Shining stars in feminist struggle

Social History


Reviewer: SARA DOWSE

Understanding the origins of Australia's once exemplary child-care system implores and parents are wondering what to do with their kids after Christmas, and it's hinted that because of the economic crisis, Australian women will not get the paid maternity leave we've been fighting for, but comes this splendid record of one shining aspect of Australia's mighty feminist struggle.

By anyone's reckoning Making Women Count, covering the 36 years of Women's Electoral Lobby's existence, is a monumental work. Yet in this summer's Australian Book Review, it's dismissed as "a profusion of facts, figures, photographs and quotations available for those interested in digging up the roots of feminist history".

At all, we feminists are used to such putdowns.

It's unlikely that a similarly intensive study of an Australian political party, or even a sect with influence beyond its number, could be so summarily treated, or receive such scant attention. A more intelligent response in the Monthly's review, but this is the only other one so far.

Here's a disclaimer. Except for a brief period after resigning from the public service, I was not a WEL member. In the beginning, I didn't seem radical enough, and one of the tenets of feminist history is that the first feminists were Women's Libbers whose only association with WEL in its early days was at the weekly "Womens" Liberation meetings. In Canberra especially the women were often the same, but wore different hats. Women's Liberation was constantly spawning daughter cells (my film group, for example) and WEL was but one. It began in Victoria, prompted by the 1972 election, and the opportunity it presented to inject women's demands into the campaign.

And it was wildly successful, beyond anyone's expectations, certainly my own. It galvanized women across the country and those who wouldn't touch liberation with a barge pole embraced WEL with millenial fervour.

The Labor Party credited it with their election and created positions and units in government to deal with the sticky issues raised by WEL. By International Women's Year, it was added to the meteoric rise of suburban groups, so few as 52 brave small-town WELs were barreling away.

As the years progressed Women's Liberation continued to fragment, filtering into services like child-care and rape crisis centres, or the creation of women's studies courses, while WEL stayed resolutely on track, focusing its energies on government. But for the most part, throughout their sometimes prickly coexistence, WEL and Women's Lib played the good cop/bad cop routine to great effect. We took on all kinds of discrimination, lobbied for child care, for part-time work, and from 1972 WEL was in the forefront of the struggle.

I'm surprised to learn how closely we all were watched. WEL might have been too bourgeois for me, but to ASIO it was a communist front, or at least a Labor one. When WEL Victoria staged a protest against the main-only public-service entrance exams, ASIO had a copy of the map used to picket the building where we were being held. And in 1974, when I was laterally recruited to the prime minister's office as arguably Australia's first female, I was told point-blank that, being from WEL, I owed my appointment to being a Labor plant. These assumptions show how little WEL's savvy was understood; it would have been completely ineffectual had it not been independent and non-party.

One of many criticisms of WEL was that it was middle-class. Yet probably its greatest achievement was when, through its intervention, the adult minimum wage was extended to thousands of low-paid women workers in a landmark arbitration decision. For 65 years women's wages had been institutionally pegged at three-quarters of the male rate and often much lower. The Whitlam government supported the extension, but it was WEL's research and argument that won the case.

WEL kept hammering away. When Gough Whitlam was gone, and we feminists couldn't have gone an inch without him. What feminism on the inside needed most of all was a powerful lobby hanging on the citadel walls. But, paradoxically, as the movement spread and feminism achieved wider (if unacknowledged) acceptance, its organisational strength diminished.

The 1990s saw the entrenchment of market ideology, as hostile an environment as anything WEL had previously encountered. "Special interest" groups were seen to be at odds with "ordinary" voters and taxpayers, an approach that sat comfortably with populist attacks on "political correctness". It was a challenge, and WEL survived, but the Howard government shut its ears.

Sawyer, one of Australia's pre-eminent political scientists, goes light on theory, but mounts her findings on a solid intellectual framework. Many students of social movements give them a life of about five years. Others dispute this, and with respect to feminism, speak of bursts of visibility followed by periods of apparent absence. WEL's trajectory of dogged persistence through the recent years can only be understood in relation to the quirks of feminist history, both here and overseas.

Sawyer and Gail Radford, WEL—ACT's original convenor, who helped with research and a survey of members, are so well equipped for getting on top of the mass of archival material and welding it into such an illuminating work.

Some readers, like the Australian Book Review reviewer, may look for less fact, more personality. Yet 1970s feminism wasn't about personality, which made relations with the media contentious and misleading, if often electric. "Where are your leaders?" we'd be asked. But we were a movement of ideas, not stars.

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