

## **Australian Sex Party – A brief history**

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First Electronic Release

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A sunny Saturday in September 2013 saw me seated at Berwick Secondary College resting while my partner handed out how to vote pamphlets for the seat of LaTrobe. His voice was clear as he exhorted people to take the pamphlet, “Australian Sex Party!”

This particular Saturday was Election Day, and the morning was spectacular, blue skies, mild breeze, strong sun – until just after lunch when it clouded over and began to rain. It got rather cold. But this is not the story about my experiences on Election Day 2013, this is the story of the party.

The Australian Sex party has at its beginning a person. That person is Fiona Patten, and it was my pleasure to interview her about the beginnings of the Sex Party.

Fiona began her political life as part of a sex worker lobby group. She got involved because of HIV/AIDS. In the late 80s Australia was one of the few countries doing anything radical about it, some may remember the Grim Reaper ad campaign in 1987. Fiona had friends who were getting sick and dying, and friends who were injecting drug users. She saw firsthand the needle exchange programs being introduced, but also the discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS or battling drug addiction. The ACT had its first self-government, and Fiona was working on law reform for prostitution. She was working with politicians who had never been lobbied before, and she had never lobbied before. “So I got this fantastic kind of nursery education on lobbying and working with government and working on law reform,” she says as we sit outside in the small courtyard at her home in an inner Melbourne suburb.

At the same time, Robbie Swan was working as a lobbyist for the adult video industry, which was a large mail order business in those days. They had never met, but they had mutual friends, “our letters to the editor used to quite often appear next to each other.”

Robbie's lobby group decided in 1992 that they wanted to run a candidate to raise the issues of the adult industry. The industry had been under attack at the time, especially the adult video industry. Conservative politicians were trying to ban or tax it out of existence. So Robbie Swan approached her to run as a candidate on an independent ticket. She ran with a

former (ACT) transport minister who had been charged for drink driving three times, and a Buddhist Monk. "We were coined the drunk, the monk, and the spunk."

They knew they weren't going to get elected. "It did show us very successfully how you can use that electoral campaign to raise issues, and to bring those issues to the forefront," Fiona tells me. It was the first time the sex industry had run a candidate, and so it was national and international news at the time. "And this was before the internet."

From this, the Eros Association was born. The Eros Association is a lobby group for the Adult Industry in Australia, providing a voice for sex workers, adult film makers, sex shop owners and workers, amongst other people. Around 2007, the Eros Association was just becoming concerned with the proposed Internet Filter. Fiona met with Senator Stephen Conroy a number of times, and he assured her that they would never ban porn, and that the adult industry had nothing to fear from the filter. However, it was only after the Labor party won the 2007 election that the extent of the filter was revealed. That was, as Fiona describes it, "the tipping point."

"There'd been many times when governments were doing one thing, despite what the community attitudes were," Fiona says. Politicians beholden to their voters, sometimes they must make compromises to retain their seats. She explains, "They'd [the politicians] say 'Fiona, I totally agree with you, they are insane laws. However, I hold this seat by 4% and there's an evangelical church in my electorate, if I campaign on this or if I support you on this, people may not vote for me and I might lose my job so I'm not going to change the law.'"

There were very few politicians around Australia opposing the law, because most ordinary folks were led to believe that the filter would protect their children, and help stop the creation and distribution of child pornography. "So that was the final straw." Fiona says. "And we just thought, 'you know what, if we can't beat them with logical arguments, community attitudes, polling, research etc. Let's take it to the polling booth.' And that was really how it [the Sex Party] was born."

The internet filter was the impetus that lead myself and my partner to the Sex Party, and also Martin Leahy, the candidate for LaTrobe we were supporting on the day of the election. Martin joined the Sex Party five years ago in 2008 when they had just started. He has stood for election four times himself, twice in the Federal seat of LaTrobe, and once each in the Victorian seats of Lyndhurst and Ferntree Gully. I also interviewed Martin for this story.

Martin is one of the older members of the party, though not a founding member. He found out about the Sex Party on billboard - an ad for the party at Sexpo. He did some research, liked what he read, then took himself along to Sexpo in Melbourne, to the Australian Sex Party booth. Sexpo is the Health, Sexuality, and Lifestyle exhibition, which is held in various capital cities in Australia throughout the year. The Sex Party, obviously, is a perfect fit. He didn't meet Fiona at the time, but the people at the booth spoke about her with awe. He met her later at a members function in town, and he was quite impressed. "Fiona has an enormous presence, and when she's around you know she's there," he says, "She doesn't bullshit."

The first elections the party stood candidates in were the Higgins and the Bradford by-elections, which occurred on the same weekend in 2009. Martin was in charge of some half a dozen booths, despite having to go into hospital a few days later. He didn't man a booth himself, but drove around making sure the volunteers had everything they needed. Fiona herself was standing in the seat of Higgins. The two seats are both very safe Liberal seats, and so there was no chance of success. The experience was useful, however, and the party learned about the logistics of running an election campaign.

In 2010, the party contested the Federal election. Fiona stood for a senate seat in Victoria, while Martin stood for the lower house seat of LaTrobe. Martin says, "what we did in 2010... we built a groundwork, a foundation for this party and I believe we built a very strong foundation with the results we received, not just in Victoria but Australia wide, but mainly Victoria cause that's our base, our home base."

It was a busy year because the Victorian state election was held a few months later, and the Sex Party stood once again. From there, they have contested every by-election and election since. In each election, the Sex Party's primary vote increased.

Martin did not actually put up his hand to run in 2013, he was simply told that he was running. There were 28 other candidates this year in Victoria alone (54 in all of Australia), compared to the 3 that stood in 2010. People from all walks of life are involved in the party, and Martin thinks that they are the next generation. "They're the second leg," Martin says, "And they're running for it. Some of them will be elected, sooner or later, and for some it may well be sooner." Where does he see the Sex Party in the future? Jokingly he says "Oh, maybe changing the curtains in the lodge."

Sitting out in the backyard, Fiona is as enthusiastic as ever. She says that next is the Victorian state election in 2014, and is very hopeful that the Sex Party will win a seat.

It is the people and their enthusiastic support that will see the party forward. So as I sat, listening to Fiona talk, I was pondering once again standing for election myself. The future looks bright, I think I'll wear shades.

[In the interests of transparency, if it wasn't already obvious, I am a card carrying voting member of the ASP, and have been since 2010. Drawn to the party by their platforms and policies, I have never regretted my decision to join.]