

2496

# WHEN I WAS 20- SOMETHING

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Interview by Benjamin Law.

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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### WHEN I WAS 20-SOMETHING

Michael Kirby  
Former High Court Justice  
As told to BENJAMIN LAW

I was in my 20s in the 1960s. This was the decade of the referendum to include powers for the Federal Parliament to make laws in respect to Aboriginals. It was a time of the gradual abolition of the laws on the White Australia Policy. But it was also a time of the Vietnam War. So it was a mixed bag, but there were some steps in the direction of progress.

I came to the Sydney Law School in the last year of my arts degree. I was working in a lawyer's firm as an article clerk earning £6 a week. When I graduated in law, I got a job as a solicitor. I was working as a full-time solicitor with a very heavy workload, and doing an economics – and then a Master of Laws – degree at night and in my own time.

Looking back, this infatuation with university was an anaesthetic to postpone my engagement with the real world, and with human relationships. It was a lonely time. Most human beings seek out personal relationships and sexual experiences and I did none of the above. I simply concentrated on my studies, but I knew there was emptiness in my life. In 1968, I came to the end of my studies – Master of Laws – I couldn't keep doing more and more degrees. I realised I had to face up to things.

I certainly didn't mix with anybody who was openly gay. Don't forget this was still an age of police raids and the criminalisation of human conduct.

Gay life, as it has emerged in Sydney, was not really part of the scene. You were expected to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself, and to keep it very much to yourself and a small circle of friends. I didn't even have a small circle of friends. It's a strange thing for modern youth to understand, but these were times where there was very little discussion of sex or sexuality.

I soon met my first lover, Demo, who was a Spaniard, a most beautiful man. He happened to be at The Rex when I walked in. The Rex was a hotel just near the fountain at Kings Cross. There was a front bar and a back bar. One of them – I can't remember which – was called the Bottom's Up Bar. Demo was just travelling the world, escaping the fascists.

Two weeks after he left to go back to Spain, I met Johan, this extremely handsome man. When I heard his German accent, I actually asked him what he thought of [Nazi Foreign Minister] von Ribbentrop – which, looking back, is extremely gauche. He later told me he thought he'd met some kind of nut. However, the conversation continued, and that led on to going in search of a coffee shop, which was closed. That led to our going home to my apartment in Kirribilli, overlooking the harbour at Admiralty House. Essentially, he's been with me ever since that night.

Johan and I were both approaching 30, so we met in our 20s – but only just. Oscar Wilde said that youth is wasted on the young. If I look back on all those committee meetings I attended in my 20s, all those nights when hormonal forces were at their peak, I do resent what was forced on me by the law and society at the time, when other people, including my siblings, were having a great time. Gay people have to remember it's

not just Australia that needs to change. We've changed a lot here, but its countries like Uganda and Trinidad where the oppression is still a very real and actual daily presence.

To young people in their 20s, my advice would be unashamedly to search for love. It is the indispensable commodity to a full life. You might not find it, or you may not find it where you thought you'd find it. If you find it, then you're a very lucky human being.

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