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Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in

Australia. By Marian Sawer. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008. Pp. 317. A\$39.95 paper. 2009 marks forty years since the founding organisations of the modern women's movement were established in Australia. And what a forty years it has been. The social, political and cultural transformation that that movement has brought about is of world-historic importance—for women, nothing is at it was and it is inconceivable that there could be any return to the past. And yet, there is enough going on around us to justify doubt about where we have got to and whether we are on quite the right track after all.

As I write this, Queensland is basking in the glory of its first female premier, the first in Australia to win an election in her own right—another milestone on the long rocky road to women's equality. Meanwhile, in the same state, a young woman and her boyfriend are being prosecuted for having procured an abortion—a reminder that whatever gains are being and have been made, some women are doing better than others out of the equality game.

Marian Sawer's history of the Women's Electoral Lobby helps us to understand some of the ways in which we have got to where we are: the achievements of recent decades, but also the limitations—and even, as she argues, some of the setbacks.

This is an important book. It tells the story of an organisation—often overlooked and under-valued in histories of women's activism in Australia. It discusses the origins and rapid spread of the group, its campaigns and ideas and successes and failures. Drawing upon social movement theory it offers a fine-grained portrait of one of the major components of the modern women's movement.

In doing so, it addresses some of the ways in which the group has been underestimated (to adopt a useful neologism). WEL is often presented as being committed solely to getting women into parliament. As Sawer makes clear, nothing could be further from the truth. Like all of the various currents of women's activism launched in the late 1960s, WEL wanted to change society. Unlike the revolutionaries of Women's Liberation, however, who were

committed to the eradication of patriarchy, gender roles, all hierarchies of any kind, WEL wanted to reform the existing social set-up, giving women the share of the pie to which their numbers entitled them. Women were to be equal, to be sure—but only to men, not to each other.

With that as their guiding star, the women of WEL worked on information collecting, on educating the power-holders, and on policy development and lobbying. Equal pay, anti-discrimination laws, services for women and children, poverty, gun laws and pornography and macro-economic policy all fell within the organisation's ambit at various points.

What makes this book particularly valuable is that, in telling the story of WEL, Sawyer is telling the story of Australian social and political activism during a period when it really, really mattered. WEL's ebbs and flows, its strategies, its gains and losses tell us as much about Australia as they do about the organisation or even the status of women in our society. The movement's first defeat came in 1973 when the Right to Life successfully mobilised against the campaign for more liberal abortion laws. That the RTL was headed up by a woman, and used WEL's own repertoire (candidate surveys and election-time form-guides), highlights the power of the movement's armoury, even when used against its goals.

Sawyer provides a nuanced analysis of the political climate—or rather climates—in which WEL (and all political activists) have worked over the past four decades. The Whitlam government with its equal pay policy and the first women's advisor, the Hawke years with its equal opportunity and access and equity strategies, the (shudder!) Howard years ... But equally, the deeper cultural shifts are unearthed for us. From women's 'disadvantage', to 'rights', to 'economic utility'—these are subtle but significantly different ways of thinking about what is wrong and what is needed and why; and they are embedded in the historical unfolding of recent decades.

Sawyer is very good on tactics and strategies, too. The femocrat, the wheel model of policy implementation, the adoption of bilingualism (the ability to speak in bureaucratic language to politicians and public servants and in plain language to women and activists) ... this is a study that helps us to understand how operating simultaneously inside and outside the existing power structures

actually works.

The social movements of the 1970s and after have profoundly reshaped Australian society. They need to be better understood than they are. This fine work shows us how we might go about producing such histories, one study at a time. GRAHAM WILLETT *University of Melbourne*
