

HOW WOMEN RESHAPED THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Author: Cathy Brigden ([Show Biography](#))

DOI: 10.1080/08164640903291860

Publication Frequency: 4 issues per year

Published in: *Australian Feminist Studies*, Volume 24, Issue 62 December 2009 , pages 469 - 471

To cite this Article: Brigden, Cathy 'HOW WOMEN RESHAPED THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24:62, 469 - 471

'No Fit Place for Women'? Women in New South Wales Politics 1856-2006. Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell, eds, 2006. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia. Marian Sawer with Gail Radford, 2008. Sydney: UNSW Press.

On 29 March 2009, after the election of Anna Bligh as the first woman elected in her own right as a State Premier and the appointment of Kate Torney, the first woman director of news at the ABC, the *Sunday Age* editorial asked: 'When will be the last time we celebrate the first woman?' Lamenting the ongoing preoccupation of commentators with gender, Bligh's achievement is placed in the context of women's political achievements, in which she joins Clare Martin as leading a political party to victory, as Martin did in the Northern Territory in 2001. Bligh had already joined Carmen Lawrence (Western Australia), Joan Kirner (Victoria), Kate Carnell (ACT) and Martin in the ranks of women premiers and chief ministers. All followed in the footsteps of numerous women who had carved out a place in parliamentary politics. On the occasion of the sesquicentenary of responsible government in NSW, 1856-2006, *'No Fit Place for Women'?* examines the experiences of women in NSW politics, both inside and outside parliament. Here there are many 'first women': as candidates for the various political parties or as independents, as members of parliament in the upper or lower house, in the bureaucracy, on advisory committees. Indeed, the book draws its title from the speech given by the first woman elected to the NSW parliament, Millicent Preston-Stanley, in which she attacked male parliamentarians who saw the parliament as 'no fit place for women' (24). The first women are appropriately acknowledged, but as important are the contributions of the second, third and subsequent women who progressively

made the NSW parliament, and NSW politics more generally, a fit place *for* women.

To guide us through the dimensions and dynamics of women's activism in NSW politics, Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell adopt the concepts of insiders, outsiders, and outsiders within, and each chapter explores these different roles and their influence and impact. They draw on the work of Mary Katzenstein who sees the relationship between insiders and outsiders as points on a continuum, influenced by the degree and nature of institutional accountability. Each of these has its own challenges, but it is the role of the 'outsider within' that provides the most interesting dimensions of political engagement. Women act as 'outsiders within' where their accountability is divided between different organisations and where these 'multiple accountabilities' must be managed. The most common examples are those whose paid employment sits alongside an ongoing external activist role, and Indigenous women with multiple accountabilities, while ALP women are also described as outsiders within, who combine allegiances with the party and the feminist movement, with both positive and negative effect.

The book's examination of formal and informal politics enables the inclusion of political strategies beyond just parliamentary politics, making for a richer appreciation of the scope and scale of NSW women's political activism, and the variety of avenues through which that activism has been generated and sustained. Hence, Donovan's chapter on suffrage takes a broader view of the way in which women's activism was shaped and developed. As she points out, the traditional focus on suffrage has provided a limited picture of the backdrop to women's growing activism. The role of literary and intellectual clubs and societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as 'training grounds' for women sheds light on how women, traditionally confined to the private sphere, were able to shift to the public sphere. The contribution to building women's confidence and organisational skills cannot be underestimated, as a later generation of women found through their involvement with the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL). Again, women who had been cast as housewives developed an unexpected range of skills, both personal and organisational. In a similar vein, Goodwin shows that women's advisory committees, which date from the mid-1970s, were enabling spaces, providing an avenue for women's

participation in the political process and, once more, as a training ground for broader activity.

While a generation passed from the granting of suffrage in 1902 to the electoral breakthrough of Millicent Preston-Stanley in 1925, NSW women's ability to participate in the political process was limited in that for most of those years they could vote but could not stand for parliament, a right gained in 1918. Irrespective of which political party they represented, barriers to entry confronted women, notwithstanding, for example, strategies adopted by the Liberal Party to ensure women's representation, including reserved seats and formal recognition of its women's committee. From 1950 to 1973 there were no women in the lower house, and for long periods the number of women in both houses remained in single figures. These overall patterns are introduced in Brennan's opening chapter and then elaborated in the three chapters on the ALP, Coalition, independent and minor party women.

Complementary stories are found across chapters: Chappell's on the bureaucracy together with Goodwin's on advisory committees and Sawyer's chapter on advocacy groups examine the shaping of women's policy. Historical patterns of continuity can be traced (51) from the non-party political stance of suffrage and post-suffrage groups, advocacy groups (in Sawyer's chapter, 'Generations of Advocacy') and, as Sarah Maddison reminds us in her chapter, the activism of young women in successive periods after the 1970s. While the complexion of each political party differs, here too similarities are to be found, most commonly in the struggles for parliamentary presence, voice and influence. One of the book's key contributions is the detail of the breadth of women's activism and the generational patterns. Characterisation of Australian feminism as two separated 'waves', and the depiction of the 1950s and 1960s as the 'trough' between them cannot be sustained when set against the work of advocacy groups such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters, and the United Associations of Women, together with the ongoing persistence of women in the various political parties in the inter-war and post-war years. What is reinforced, however, is the significance of the 1970s: the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement, the founding of WEL, establishment of women's advisory committees, the increase in women's parliamentary presence, and the creation of women's policy agencies in the NSW public

service.

Throughout this analysis of NSW politics, WEL appears—whether in terms of influence on the bureaucracy, individuals across the political spectrum, or as one of the key advocacy groups. *Making Women Count*, the history of WEL, provides many insights into the early growth of the organisation following its formation in 1972, the quick gaining of a media profile through its 1972 federal election candidate survey (which was indeed a tool long used by women's groups), and how it reached out to women. WEL began as a non-party organisation for which policy was the priority (with WEL submissions now numbering over 900). This central focus on public policy, including both economic and social policy from taxation to domestic violence, discrimination to reproductive rights, distinguished it from Women's Liberation and created a different trajectory. While this provided one of the tensions between the two, the often complementary relationship is also explored. As the years unfolded, the reliance on the state would shift from being WEL's strength to its weakness in an environment of economic rationalism and over a decade of conservative government from 1996 to 2007.

Making Women Count resonates with the excitement and passion of those involved and just how much could be achieved by a committed group of activists. It also paints a portrait of the making of activists through the recollections of WEL members, reinforcing its transformative effect for many women. Some would go on to have political careers (spanning the political spectrum). Others entered the bureaucracy, with WEL members predominantly being appointed by governments as women's advisors, reinforcing again the adoption of the outsider within role. The current challenges facing WEL are also acknowledged, including both organisational sustainability and the demands of membership renewal, and the impact on and shaping of public policy in a hostile environment.

The final chapter considers whether WEL was part of a continuous women's movement or part of the rupture with the past, as 'new' social movements of the 1960s saw themselves. In arguing for recognition of continuity, Sawer locates WEL within the fabric of a women's movement that ebbed and flowed, which had periods of abeyance and resurgence. Writing this history in what became

the final years of the Howard government, the notion of abeyance becomes the point of optimism countering the somewhat downbeat tone that infuses the conclusion.

Taking *Making Women Count* and *'No Fit Place for Women'?* together, critical and timely insights are provided into the experiences of women who sought change and those who continue to seek political change, whether through the formal or informal political process, as insiders, outsiders or outsiders within, collectively through groups like WEL or as individuals shaped by their activism in WEL. The organisational and personal achievements of the women chronicled here remind us of the battles fought, won and lost. Furthering our understanding of these dynamics of change and the effect of abeyance and resurgence, these retrospectives stimulate collective memory and reinforce the notion of a women's movement without end, both when advances are achievable and when graft, consolidation and resistance is needed.