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

Marian Sawer (with Gail Radford), *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008), xv + 317 pp., \$39.95, ISBN 9780868409439

Some Australian feminist writing speaks only to an inner circle of initiates well versed in theory, and has little appeal to a broader audience. This latest offering from that seasoned chronicler and analyst of Australian politics is, of course, not in this category. Anyone who was around in the heady 1970s, endured the 1980s and survived the 1990s will find it of interest. Women, in particular, whether active participants, fringe adherents or interested on-lookers, will find absorbing this history of a body that proved to be a significant agent of social and political change in this country.

Operating as they did, in an organised and purposeful manner, the founders and inheritors of WEL kept track of what they were doing, their newsletters, interviews, oral records and photographs, forming the basis of the story told here and the source of some of the most evocative illustrations. Born in the early 1970s as the younger and more demure sister of Women's Liberation, WEL had a loud and healthy infancy, a steady childhood and adolescence, but may now be declining into a premature middle age. The burgeoning of the discipline of Women's Studies here and around the world has produced a vast array of secondary material in the form of books and academic articles and theses, still largely penned by women. This volume serves to remind us where it all started - in a world unrecognisable to the young women of today.

Although many WEL pioneers went on to careers in politics, the bureaucracy and academia, their initial aim was to get women's issues onto the agenda of those in, or aspiring to, positions of political power. Hence the early adoption of that very instructive tool, the candidate questionnaire - something still associated in the public mind with WEL. The ignorant and dismissive attitudes on issues important to women that these surveys revealed were the stimulus to more active measures - education of the well-intentioned and shaming of the

arrogant. Humour, rather than indignation and wringing of hands proved potent, with cartooning, lampooning and, later, the making of 'awards' for the most sexist and boorish statements and behaviour of public figures. The media was, of course, always up for a photo-opportunity whenever young women were concerned, although they never witnessed any 'bra-burning' (whose mythological origins are exposed on page 124). Media attention was a mixed blessing - positive when the message got through, and negative when used to reinforce gender stereotypes.

From the start, the women of WEL preferred less ephemeral ways of getting and maintaining attention to their causes. Highlighting bad practice and appealing to the latent Australian sense of fair play involved a lot of hard work. The process of designing questionnaires, organising and conducting interviews, and preparing and printing newsletters, posters and flyers involved much meeting, strategising and sharing of experience. The preparation and presentation of submissions to parliamentary committees and inquiries required skills of a higher order and won them enduring credibility in a country still lacking a peak body for women. Getting results reinforced the feeling that these things were worth doing, while the sense of solidarity with other women sustained them. WEL contributed much to the very real improvements for women and children achieved in the Whitlam and Fraser period, and by pioneering state administrations like Dunstan's in South Australia.

That there was a continuity with earlier waves of feminist struggle is a point Sawyer makes several times. Largely unaware of what went before, though, each generation discovers afresh forms of gender-based disadvantage and discrimination, and rebels. If they are lucky, there will be 'gentle warriors' of earlier generations around to talk to and learn from. Just as age-old problems manifest themselves in new guises, so too are new tools of communication and advocacy available to each wave; one wonders, though, whether the historians of the next 35 years of Australian feminism will be able to retrieve from the electronic ether the material they need. Will the struggle of humankind merely to survive on this degrading planet mean that issues of gender fade, or will the brute struggle for survival throw into even greater relief the vulnerabilities of the female half of the population? The fragility of some of the gains, exposed since the early nineties with every economic downturn, is a

reminder that 'women's work is never done'.

Jenny Tilby Stock

*University of Adelaide*

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