

Shining stars in feminist struggle

SOCIAL HISTORY

MAKING WOMEN COUNT: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia. By Marian Sawyer with Gail Radford. UNSW Press. 317pp. \$39.95.

Reviewer: SARA DOWSE

While Australia's once exemplary child-care system implodes 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 be getting the paid maternity leave we've been fighting for, out comes this splendid record of one shining aspect of this country'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".

Alas, 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 numbers, could be so summarily treated, or receive such scant attention. A more intelligent response is *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, it didn't seem radical enough, and one of the ironies of feminist history is that the first femocrats were Women's Libbers whose only association with WEL in its early days was at the weekly Women's 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 galvanised women across the country and those who wouldn't touch liberation with a barge pole embraced WEL with millennial fervour. The Labor Party credited it with their election and created positions and units in government to deal with the sticky issues raised. By 1975, International Women's Year, in addition to the metropolitan and suburban groups, no fewer than 52 brave small-town WELs were beaver away.

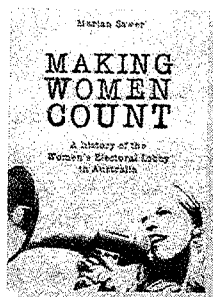
As the years progressed Women's Liberation continued to fragment, filtering into services like refuges and rape crisis centres, or the creation of women's studies courses, while WEL stayed resolutely on track, focusing its energies on government. But for the most part, throughout their sometimes prickly 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 male-only public-service entrance exams, ASIO filed a copy of the map used to picket the building where they were being held. And in 1974, when I was laterally recruited to the prime minister's office as arguably Australia's first femocrat, 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



Early days: a Women's Electoral Lobby Victoria meeting in 1972.



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 femocrats couldn't have gone an inch without them. What feminists on the inside needed most of all was a powerful lobby banging 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 abeyance. 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 to be commended 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

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stars; inspired by the discovery that individual discontent arose from systemic oppression rather than personal failure, this is what we were passionate about.

Celebrity culture is even stronger today, and it's hard to find books, especially about women, that celebrate intellect as much as emotion. A sad development, for it's been base emotion dressed up as "rationality" that's got us in our present mess. I'm all for thinking again, and *Making Women Count* is an excellent way to begin.

Sara Dowse was the first head of the Office of Women's Affairs (later the Office of the Status of Women), appointed in 1974.