

Why Aussie gay rights campaigner is defending homophobes

A new film relates the Footscray-born gay rights activist's journey from scourge of UK's mainstream to near-iconic status. But he's still picking fresh battles, writes AFR Europe correspondent Hans van Leeuwen

On Easter Sunday 1998, the traditional and widely watched Easter Sunday sermon at England's Canterbury Cathedral, televised live, was unexpectedly interrupted by an Australian accent. Dogged and controversial Melbourne-born gay rights activist [Peter Tatchell](#) leapt from a pew and stormed the pulpit, to protest then archbishop George Carey's opposition to legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

"This is not a Christian teaching," the staccato-voiced Tatchell yelled. The congregation began slow-clapping him with the unintentionally ironic chant of "Out! Out! Out!", before he was unceremoniously bundled from the scene. It was front-page news – the result Tatchell wanted, despite the outpouring of opprobrium that followed. Already well known for his provocative protests and uncompromising attitude, he had really pushed the envelope this time. On television, Carey described Tatchell's tactics as "a kind of scorched-earth policy – you don't make friends that way". Had he gone too far, alienated too many? Was he helping or hindering his cause? "I know what works and what doesn't," an unrepentant Tatchell said.

Fast-forward almost a quarter of a century, and he was proved right. Same-sex marriage is legal in Britain. And Tatchell, for so long the outsider's outsider, is now challenging the emerging shibboleths of the identitarian left – and is arguably even a fixture of the British political establishment. Just ask the former archbishop Carey, who recently made a startling comparison. "Jesus was prepared to stand up against the powerful people in society, represent the smaller people," he says. "Where some of us might still question [Tatchell's] tactics, no one can actually doubt that he's on the right side of history."



Carey's conversion was just one remarkable moment in a new biographical documentary about the 69-year-old activist from Footscray. *Hating Peter Tatchell* premieres in Australia at the [Melbourne International Film Festival](#) on August 18. It covers his early years growing up in an evangelical, and abusive, household in Seddon; his political awakening at age 11; his sexual awakening in his late teens; and his flight from Australia at age 19 to avoid 1971's Vietnam War draft. In conversation with actor Ian McKellen, and using archival footage, the film canters through some of the highlights of a frankly exhausting career: civil disobedience, 3000-plus protests, 100 arrests; a bid to win a byelection for the Labour Party in inner London in 1983 that succumbed to a tabloid-fuelled campaign of homophobia; his [attempted citizen's arrest](#) of Zimbabwean autocrat Robert Mugabe in Brussels; a trip to Moscow that ended, like several other of his edgier protests, in an actual physical assault. And along the way, endless appearances in front of rolling news cameras, on panel discussions and in debate with audiences, relentlessly pushing the cause of LGBT+ equality in the face of equally unrelenting scepticism, even hostility.

"The documentary came about because the director, Christopher Amos, was very surprised to discover that no film had been made about my five decades of campaigning," Tatchell tells *Weekend Fin* from his flat in south London. "When he started looking at footage from interviews and news reports, he was shocked at the level of bias and downright hatred directed against me. So that's how the title *Hating Peter Tatchell* came about."

Rather than just make a film about the past, the Brisbane-born director decided to give it currency by collaborating on a classic Tatchell mission: under the guise of being football fans, Tatchell and Amos went to the Russia-hosted World Cup in June 2018 to stage a protest against President Vladimir Putin's anti-LGBT policies. But the emotional heart of the film lies in several extraordinary scenes with his elderly mother. She retains her religion-rooted belief that homosexuality is wrong, but has come to terms with who her son is and what he does. On camera, their relationship seems to blend tenderness with a faint wariness, suggesting a love that survives by leaving some things left unsaid. Those scenes, alongside all the footage in which he faces spittle-flecked animosity and blunt vituperation on the street or in the TV studio, also highlight one of the most remarkable things about Tatchell: his air of preternatural calm and imperturbability. His face is nearly always expressionless, impassive – it's almost like a mask, and is in striking juxtaposition to his impassioned rhetoric and his evident appetite for confrontation.

“Very early on, I realised that it’s a huge mistake to respond to insults and rowdiness in the same manner,” he says. “I can remember going on literally hundreds and hundreds of TV and radio programs confronting some incredibly toxic, homophobic people. But in every case, I just tried to stay calm, be rational, answer their arguments and show why they were wrong.”

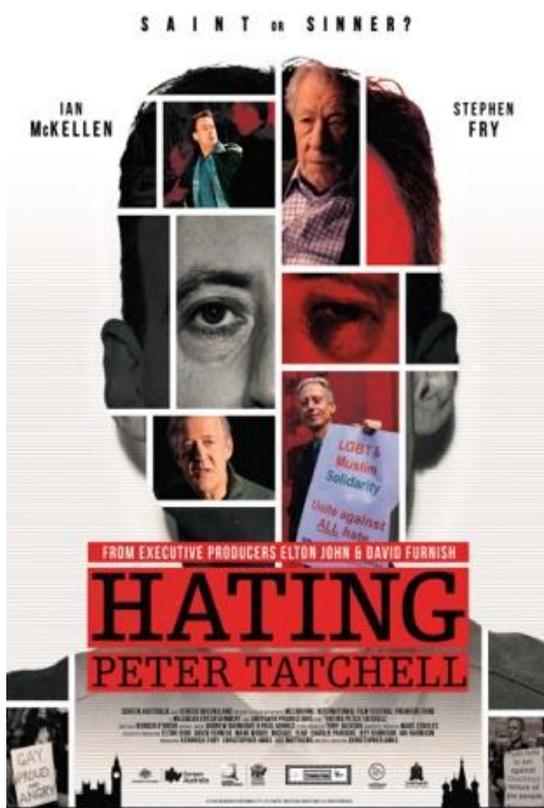
It’s this commitment to argument and debate that has opened-up an interesting new chapter in Tatchell’s activist career, which has really come to the fore since this film. In arguing for the power of free speech, he has set himself against the new movement from the left that promotes the idea of “safe spaces”, where some views or speakers in a debate are off-limits because they might upset or offend, and its more aggressive cousin “cancel culture”.

“Bans and no-platforms don’t defeat bigotry. They simply suppress it. It festers, but it doesn’t change,” he says. “We took on the hardcore homophobes in open debate. We protested against them. But we didn’t try and ban them, because although that would give us a temporary thrill or victory, it wouldn’t change hearts and minds.”

This has created some surprising new episodes in the Tatchell story. He has come to the defence of septuagenarian evangelist pastor John Sherwood, [who was arrested](#) in west London in April while preaching on the street. The police received complaints from the public that Sherwood was making homophobic comments, though he says he was “just defining marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman”. Tatchell, much to the surprise of many, offered to testify in his defence if he ends up in court on a charge.

“I just felt it was wrong that Pastor Sherwood was arrested for peacefully and quite respectfully saying that he disagreed with homosexuality. It’s his right in a free society,” Tatchell says. “Much as I disagree with him, I will defend his right to hold his point of view. He wasn’t harassing gay people. He wasn’t inciting violence against us. He wasn’t even advocating discrimination. He was simply saying that in his personal interpretation of Christianity, homosexuality is wrong. So I felt that he should not be prosecuted.”

Tatchell thinks the distinction is clear: “For me, the free speech red lines are: if you make false damaging allegations against the person, like saying they’re a rapist or tax fraudster; if you engage in threats, menaces or harassment; or if you incite violence. Those are the three red lines where free speech ends, they actually undermine free and open debate, because they create an atmosphere of intimidation, threats.”



A few years earlier, he signed a letter criticising the National Union of Students for no-platforming feminists who questioned aspects the trans agenda, and was himself then blackballed by the NUS’s LGBT+ spokeswoman. [He wrote](#) in Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* at the time of a “witch-hunting, accusatory atmosphere”. In this debate, he finds himself on the side of another long-term Australian expatriate of similar vintage, Germaine Greer. Tatchell is perhaps less well known in his home country than Greer; in fact, he is less well known in Australia generally than he is in Britain. He has been gone a long time, of course, and he has been on a long journey. From pariah and establishment scourge, to being the beneficiary of a benediction from an archbishop.

“That was a bit over the top. A generous and kind comment, but a bit over the top,” he says of Carey’s comments in the film. “But it’s true that a lot of journalists, politicians, and church leaders who once denounced me in pretty vile terms now seem to regard me as some kind of human rights hero. “I don’t see myself like that ... It’s just an incredible honour and privilege to be part of this great social movement that has fundamentally changed both public attitudes and laws towards LGBT+ people.” But despite the progress, and its documentation in feature-length celluloid, there’s no thought of resting on laurels. As he says in the film: “I’m the kind of person that never feels satisfied. When I have a victory, I just think: ‘What’s next?’”

[Hating Peter Tatchell](#), supported by the [MIFF Premiere Fund](#), premieres on 11 August 2021 at the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF)