



*A Comprehensive & Profoundly Queer Accounting of the
Brief (Yet GLORIOUS) History of*

The Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands



[working title]

a new play by Tom Ballard



Emperor Dale Parker Anderson I claims his Kingdom.

THE PLAY

In 2004, a group of queer activists boarded a seaplane they'd christened *The Gayflower* and flew 200 nautical miles off the coast of Queensland, eventually landing on a tiny patch of sand and grass in the middle of the ocean.

It was here that Emperor Dale Parker Anderson I would officially declare the existence of "The Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands" – a gay nation independent of homophobic Australia, where there was marriage equality for all, the national flag was a rainbow, the currency was the pink dollar, and the official anthem was Gloria Gaynor's *I Am What I Am*.

I want to write a funny, joyous and proudly queer play telling the story of this fascinating protest – its history, its characters and its politics – and interrogating what it means for Australian queers now.

What was the Kingdom really about? What were they thinking? Was it a serious form of protest, or just an in-joke, or a stunt? Did it achieve anything?

And should it inspire us today? Should we all be queer nationalists? Do we really *belong* here, or would we all be better off seceding from "straight society" and escaping to a queer paradise we build for ourselves?

The play will be written for a cast of four actors (each playing numerous characters across time and space). It will run for between 60 and 75 minutes.



THE CONTEXT

- In the early 2000s, momentum for marriage equality was beginning to build around the world. The Netherlands became the first country to broaden marriage laws to include same-sex couples in 2001, and Belgium and two Canadian provinces followed suit in 2003.
- This rising social movement was met with a climate of queerphobic hysteria across the West.
- In the US, Christian fundamentalists Pat Robertson & Jerry Falwell blamed the 9/11 attacks on abortion, feminism and “the gays the lesbians”. Ahead of his re-election campaign in February 2004, President George W. Bush announced his support for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage to protect the status of marriage as being between one man and one woman, which he called “the most fundamental institution of civilisation”.
- In Australia, the ultraconservative Howard government was waging a constant war on the LGBTQIA+ community, attacking:
 - queer immigration rights
 - lesbian mothers’ ability to access fertility services
 - same-sex couples’ ability to become parents
 - the extension of superannuation to same-sex couples
 - same-sex widows of prisoners of war receiving compensation
 - the recognition of a marriage between a trans man and his cis wife
 - the partners of queer veterans and their ability to receive a de facto spousal pension
 - queer couples’ ability to have their cases heard by the federal Family Court
- In 2002, the Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan accused openly gay High Court Justice Michael Kirby of using Commonwealth cars to procure young men for sex. The “evidence” for this claim was completely discredited, but neither Heffernan nor the government ever apologised.
- In 2004, two same-sex couples went to the Family Court to try and have their Canadian marriages recognised in Australia.

- The Howard government moved swiftly to avoid the judiciary ruling on how marriage should be defined. It introduced the *Marriage Amendment Bill 2004* so as to legally define marriage as “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”. The legislation included a section which stated explicitly that any same-sex marriages solemnised in foreign countries would not be legally recognised in Australia. It was not opposed by the Labor Party at the time, although some Labor MPs spoke out against the change.
- As a result of that law, Australian marriage celebrants were now required to clarify the official heterosexual definition of marriage during every wedding ceremony they performed.
- The same year, the Coalition government condemned state laws that allowed same-sex couples to adopt children, and legislated to ban same-sex couples from adopting from overseas. Howard declared, “I am against gay adoption, just as I'm against gay marriage.”
- Just days after the Amendment was passed by the House of Representatives, the country experienced a fresh anti-gay battle in the culture wars when *Play School* aired a “Through the Windows” segment, featuring a girl going to a fun park with her two mums.

The Howard government was outraged; Deputy PM John Anderson accused the ABC of “promoting gay parenting”, the Communications Minister called the ABC to express his concerns, Minister for Children & Youth Affairs Larry Anthony was worried the program’s producers were “just responding to minorities” and Health Minister Tony Abbott told the media, “I think that if I'd been watching it with my kids, I'd have been a bit shocked.”

Labor distanced itself from the broadcast; the party’s family and community spokesman Wayne Swan was quoted as saying, “I haven't seen the program but I'd be concerned if a children's program explored issues of sexuality, because that's a matter for parents.”

THE KINGDOM

“Homosexual people have honestly endeavoured everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities and to be treated equally. We are not permitted to do so. In vain we are loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce.

“In countries where we have lived for centuries, we are still cried down as strangers. In the world as it is now and for an indefinite period – I think we shall not be left in peace.”

- The Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands’ Declaration of Independence

- To protest their government’s bigotry, a group of queer Australian activists at Brisbane Pride 2004 – including a 38-year-old man named Dale Parker Anderson – decided they would create their own Gay and Lesbian “Kingdom” in the Coral Sea Islands¹, where they could be free.
- (It’s unclear how the idea originally came about – there are some rumours it all began as a bar bet.)
- There was an obtuse legal reason behind choosing the Coral Sea Islands as the location for this independent gay kingdom. The Coral Sea Islands Territory is recognised as an “External Overseas Territory” (EOT) of Australia, and under international law “an oppressed people who occupy an EOT have the right to self-determination and self-government”.

Thus, if these queer people were to assert their occupancy of this particular EOT, they could establish their own, non-queerphobic form of government and provide safety to their fellow queer citizens.

Plus, you know – corals are pretty gay.

¹ The Coral Sea Islands Territory comprises of a group of small and mostly uninhabited tropical islands in the Coral Sea, north-east of Queensland. It covers 780,000 km² of ocean, and includes parts of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Islands were stolen, colonised and managed by the British for decades until the 1960s, when it was administered by the Australian Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories as an Overseas External Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia.

- Dale Parker Anderson also claimed a personal connection to the Coral Sea Islands: apparently his great, great, great grandfather was William Purcell, the senior Warrant Officer on the *HMAV Bounty* (of the famous *Bounty* mutiny), who was one of the first recorded Europeans to set foot on the Islands.
- In June 2004, Dale and his friends formed a “Board” for the new gay nation, which was then changed to a “legislative assembly” and which held a referendum asking “the people” of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom (themselves?), “Do you agree that the Coral Sea Islands should become a Gay Sovereign State? YES or NO?”
 YES received 100% of the vote. (It’s unclear how many total votes were involved.)
- Originally Dale was voted in as the Administrator of the Gay & Lesbian government, but upon legal advice his title was changed to Sovereign on the grounds that under Australian law, a *de facto* prince trying to claim his crown cannot be charged for treason. The Kingdom was conceived of as a constitutional monarchy, although Dale was still bestowed the title of “Emperor”.
- Dale then got a crew together (including his gay cousin, now titled The Crown Prince Lachlan) and commandeered a friend’s seaplane (christened *The Gayflower*) to fly out to Cato Island, the highest point in the Coral Sea Islands.
- Cato Island isn’t much: a 650m x 300m barren island of flat sand in a coral lagoon, featuring nothing but an unmanned weather station. Its only claim to fame was the fact that it had been mined for guano (birdshit) to be used as fertiliser in the 1870s.
- Nevertheless, this was where Dale Parker Anderson planted his massive rainbow flag and claimed his Kingdom. They installed a commemorative plaque on the Island, which read:

“On the 14th day of June 2004, at this, the highest point in the Coral Sea, Emperor Dale Parker Anderson, raised the gay rainbow flag and claimed the Islands of the Coral Sea in his name as the homeland of the Gay and Lesbian people. God Save Our King!”

- There was also an official Declaration of Independence, which read in part:

Australia maintains appalling laws against gay and lesbian people. We live under a regime of apartheid. It is an apartheid not based on the colour of our skin, but on the colour of our sexuality homophobia is nothing less than sexual racism.

But homosexuality is not a behaviour to be regulated. It is an identity to be respected. We are people, first and foremost. We work, we have lives, we love and have relationships. We are family.

Yet, despite being citizens, voters and taxpayers, lesbian and gay Australians do not have the same rights – or in many cases have no rights – to those things in life that heterosexual people take for granted. Gay and Lesbian couples can be denied access to a hospital to visit their partner if he or she is sick or injured – because they are not considered next of kin. If they should die, their partner has no legal claim to their superannuation death benefit, despite the fact that they have nominated them as their beneficiary. Gay or lesbian couples cannot claim their partner as a dependant or split their incomes for taxation purposes and, if they should separate, there is no legal mechanism to ensure fair and reasonable property settlement – they are denied access to the Family Court....

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal stations to which the laws of nature and of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.²

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness....

We must therefore in the necessity, which denounces our separation and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace, friends.

We, therefore as representatives of the homosexual people, in general

² This bit doesn't really make sense, tbh. But it still sounds kinda grand.

congress, assembled, appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do in the name, and by authority of the good gay people of the Coral Sea Islands, and in the name of our Dale, our Emperor, solemnly publish and declare, that the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands one and of right ought to be, free and independent; that is now absolved from all allegiance to the Australian crown, and that all political connections between them and Australia, is and ought to be totally dissolved and that as free and independent. We have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which an independent Kingdom may of right do.

And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honour.

We extend the hand of peace and good neighbourliness to all the states around us and to their peoples.

- The Declaration was signed by Dale, and copies were sent to Prime Minister Howard and Governor-General Michael Jeffery.
- The gay government featured a Prime Minister, a Privy Council (we know this originally included two lesbian women, names unknown) and the legislative assembly.
- The “constitution” outlined the Kingdom’s commitment to freedom of the press, separation of powers, and required compulsory national service (but only for lesbians).
- The gay government argued its claiming of the Islands was legitimate because of the legal principle of “unjust enrichment”, which demands adequate compensation when citizens are deprived of something. The people of the Kingdom believed that the Australian government had unjustly taken away their equal rights by changing the Marriage Act and enforcing its other queerphobic policies, and so they demanded “territorial compensation” in the form of the Islands of the Coral Sea.
- The Kingdom’s national flag was the rainbow flag, its coat of arms was the pink triangle, the pink dollar was its official currency, and the “capital” was named Heaven (after the famous gay nightclub in

London). At one point they tried to have official passports for the Kingdom printed (potentially unsuccessfully).

- The national anthem was Gloria Gaynor's *I Am What I Am*, written by Jerry Herman for the musical *Les Cages Aux Folles*. Herman was made an honorary Lord of the Kingdom.
- The Kingdom set up a website and various Facebook groups and forums were maintained discussing what the Kingdom was and should be about.
- Dale wrote to various Australian MPs about the Kingdom, and received a few responses from Labor and the Greens, nothing from Coalition MPs.
- In September 2004 the Kingdom declared war on Australia over its stance on marriage equality. The declaration was sent to Howard's desk, and was also communicated to Australia via Switzerland.
- People across the world were inspired by the Kingdom's example and reached out to find out more (and some wanted to find out if they could actually move and seek refuge there).
- The official website laid out Dale's grand vision for the Kingdom, and what he hoped it might somehow achieve:

It is my hope that the Gay Kingdom and its government will go towards addressing this imbalance [between heterosexuals and queer people]. As an independent nation the GK will give gay people a voice in the United Nations, those members of the gay tribe who live in other homophobic nations may apply and seek refuge under the gay flag, and more importantly, the government of the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom will also have a legal platform to bring rich and powerful nations such as America before the International Court of Justice to end discrimination against gay and lesbian people that live and work within its borders.

- The Kingdom issued its first stamps in July 2006, "with the aim of creating a high and distinctive reputation amongst the philatelic fraternity". They were sold online and were the Kingdom's only economic activity.



V. gay stamps.

- There were somewhat-serious attempts to try and get the Kingdom recognised by the United Nations; they wrote a legal letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan informing him that “the Kingdom fully submits itself to the International Court of Justice” – but received no reply.
- Over time, it seems, there were rifts between members of the government over various issues. Some objected to how much “power” Dale had accrued as Emperor, others disagreed over what the Kingdom should be and what it was doing, especially as international activists (who had never set foot in Australia, let alone the Kingdom) became involved.
- At one point there seems to have been some kind of financial scandal involving Dale and the mishandling of income from stamp sales.
- Dale was stripped of his power, some people went their separate ways, and the energy and ideas around the Kingdom appears to have fizzled out.
- In 2017, during a Senate Estimates hearing, hard-right Liberal Senator Eric Abetz expressed his tongue-in-cheek-but-still-

extremely-stupid concern about the Department of Finance displaying a rainbow flag in its lobby:

"This particular flag, you will realise, is the flag of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands, that declared war on Australia and you Senator Cormann would understand they did the same as Prince Leonard of Hutt River Province and now this is their official flag.

"Of course, it is the flag of a hostile nation if we are to believe them, having declared war on Australia. I dare say that wasn't the reason it was flown..."

- That same year, Australia finally held a voluntary, non-binding (and very painful) postal survey on the question of marriage equality.
- When 61.6% of Australian voters said YES, Emperor Dale considered the work of the Kingdom to be done. He announced via the website that he'd signed a proclamation which dissolved the Kingdom and returned the Coral Sea Islands to Australia's control.

THEMES

"With the 1970s impulse to separate, it seemed to radical people that it wasn't enough to have a piece of the pie when the whole pie was rotten.

"I think that's always been behind these radical movements—to make a protest of assimilation in mainstream society. I think the same thing is true with radicals today who see pride parades as overtaken by corporations and police forces."

- Lillian Faderman, author of The Gay Revolution

As well as telling the actual, remarkable story of the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom, I see this play as a meditation on some larger queer themes. The act of creating a "gay nation" provokes us to ask questions about queer belonging, separatism and assimilation; is our community better off if we leave "straight" society entirely and build our own queer world? Or should we stay, and continue to claim our rightful place within the heteronormative status quo? How would it even work, anyway? Who gets to decide who can and can't be a citizen of this queer utopia? Would it involve a giant sign that just screams "NO CIS-HETS ALLOWED"?

These questions have been asked and debated in queer political circles for decades, as part of a tradition known as "queer nationalism" or "queer separatism". In the 1970s, the Gay Liberation Front forged a movement to establish a "Stonewall Nation", by calling for hundreds of queer people to move to Alpine County in California so they could form a powerful voting bloc and effectively create a gay local government. (This did not happen.) Similar separatist philosophies can be found in the various lesbian and queer communes that sprang up in the seventies (such as Mandala in the Northern Rivers, an "ecological oasis and rural retreat and gay men and womyn"); or in today's Gay Homeland Foundation, which hopes to "establish a free, independent, and democratic gay state".³

I think these questions feel particularly relevant in our current moment, in the context of the ongoing toxic culture war on trans rights, the "groomer" discourse about queer people and culture, and the bizarre moral panic over Drag Story Time. Even in a post-marriage equality Australia, it seems, queer people are still constantly told that we're not "normal", and that we don't belong here. Maybe we should all just piss off to a tropical island somewhere and build our own fabulous society, where we can all be safe? Or is that the coward's way out, and a denial of our fundamental humanity?

³ Some more reading on the history of queer separatism can be found in [this piece from Vice](#).

I also see the play exploring questions about the effectiveness of queer protest and activism. Yes, the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom project seemed to be filled with a level of idealism and campy humour that often feels missing from queer campaigns of today, and I love that. At the same time, it's very hard to see whether the thing actually changed anything, or proved to be a very successful protest at all.

I hope this play can ask the tricky questions of our community on this front: what actions *actually* produce change? How do we fight for the better world we want? Stunts like the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom might be funny and entertaining – but do they further the cause for queer equality, or make it harder to take us seriously?

POTENTIAL CHARACTERS

- **THE QUEER CHORUS** – Our rainbow cast who will bring us the legend of the Kingdom with direct address, jokes, music, storytelling and love.
- **EMPEROR DALE PARKER ANDERSON I** – His Imperial Majesty the Emperor, the Sovereign of the Gay Kingdom. As well as being a descendant of William Purcell, Dale claims to be a direct descendent of the murdered (gay) King of England II (1284 – 1327), and thus related to all the major royal houses of Europe.

He was 38 years old and single when he came to the throne of the GLK, and while he held that title, his future husband would be given the title of His Serene Highness The Prince Consort. According to the Kingdom's website, Dale is "quiet and shy by nature", and lists his hobbies as "gardening, music and travel".
- **VARIOUS MEMBERS OF THE GAY GOVERNMENT** – Men, women, trans and non-binary folk from Australia and across the world who established, believed in, and volunteered to help the cause of the Kingdom. We know some of their names, others will have to be imagined.
- **BILL FREEMAN** – A lawyer from Birmingham, Alabama, who was so inspired by the example of the Kingdom that he reached out to Dale, offered his legal expertise and eventually became the GLK's Chief Justice.

Bill tried to have the Kingdom recognised by the UN (he dreamed of seeing the rainbow flying alongside the flags of the world's nations) and sincerely believed the GLK's existence could improve human rights for the queer people of the world.
- **POLITICAL FIGURES** – John Howard, Eric Abetz, George W. Bush, Tony Abbott, Fred Nile, Julia Gillard, Penny Wong, Kofi Annan. Some of these characters will be embodied by actors, others will have the audio of their words played while actors lip-sync to them.
- **THE ROYAL DOG MERRICK** – Dale's dog.
- **QUEER HEROES FROM HISTORY** – Everyone from Oscar Wilde to Joan of Arc to Carlotta to James Baldwin might make an

appearance to contribute their takes on the Kingdom and queer separatism. Why the hell not?

POTENTIAL MOMENTS & SCENES

Stuff I'd love to see come alive on stage:

- The *Play School* controversy
- The *Gayflower's* voyage
- Exploring Dale Parker Anderson's wild family history
- Raising the rainbow flag on Cato Island
- A passionate recital of the Declaration of Independence
- The declaration of war on Australia
- Arguments between members of the Gay Government
- Singing *I Am What I Am* as a national anthem
- Receiving letters from queer refugees hoping to come to the Kingdom (some of them quite silly, some of them quite sad and moving)
- The Eric Abetz moment in Senate Estimates
- The YES vote coming in

Outside of the story of the Kingdom itself, I can also see other relevant political events from the period being referenced in the play, including:

- The 22 unsuccessful attempts since 2004 to legalise same-sex marriage in Australia
- Kevin Rudd on *Rove Live* being asked who he would turn gay for, and him saying "My wife" (???)
- The Rudd government reforms which gave de facto queer couples equal legal rights as marriages in all but name
- Julia Gillard's and Penny Wong's bizarre positions opposing marriage equality
- In 2013, the ACT legalised SSM but was then overturned by the High Court
- In 2016, gay activist group Planting Peace raised a rainbow flag and "claimed" Antarctica as the first gay-friendly continent in the world
- All the batshit moments during the marriage equality debate; in particular, that time that Peter Dutton seriously suggested that because Macklemore was going to perform *Same Love* at the AFL Grand Final, then "two songs should be played – one for gay marriage and one against gay marriage".

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

In researching and thinking about this play, several complex political considerations have come up that I feel would need to be somehow confronted in the work:

- The term “Gay & Lesbian Kingdom” doesn’t quite reflect the full diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community, and may suggest the founders of the Kingdom were guilty of erasing bi, trans and other identities from their vision.⁴
- The notion of white, non-First Nations queers claiming “sovereignty” over masses of territory simply by planting a flag on an island has quite strong colonialist overtones, and seems to ignore the context of the ongoing and unjust dispossession of First Nations people of their country.

I think it’s possible to both celebrate and laugh about what the Kingdom was trying to do, while still acknowledging that it was all happening within Australia’s broader settler-colonial context.

- Similarly, the Kingdom’s laws of “gay citizenship” were said to be modelled on Israel’s Law of Return for Jewish people, which also raises complex questions surrounding political Zionism and the rights of Indigenous peoples. I want the play to be sophisticated enough to acknowledge such thorny questions – without sacrificing the fun, or taking itself too seriously.

⁴ I don’t think this is the case – it’s probably more a reflection of the use of language of the time, when “Gay & Lesbian” was the umbrella term used to refer to the whole queer community.

One section of the Kingdom’s website reads, “To the thousands of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered citizens who know the pain of abuse and discrimination and to those who have been unjustly arrested and jailed, the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom pledges its support and the support of its government.”