

a career in housing

> *The President of Housing Action Network and former President of AHI, Tony Gilmour, has done a lot for housing in his 13 years of activity in the sector. HousingWORKS uncovers some surprises about him, including his former identity as a banking and finance professional.*

It is a relatively warm November evening for the AHI's 2017 Professional Excellence in Housing Awards at Darling Harbour's International Convention Centre in Sydney. Running in conjunction with AHURI's National Housing Conference, the awards reception is buzzing with people on their way to, or leaving, a range of soirees. The drinks (responsibly, of course) and bonhomie are flowing in equal measure and the air is filled with an undeniable atmosphere of celebration.

For the MC of the AHI's Awards Gala, Tony Gilmour, the celebratory feel is being experienced on a number of levels. Firstly, his jokes are working, which, as anyone who's had the nightmarish experience of hosting events will tell you, is a huge relief. Secondly, earlier that same day, Australia's Parliament ratified a recent plebiscite, which confirmed overwhelming public support for same-sex marriage to be recognised under Australian law. After years of fighting for recognition – years of overcoming obstacle after obstacle, and enduring all kinds of institutionalised bigotry and prejudice – people like Tony and his long-time partner, John, are finally able to have their love and commitment to each other recognised by law.

With all the deftness, skill, understatement and power of a Muhammad Ali four-punch-combination, Tony announced between jokes that he and John would finally tie the knot.

When we catch up with Tony, he's just arrived back in Australia after an extended period of time in England. Mindful of one of the golden rules of writing – never assume, never presume – *HousingWORKS* politely enquires if there was a more important aspect to the trip than merely catching up with family and friends: "Yes," says Tony proudly. "We got married in April and we're just back from the honeymoon so, yes, it's all gone ahead."

"It was a fantastic party and there were a lot of laughs," recalls Tony of his wedding. "There were occasional serious moments but it was mainly a big celebration, which I think is how it ought to have been. Interestingly – because you have to design from the ground up – there weren't any precedents to follow. We could choose a format accordingly, which actually proved quite daunting and quite a lot of work. It's quite a contrast to the old days where there was generally a religious format and that's the one you followed."

The support for same-sex marriage recognition that Tony saw within the housing industry in the lead up to the plebiscite last year was encouraging.

"[John and I had] both been involved in the campaign for marriage equality and I think that cemented our view that it's just something important to get through, and there was a lot of support from other people in the social housing sector," he explains. "I'd approached a number of the chief execs.



Tony (left) and John at their wedding ceremony

They were very supportive and did their part to bring about the change as well. It's a broad coalition that brings these things about."

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Tony's introduction to the housing industry occurred via an academic route. After 20 years in banking and finance, it was his doctoral studies at the University of Sydney that steered him towards a new career.

"For my sins, I had 20 years working in banking, which I then escaped from," he says. "And I did a PhD at the University of Sydney looking into the growth of community housing. I chose that area because there was absolutely no connection with banking. Banking gives you lots of different jobs you can do in different areas but I'd done most of them and was ready to change countries, and to change careers. It actually turned out to be easier to do both at the same time."

"I started with a degree in Architectural History at Sydney University," Tony continues. "That was the first step, and then I was grabbed by the people trying to smooth-talk students into doing PhDs in affordable housing."

Tony's connection to banking and housing mirrors that of his parents. While his father was a bank manager at one time in his career, there's a long history of involvement in grassroots housing in the Gilmour household.

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"I think I've always understood quite a lot about social housing," he muses. "I remember with my father and my stepmother – my stepmother worked in public housing in Britain. They effectively carried on until their dying day in the social housing sector. It's a sort of cradle to birth type of involvement. They were still on boards in their 70s, trying to help out. I think it sticks with you. It's almost like something that you catch and it stays with you forever. I never necessarily imagined I'd be working in it but I'm delighted that I am now, and couldn't imagine doing anything else."

It was always Tony's dream to work in Australia, and his relocation from the Northern Hemisphere was something he actively pursued.

"Arguably, there's been social housing in Britain since about the 12th century or certainly, across the last century, there's been a lot of social housing. So it's a very established industry," says Tony. "To some extent, if you've not been in it for a number of years, it's probably quite hard to get into, so I've really appreciated being given the chance to have a different career in social housing. I would've found it harder in Britain to change ships but that's been much easier to achieve in Australia."

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There are a number of facets to the industry that Tony draws enormous amounts of inspiration and pride from: the people he works alongside and being able to see the positive change that the industry can deliver are two facets that immediately spring to mind.

"On one hand, we're making a difference to people's lives, for the better," he says. "And there's never a dull moment with people who work in the sector, I find. We're an electric and eccentric crowd, I'd say. As an eccentric myself, I can fit in relatively easily."

"What really motivates me is when you can actually see change starting to happen," he continues. "As a housing consultant, you can spend many hours writing many words, which sometimes people occasionally read [laughs]. But it's actually making the change happen that's important. When you've worked with organisations for a number of years, and you see how they're starting to move in different directions, a whole range of different ideas start coming through, and for them to be implemented rather than just writing about them is an amazing feeling."

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Away from work pressures, Tony's love of history and architecture is playing more of a prominent role in his life: "I'm in my 50s now, and different bits of my life are starting to come together, which is great. I just wrote a book on the history of Shelter New South Wales, which will be published pretty soon, and I found that fascinating because it ties in with my love of history and architecture with a bit of writing, and speaking with people as well."

An "excessive traveller," Tony pinpoints his home on the New South Wales south coast as close enough to being his favourite destination: "I live in Kiama, so I actually consider I'm on holiday all the time when I'm here, because I'm sitting here looking out over the ocean. This would be the absolute dream for anyone in Britain to be able to live by the coast, and it's an issue of Australia being able to deliver what it says on the packaging, to be in a place like this."

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While there's plenty of life left to live now, he considers his legacy in housing carefully, suggesting that he'd hope to be remembered for his sense of humour.

"I think when people think about me they probably remember some wisecrack I'd made at a conference or at a presentation, or something, because I enjoy having a sense of humour," he confesses. "I'm a great believer that you can make any topic boring, or any topic interesting, so you may as well actually try and make it interesting. I like using humour and telling stories as a way of getting messages across as well, because in the housing field there's a lot of jargon, a lot of data and details and acronyms that people just glaze over, so you actually have to try and get messages through by other ways of communication. It's not just about saying how many more affordable housing units we need, it's saying why it's so important for people."

“I never take anything for granted.”

As for his future as an MC, "I could see myself doing weddings, celebrations and bar mitzvahs... maybe that could be the next change?" he ponders jokingly. "It's strange for me because I was so shy, even into my 30s. If anybody had said I would be standing up and talking in front of anybody – never mind a room full of people. I would never, ever, have believed it. That's the funny thing with writing books – I was told that I couldn't write to save my life so I never take anything for granted."

Watch out, because Tony doesn't plan on stopping the surprises: "Yes. Even surprising myself!"