

## 1. The birth of WEL

‘The girl from WEL’, read the story in *The Sun*, which featured a slim young WEL member striding toward the camera with her tote-bag of WEL T-shirts for sale. ‘Hubbies hold the baby’, read the story on the next page. It was January 1973 and WEL’s first national conference was being held in Canberra. There was an all-male staff of nine working on the conference desk and there would have been more men at the conference, a spokeswoman assured a reporter, if they hadn’t been at home baby-sitting. Attractive young women and husbands holding the babies were the main story. But if readers persevered to page 32, there was a whole page on WEL’s demands for things such as an equal opportunity commission and an enquiry into discrimination in hiring apprentices.<sup>1</sup>

The mixed messages found in the media were part of the heady world of the early days of WEL. Could women be young and attractive and still want equal opportunity? For generations, Australian cartoonists had depicted feminists as physically unattractive women, who had become feminists because they could not get a man. And what about men – could they support the challenge to gender roles and the redistribution of domestic work that seemed to be required? Would women abandon the home?

[[**Insert Figure 01.01**]]

Frances MacGillycuddy, ‘The girl from WEL’, WEL’s first national conference. *The Sun*, 22 January 1973, p. 7. *The Herald and Weekly Times Pty Ltd*.

The conference was held less than two months after the first Australian election in which ‘women’s issues’ had become an important campaign theme. In 1972, the auspices were particularly promising for those seeking change. The conservative Coalition government, in power for 23 years, had clearly grown old in office and was out of step with the times. It was being challenged by a modernising Labor Party, reaching out to the young and to the new social movements. Labor was extending the language of equal opportunity beyond its traditional class-based boundaries to encompass women, migrants and Aboriginal Australians. The economy was buoyant, there were more educated women

than ever before, and in general the political opportunity structure could not have been more favourable for a new push by the women's movement.

WEL's effect on the political agenda made its conference a major news story. More than 350 women had 'untied their apron strings, shoved aside typewriters and hung up their professional gowns and white coats' to come to Canberra.<sup>2</sup> There was excitement at being part of history and of historic social change. For those used to political conferences there had never been a gathering like it. 'Women were serious, warm, happy. No evidence of fanaticism, factionalism, bigotry, purity or mania.'<sup>3</sup> While other families were holidaying at the coast, WEL members were sitting in the heat in a tent, listening to lawyer Mary Gaudron. In its first week in office the Whitlam government had asked her to reopen the equal pay case. Two days later came the decision that one and a half million working women would now be eligible for full pay. Fourteen years later she became the first woman on the High Court.

### **Time to move beyond talk**

Although the opportunities were local, the new ways of looking at the world had largely come from overseas. Women active in the anti-Vietnam War movement seized upon the roneoed Women's Liberation material brought back from the United States. American sisters opened their eyes to their lack of equality in this supposedly radical movement. As the first Australian Women's Liberation leaflet said: 'Only the Chains Have Changed'.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 small groups of women in Chicago and New York had adopted a new mode of political action that came to be known as consciousness-raising. It drew on the way that black activists in the civil rights movement had testified about their personal experiences of oppression and also on Mao's slogan, 'Speak pain to recall pain'. Consciousness-raising involved women speaking in turn from their life experiences within a supportive group. They learned from the similarities of their stories that their problems were political rather than just personal. In fact the personal *was* political. This became the characteristic mode of action of the loosely organised groups known as Women's Liberation, first set up in Australia in 1969–70.

WEL founder Beatrice Faust joined Women's Liberation in Melbourne but quickly become convinced it was time for the women's movement to move beyond talk. Again the inspiration was from the United States – an article in the preview issue of Gloria Steinem's *Ms.* magazine about how feminists had been rating presidential candidates.<sup>5</sup> With a federal election looming in Australia, it seemed a perfect time to try something similar.

In February 1972, Faust called a meeting of ten women in her own house in Carlton (Melbourne) and WEL was born. The ten included journalists Iola Hack (Mathews) and Sally White, psychologist Carmen Lawrence and sociologist Jan Harper. The first public meeting, advertised in *The Age* and *Nation Review*, took place in April. The initial plan was to survey Victorian candidates through a mail-out questionnaire on their attitudes to issues such as equal pay and equal opportunity, child care, abortion and family planning. Faust had already been getting medical students from Monash University to write to members of parliament (MPs) asking about their views on abortion, using the name 'Parliamentary Abortion Lobby', the prototype for 'Women's Electoral Lobby'.

The name 'Women's Electoral Lobby' (WEL) caught on from the start and lent itself to slogans such as 'Think WEL before you vote'. The women who Faust summoned all had professional skills of some kind or another, and this was to be a hallmark of the new organisation. Women journalists played a crucial role in the media impact of WEL in its first year and hence on further recruitment of members, while the young social scientists worked on survey design and professional credibility. These were exciting days as women discovered the power of collective action and sharing of new skills. In the words of one member:

Never one to do anything by halves, I flung myself into the activities of Women's Electoral Lobby, soon being on the co-ordinating committee, editing the Broadsheet, interviewing politicians, appearing on television and radio, helping to write submissions, visiting Canberra. They were heady days. Groups of us would sit up all night, planning and writing. The subject was new, so the impact of our findings was great. We found supportive women of all ages in every profession, in every suburb, in the

country, in other states. We realised what could be achieved by working together. We discovered we had power.<sup>6</sup>

There were some initial hiccups, and few responses to the initial mail-out version of the survey. It was decided it must be face to face, with two women present at each interview, one to conduct the interview and one to scribe. And it had to be national. The group in Melbourne would need assistance from women all around Australia. Faust set off to other capital cities to talk to women about founding WEL groups. WEL had to come into being on a national scale to make an impact in the election.

The survey turned out to be an ideal exercise for mobilising women, many of whom had no previous contact with the women's movement and had not previously been involved in politics. Many read about the WEL survey in newspaper articles and were attracted by the idea of 'doing something practical'. Others were drafted to interview candidates in far-flung electorates. They 'hunted in pairs' and became famous for their persistence in pursuit of reluctant candidates.

The interviews were a revelation as women found out how little the male candidates, of whom they had often been in awe, knew about the issues of concern to women. A not untypical reaction was: 'What does this peanut think he's doing standing for parliament?' One interviewer found that she was repeating like a cockatoo, 'That's nice, that's nice', as candidates kept telling her, 'My wife is quite happy to stay at home with the children'.<sup>7</sup> Another wrote:

I'll never forget my interview with the experienced and powerful member of parliament who fumbled and stuttered when asked about sex discrimination, mumbling something about sexuality and people's freedom, trying to figure out what he was supposed to think about sex.<sup>8</sup>

Young social scientists helped devise the 45-item candidate questionnaire, not without some strong disagreements that threatened to derail the whole process. In Melbourne, psychologists Carmen Lawrence and Pat Strong and sociologist Helen Glezer favoured a format that would help educate the candidates and commit them to action, as well as obtaining information on attitudes. In Sydney, WEL members led by Eva Cox favoured a simpler market research-type tick-a-box model.

The questions were designed to probe candidates' knowledge of existing facilities for child care, family planning and retraining for women re-entering the workforce; their attitudes on issues such as sex education in schools or discrimination against working women; and their willingness to commit to action on issues such as removing the ban on the advertising and display of contraceptives or introducing anti-discrimination legislation.<sup>9</sup> The survey epitomised WEL's belief in 'evidence-based change', serving to educate both the candidates and the women doing the interviews.

There were over 600 federal candidates to be interviewed. While WEL tried to have women from the relevant electorate interview candidates, some candidates were interviewed in airports and Canberra WEL members interviewed **those** who were sitting MPs at Parliament House. The least co-operative were the mainly Catholic Democratic Labor Party (DLP) candidates. A WEL member in Bennelong reported that a Catholic candidate 'threatened to throw us out of his office if we mentioned the word sex again'.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of the survey on the political agenda was remarkable. Women journalists helped sell its academic credentials to editors and it was given wide coverage in broadsheets and tabloids throughout Australia. As a result of the media coverage, there was a very high survey response rate: 77 per cent rising to 94 per cent if the DLP were excluded. *The Age* printed the form guide for Victorian candidates as a particularly successful lift-out Green Guide.<sup>11</sup> *Age* journalists Sally White and Iola Hack (Mathews) had persuaded the editor, Creighton Burns, that the survey results were academically respectable and should be given a run. The *National Times* described WEL on its front page as the 'rising new force in Australian politics', while Nancy Dexter wrote in the *Age*: 'The 1972 federal election must go down in history as the first in which the average woman is really interested. Much of this interest is due to WEL...' Robert Turnbull, in the *New York Times*, described WEL as 'an organized and formidable factor' in the election campaign.<sup>12</sup> No other non-party organisation was so successful at promoting its issues during a federal election until the Tasmanian Wilderness Society/Australian Conservation Foundation combination in the 1983 campaign.

**[[Insert Figure 01.02]]**

WEL–Victoria meeting, Mary Owen leaning forward in the centre.

‘The Women Voters’ Guide’, *The Age*, 20 November 1972.

*The Age Archives, courtesy The Age.*

The ALP had gone into the 1972 election without a women’s policy<sup>13</sup>, but its shadow ministers tended to be distinctly more responsive to the issues WEL was raising than Coalition ministers, foreshadowing some dramatic improvements for women if the ALP won government. While Prime Minister William McMahon gave his WEL interviewers half an hour, the Foreign Minister, Nigel Bowen, could spare them only thirteen minutes and doubted there was anybody in Australia who didn’t know about birth control. The Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Peter Howson, was ‘unaware of any areas of discrimination against women’ while the Minister for Education, Malcolm Fraser, thought that to allow the advertising or display of contraceptives would be offensive.<sup>14</sup>

In South Australia, a complaint was lodged with the Electoral Office by a sitting member, Sir John McLeay, about failure to place an authorisation at the bottom of leaflets carrying the detailed WEL ratings. WEL–SA withdrew 3500 leaflets and arranged to have them overprinted with authorisation and printer’s name. When it was realised that whoever provided the authorisation was likely to be charged with an electoral offence, Karla Tan volunteered, because as a ‘housewife’ she would be least affected by a conviction. In fact she became interested in the law as a result of her involvement in WEL and had to disclose the conviction when admitted to the bar. The young printer was so upset by the Federal Police inquiry that he sold his printing press.<sup>15</sup>

The question of how much information to provide on the performance of parties rather than individual candidates was controversial, given fears of being accused of partisanship. WEL in Brisbane telegrammed its intention ‘to resign en masse with [a] blaze of publicity’ if any party breakdown was provided, and South Australia was similarly disaffected.<sup>16</sup> The WEL media action group, on the other hand, was conscious

that this was the information journalists wanted and could, in any case, extract from the data on individual candidates.

Despite these hiccups, the overall effect of WEL's intervention in the 1972 federal campaign was such that political parties no longer felt comfortable going into election campaigns without a women's policy. As we shall see, this was to remain true for more than thirty years.

### **Recruiting**

To turn the survey into a national exercise and to spread WEL beyond Melbourne, Faust sent out letters to her existing abortion law reform and Women's Liberation networks. The Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) preceded the arrival of the new wave of the women's movement and provided many of its early members. A survey conducted at the national WEL conference in January 1973 found almost a fifth of those present had an ALRA background.<sup>17</sup>

Faust anticipated resistance from Women's Liberation because of its rejection of reformist action. Her letter to a Women's Liberation contact in Canberra said: 'If you believe the democratic process is useless, perhaps you could pass this on to someone who still has hopes of it'.<sup>18</sup> The letter was passed on to Gail Wilenski, who with others had already created a Women's Liberation action workshop. Wilenski responded positively, saying that the workshop would establish a subcommittee of WEL. Faust travelled to Sydney and Brisbane to talk to women about starting WEL groups and would have come to Canberra but missed the plane – so WEL had to begin in Canberra without her.

**[[Insert Figure 01.03]]**

**Table 1.1** Founding of metropolitan WEL groups

In Sydney, a meeting was organised at the house of Julia Freebury, an ALRA activist. Those attending were only mildly enthusiastic, feeling Faust was too critical of Germaine

Greer and Women's Liberation, but Caroline Graham accepted the role of convenor and Wendy McCarthy and June Surtees (later Williams) became the deputy convenors of the new organisation. In 1972 it wasn't always easy to find WEL in Sydney – one woman was said to have waited in a carpark beside a car with a WEL sticker until the owner returned so she could join.

In Brisbane, the meeting was organised at the house of Barbara Wertheim or, rather, in a shallow, drained swimming pool in her garden that was used as a conversation pit. Thirty years later, women had memories of feminist campaigner Merle Thornton collecting cane toads from the floor of the pool during this meeting, as her young son sold toads to the university laboratories to supplement his pocket money. Thornton decided not to join WEL because she mistakenly saw it as a women-only organisation, but not long afterwards she was an inspiring guest speaker at a weekend workshop organised by WEL–Darwin.

Further south, WEL was also spreading to Adelaide and Hobart. In Adelaide WEL started with thirteen members and had its first public meeting in late July; by September, it had more than 100 members and soon claimed 1000, inspired by an idea whose time had come – that women deserved a better deal from politicians.<sup>19</sup> Around Australia, many members joined after reading about the WEL survey and the need for more volunteers. The enormous publicity generated by Germaine Greer, touring Australia to promote the paperback edition of her book *The Female Eunuch*, also helped. Her book, 'which was everywhere', was a turning point for many women who joined WEL and were hungry for action.

**[[Insert figure 01.04]]**

WEL–Darwin members modelling T-shirts, 1974. L to R, Lucille Kidney, Leith Cameron, Lenore Coltheart and Maureen McDonald (Cleary).  
*Lenore Coltheart.*

These founding meetings aroused the suspicion of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), for whom women's rights were part of a communist agenda. The

flyers advertising the first WEL meetings were collected and ‘inquiries’ made of those involved.<sup>20</sup> Sharing premises with Women’s Liberation and anti-war groups or, in Hobart, with the Committee for Democracy in Chile, fuelled these suspicions.

WEL took a little longer to reach Western Australia. A few WA activists, including Pat Giles from Women’s Liberation, had managed to join WEL and travelled to Canberra for the first national conference. On their return they set up WEL in Perth and held a packed first meeting in March 1973 in the Nursing Federation Hall. Pat Giles, later to have an illustrious political career, became the inaugural convenor.

WEL was spreading not only in Australia but also over the Tasman. In March 1975 the desire to move beyond talk to action brought into being WEL–New Zealand. Marijke Robinson described the catalyst as a party held at Victoria University in Wellington to honour visiting socialist feminist writer, Juliet Mitchell, at which Mitchell said that if women really wanted to bring about change they would have to develop a theory. Robinson, then doing sociology honours, had not been able to find any theory that satisfactorily explained women’s oppression. She got up at question time and expressed her impatience with the idea that action would have to wait on theory:

It’s all very well to say we have to know what we are doing, and to have a theory, but in the meantime we are being oppressed and those men on the Hill, in Parliament, are doing whatever they like while we’re not getting anywhere. I say, let’s just do something about that, as women, as a pressure group. I have just heard about WEL in Australia. Let’s do something like that!

In recalling this moment, Robinson added: ‘This was the first time I had ever spoken in public, and I remember I had a glass of sherry in my hand when I rose to speak. When I sat down I had absolutely no sherry left in my glass – it had all shaken out.’<sup>21</sup> Judy Zavos, just returned from Australia where she had been impressed by WEL’s successes, came up to Robinson afterwards and the planning of WEL–New Zealand began.

The foundation story of WEL–New Zealand shows clearly the role of emotions in political mobilisation. It was indignation at injustice and the desire to do something

practical about it that propelled women into action, not the calculation of interests nor the light of theory. One of the founders of WEL in Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, was amazed at the level of anger expressed at the first meeting there: 'The intensity of the anger staggered me. Every story told of discrimination in the work place and repressive sexist attitudes'.<sup>22</sup> This story of pent-up rage over discrimination is one that is often told and is a key to the energy women poured into WEL in its early years.

From the beginning, the under-employment of tertiary-educated women was often seen as the impulse behind WEL.<sup>23</sup> Women's participation in higher education had been expanding fast in the 1960s but the barriers to careers for women, particularly married women, were still firmly in place. Of WEL members who joined in 1972–75, just over half had at least a bachelor degree; this proportion rose to around three quarters in later years, with the removal of tertiary fees. Of those in paid employment, the most common profession was teaching. The contrast with the broader population was very marked, with the 1971 census showing only 1 per cent of women having a university degree. An early survey of Victorian WEL members concluded that they were a 'homogeneous group of young well-educated women' who were 'characteristically married to liberal, professional or "white-collar" husbands'.<sup>24</sup>

While university qualifications were stressed in establishing the credibility of the election survey, when seeking to establish the representative credentials of WEL other characteristics were emphasised. In South Australia, for example, WEL's publicity officer stressed that 'WEL is not a top-heavy, intellectual organisation. Its followers come from the ranks of housewives (who make up 47 per cent of the membership), shop assistants, typists and dressmakers, as well as professional and career women'.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, in all cities around Australia there was a pool of educated women who seemed to have been waiting for WEL. Marriage bars, lack of child care and plain discrimination were preventing many from using their qualifications in paid employment. They were often stranded in new suburbs with their children, with little in the way of

support services or intellectual companionship. ‘The woman isolated in the home’ was a frequent topic at early WEL conferences, and one such woman later wrote:

In the 1970s, I was one of the women in the new housing developments around Adelaide who suffered a special kind of isolation ... with a working-studying husband and three young children, domesticity engulfed me and I felt starved intellectually. Salvation arrived unexpectedly. At a school Mother’s Club meeting, a letter was tabled from a new group called Women’s Electoral Lobby. I joined immediately ... I was swept along with the excitement and energy of this lobby group and my sense of isolation diminished ... Acts of Parliament, Hansard, statistics and official submissions became part of my daily life when I joined the Australia-wide team lobbying for the abolition of succession duties between spouses.<sup>26</sup>

Around three quarters of the first cohort of WEL members were married and had children when they joined. In fact, 38 per cent had children under school age. Early surveys of membership, such as one conducted in Western Australia in 1974, confirm the WEL history’s finding that the statistically average member at that period was aged between 26 and 35, was married and had between one and three children.<sup>27</sup> The organisations in which WEL members were most likely to have been active before joining WEL were Parents and Citizens Associations or their equivalents. Marjorie Luck described how a guest speaker at the Tarooma Primary School Mothers Club shocked her into joining WEL–Tasmania in 1972: ‘Women who sell men’s shoes get paid less than men who sell men’s shoes. Women who sell women’s shoes get paid even less’.<sup>28</sup>

**[[Insert figure 01.05]]**

WEL members marching with their children, Sydney, International Women’s Day 1975. *WEL–NSW office.*

Motherhood meant women were more likely to be out of the paid workforce, to be available for WEL activities and to have a keen interest in child care. WEL was seen as a comfortable place for women with young children. Conversely, it was possible for single women to feel WEL did not sufficiently cater for them. In 1973, Anne Summers told a journalist that she was not a member of WEL because it was too much occupied with child care in which, as a childless woman, she was not greatly interested.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, one of Summers’ great coups when she first went into government as head of the Office of

Status of Women was to get the Hawke government to commit to 20 000 new child-care places for the 1984 election policy.

Perhaps linked to their higher levels of education, WEL members also differed from the general population of women in terms of religion. WEL members were more secular than the norm, with 80 per cent later claiming they had no religious affiliation when they joined. By contrast, only 5 per cent of all women in the 1971 census admitted to having no religious denomination. Twice as many WEL members had grown up as Anglicans (30 per cent) than as Catholics (14 per cent), contrary to some later mythologies. A large proportion (28 per cent) also came from 'other denominations', perhaps reflecting the traditional links between dissenting protestant churches and the women's movement.

The history survey reveals that the characteristics of WEL members changed quite dramatically over thirty years, with the later cohorts reflecting general social changes. For example, while three quarters of the first WEL members were married, by the time of those joining in the Howard era, only one third were married. The proportion of those with children went down from 72 per cent to around 50 per cent while the proportion of those in paid employment went up significantly.

Unlike Women's Liberation, WEL always had a few men among its membership, usually supportive husbands or partners. Indeed, in 1975 Georgette and Howard Whitton took a turn as joint editors of the *WEL-ACT Newsletter*. From time to time questions were raised concerning men's participation in specific events, but on the whole support was gratefully received.

From the start WEL was raising Aboriginal issues, including in the initial mail-out survey. In Canberra, Aboriginal woman Pat Eatock and her baby lived for some time in the Bremer Street Women's House attending WEL and Women's Liberation meetings. She had to stay until the end of all the meetings as they were held in the room where she slept.<sup>30</sup> She stood in the 1972 federal elections as a Black Liberation candidate and topped WEL's ratings for the ACT with all the knowledge she had gained. However,

despite supporting Aboriginal issues, WEL was not successful in attracting more than a handful of Aboriginal members.

### **Not enough ashtrays**

Did WEL members in the 1970s conform to our image of how middle-class reformers behave? Witness the letter sent by WEL to the Tasmanian Teachers' Federation in May 1974:

Dear Miss Backhouse,

I have been instructed by the Women's Electoral lobby to write to you on the matter raised in your letter of May 8th. We are sorry that your cleaners have been put to such an effort cleaning after our public meeting and regret that those attending should have ground out their cigarette butts into the cork floor. Unfortunately there were not enough ashtrays to give each of our 300 participants one each; perhaps the problem will be solved in future by the provision of No Smoking signs in the hall.<sup>31</sup>

In Canberra, Maureen Worsley, soon to be elected to the Legislative Assembly for the Australia Party, was dissatisfied not only with the lack of voting procedures at WEL meetings but also with 'sitting in an overcrowded room on six square inches of carpet with a matchbox for an ashtray and being exhorted to empty my ashtray, "clear up your shit sister" etc'.<sup>32</sup> While WEL members might eschew fashion items such as high-heeled shoes that were 'harmful to the body', like other social movement activists of the period they smoked a lot, and drank more wine than would today be considered good for them. They were caught up in the heady business of changing the world, a process that might require sitting around a cask of white wine on the floor until late at night or 'drilling ourselves like a military operation' for meetings with federal ministers. In the early years WEL meetings sometimes went on until three in the morning:

there were the long nights of submission writing, of sitting together at someone's house with wine or coffee and a plate of raw vegetables and dip or cake and biscuits, talking over the issues ... Slowly, over nights of discussion, our submission would emerge, combining our insights and the facts we would gather between meetings ... After presentation to a WEL general meeting for endorsement, the submission was sent off and a strategy enacted for getting it heard. We might make visits to key people,

or give radio interviews, or organise a mailing of copies to everyone that came to mind.<sup>33</sup>

While much of this repertoire was not too different from that of older women's organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the style was definitely different. WEL women tended to be forthright on matters of sex and access to contraception and abortion, in a manner sometimes shocking to older women's rights campaigners, who had pressed for the abolition of the double standard through 'purity for men' rather than sexual freedom for women.

WEL women had high energy levels and were incredibly busy – they wanted to change the world and there were a lot of half-open doors waiting to be pushed. Every opportunity had to be taken, regardless of timing. In South Australia, one of the WEL members giving evidence to a parliamentary inquiry into sex discrimination had contractions throughout the hearing and gave birth at 6 pm that evening. In Western Australia, Yvonne Henderson had to feed her newborn baby in the State Arbitration Commission while presenting WEL's equal pay submission. In Sydney, Wendy McCarthy was delivering press releases around town during the day with the children in the back seat, going to meetings at night and returning home exhilarated.<sup>34</sup>

Government agencies and public institutions still practised many overt as well as covert forms of discrimination against women, as did private companies. WEL members developed a 'nose for discrimination'. They sent off letters to Ministers and chief executives, as well as to employment discrimination committees, to show 'Big Sister' was watching. Long-time labour activist Edna Ryan, who was 68 when she retired to devote her time to WEL, wrote: 'WEL is flourishing – happening after happening. We are as enchanted as the flower power people. Telephone trees, WEL badges for sale, husbands helping produce the newsletter, child care survey ... Child care kit outlines, seminar on disarmament, survey on abortion ...'<sup>35</sup>

Yet the communications equipment available to WEL members was primitive in the extreme, from the perspective of thirty years on. There were no computers, laser-printing,

email, websites, fax machines or conference calls. Neither were photocopiers generally available. Instead, there were typewriters and carbon copies, the Gestetner for duplicating, the post, the telephone, the telegram and silk-screen printing. Urgent messages, which might lead to a telegram to the prime minister, had to be circulated by means of telephone trees, with the membership divided into groups and messages passed on in an agreed order. Telephone trees didn't always work: 'some stroppy woman would start arguing, "Well, I can't agree with that!" and I'd have to ring backwards down the tree'.<sup>36</sup>

The cost of long-distance phone calls contributed to frequent communication breakdowns between different WEL groups, for example, between Melbourne and Sydney. They could also be a cause of family friction, when family budgets had to be readjusted. As late as 1985, there was still reliance on telephone trees for purposes such as the campaign to persuade the prime minister to proceed with federal affirmative action legislation (some women had to ring up to 45 women each).

[[**Insert figure 01.06**]]

Junior-WEL at Joyce Nicholson's house, Gestetner machine in background, Melbourne, 1975.

*Jan Harper.*

Newsletters were typed, pasted up, run off on duplicating machines and then collated, with these tasks rotating around the membership. Changing the world started with learning how to make stencils and use the Gestetner. A 1973 letter by a member of WEL-Brisbane gives some idea both of the busyness and of the equipment that underpinned it:

WEL is so busy ... We are working on child care and hope to undertake a comprehensive survey of all centres in Brisbane and are working to establish centres in the suburbs – this means mostly demonstrating the need and then persuading the councils to take up the available subsidies. Unfortunately most councils don't want to do anything at all. Battered babies also come into this – apparently one of the needs is somewhere for the mothers to leave their children for a few weeks to relieve the pressures. We are also about to work on a submission on discrimination to a Status of Women Enquiry in Queensland – which gave us precisely 28 days in

which to prepare it!! I am also typing half the newsletter each month and we are supposed to be teaching everyone how to use the duplicating machine and make stencils etc.<sup>37</sup>

Like other women's centres in capital cities, the Canberra Women's House obtained a new Gestetner machine out of an International Women's Year grant in 1975. It also ran a screen-printing workshop where WEL made T-shirts, posters and car stickers for their own use and for other WEL groups. It was flat out in 1975:

It was the time of Sue Ryan's campaign to be elected as Senate Rep. WEL was giving her as much support as we could. There was a screen-printing workshop to print 'A Woman's Place is in the Senate' on hundreds of T-shirts for sale. Two women artists ran it, to teach us novices how to do it. At the end of the day you couldn't find any arms or legs or faces or clothing or hands or hair that weren't covered in this terrible ink-dye stuff, and to add insult to injury, we were so committed, we bought all the 'smudgy' ones with blurred writing that hadn't worked out and took them home with us.<sup>38</sup>

The commitment that led novices to buy up their own screen-printing failures arose from the nature of the issues that WEL members were trying to get onto the agenda and into parliament.

### **Policy the first priority**

When WEL was founded there were no women in the House of Representatives, no women in any Cabinet in Australia and very few on boards. In NSW, where there were over sixty boards in the health and education portfolios, the vast majority had no women members.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, three quarters of federal advisory bodies contained no women. However, contrary to what political scientists have sometimes claimed, WEL was not formed to put women into parliament – it was policy that was the first priority. WEL wanted to raise issues of concern to women and get candidates and parties committed to doing something about them. Its aims were 'to influence governments and politicians to make laws and change laws so that women can have equal opportunity and economic independence, as well as the services they need to achieve these'.<sup>40</sup>

It was not until the cohort of members joining in the 1990s that women's participation in politics ranked with policy issues relating to employment, education and health. That was when the issue of women and public decision making (and electoral quotas) became prominent on both national and international policy agendas. Earlier on, the priority of policy was true both of Australia and of WEL–New Zealand, where the initial aims were to inform women about discrimination; to work for the introduction and enactment of legislation to benefit women; and to secure the appointment and election of persons and policies that advanced the rights of women.<sup>41</sup>

When WEL was founded, a particularly urgent issue was a woman's right to control her own fertility. Many of the first cohort of WEL members were already active in abortion law reform and for them the issues of abortion, family planning and sexual health were the most important, followed by general discrimination against women, discrimination in workplace employment, equal pay and child care (see Table 1.2).

As a founding member wrote in 1972:

The impetus for WEL's work is in the circumstances under which the vast majority of ordinary Australian (and migrant) women exist – with insufficient sex education, sparse family planning clinics, unnecessarily expensive contraceptives, inadequate child care centres and poor chances, compared with men, for good education, good jobs and good pay.<sup>42</sup>

Victorian WEL members were soon seen on television marching on Parliament with condoms on sticks to protest against the statutory ban on advertising contraceptives. In 1974, WEL–Victoria carried out a detailed survey of women's experiences of contraception. Over half the respondents had difficulty getting adequate advice from doctors, including advice about alternative methods and possible side-effects, and more than half said they had suffered from fear of pregnancy at some stage of their lives. As one respondent, who had had two children in less than two years, said: 'Fear of pregnancy dominated my life for the first ten years of my marriage'.<sup>43</sup>

[[Insert Figure 01.07]]

**Table 1.2** Issues for founding WEL members (1972–75)

Source: WEL history survey 2002–03.

A survey conducted at the 1975 national conference in Sydney resulted in a somewhat different ordering of issues (see Appendix), but women in politics still ranked at the bottom. Education had moved up and abortion and contraception had moved down. The survey's author commented somewhat over-optimistically that the relegation of family planning issues was 'probably because the battle is now virtually won'.<sup>44</sup> While WEL achieved major breakthroughs on the funding of family planning services and the advertising of contraceptives (except in Tasmania where the display and advertising of contraceptives was banned until 1987), the battle over abortion was far from won.

Discrimination in employment was so overt it was an easy target for the articulate and increasingly confident WEL women. For example, the federal secretariat of the Liberal Party of Australia was not shy in stating that a male graduate would be preferred when it advertised for a research officer in late 1972.<sup>45</sup> At the time, it was standard in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the many pages of classified job advertisements to be divided between those for men and boys and those for women and girls and, needless to say, the pay packets and career opportunities were very different. The separate advertising of male and female jobs did not disappear until it was made unlawful by the passage of the long-awaited federal *Sex Discrimination Act* in 1984. In the 1970s, it was regarded as normal for organisations, including universities, to restrict positions such as laboratory or technical staff to men, while of the dozens of different apprenticeships normally only hairdressing was available for women. At the beginning of 1973, WEL was pursuing the Government Printer in Canberra for refusing to allow a woman an apprenticeship.<sup>46</sup>

Discrimination against married women was still rife, despite the lifting of the marriage bar in the Commonwealth Public Service in 1966. A member of WEL in Brisbane commented on the paradox that while marriage was regarded an honourable estate, those who entered it were treated punitively, at least if they were women:

Even the most permissive of the permissive society do not hold the marriage state in such contempt as to suggest that entering into matrimony is a serious misdemeanour warranting the deprivation of one's livelihood, as apparently held by banks, assurance offices, city councils and hospitals, at least when the guilty party is a woman. Her partner in guilt escapes without penalty.<sup>47</sup>

One of the founding members of WEL in Victoria, Helen Glezer, had been refused a job in the public service because she was married. An honours graduate, she had assumed that because the marriage bar was shortly to be removed, it would not matter if she married. Instead, the job was given to a man who had only a pass degree and, naturally, was paid more than she would have been.<sup>48</sup> Victorian membership records from the 1990s showed equal opportunity to be still by far the most important issue for WEL members.

In Canberra, a national delegation led by Edna Ryan met with a sympathetic Minister for Labour, seeking paid maternity leave for all women in the workforce and training places for women. WEL was also seeking the ratification of the ILO convention on equal pay and the extension of the minimum wage to women.<sup>49</sup> In New South Wales, the WEL Discrimination Group and Joan Bielski were hunting down the discrimination rife in every nook and cranny of public sector employment and large corporations, where women were largely confined to typing pools and process work:

The Departments like the Railways and the Electricity Commission do not offer apprenticeships to girls ... An Electricity Commission personnel officer stated that, in power stations, electricians often had to be big and burly to lift large motors. When I asked if they would reject a weedy male with a good school record, he replied that he liked women to remain feminine. The conversation ended on a somewhat acrimonious note.<sup>50</sup>

When it was the fire service's turn to be lobbied, the service reacted by writing to the wives of firemen asking them what they thought of the idea of women being employed.

One issue that spanned both industrial relations and social security was that of female poverty. The WEL–NSW submission to the Henderson Poverty Inquiry in 1973 received so much media coverage and was so much in demand that the stencils wore out and had

to be retyped. Despite women being more at risk of being poor, the WEL survey found a frightening lack of information about the social services to which they were entitled. For example, only about one in five knew where to go in the event of a husband's death or desertion. The general discrimination against women by banks and financial institutions was given added poignancy when a bank refused credit to a widow for her husband's funeral without a male guarantor.

Another major issue which WEL campaigned on for the next three decades was that of the poverty trap arising from the clawing back of pension dollars the minute a woman earned over a tiny sum, together with the lack of affordable child care. A related issue was the level of surveillance over women on welfare and the fear that children would be taken away if a man stayed 'after television is finished'. Sole parents had only achieved a real opportunity to keep their babies with the introduction of the Supporting Mothers' Benefit in 1973. Unmarried mothers had previously been pressured into adoption but after the introduction of the benefit, adoptions fell away dramatically. Yet when Sydney WEL members surveyed party leaders and frontbenchers before the 1973 State election they found that quite a few believed the new Supporting Mothers' Benefit encouraged 'immorality'.<sup>51</sup>

While WEL encountered resistance to change, it experienced little in the way of organised opposition until Right to Life organisations mobilised against the 1973 attempt at abortion law reform discussed below. It was on this issue that WEL met its match in the shape of the organising ability of the Catholic Church and of lobbyists such as Margaret Tighe, who was to conduct Right to Life Victoria (RTLTV) electoral campaigns for many years. Borrowing from WEL's repertoire, RTLTV conducted candidate surveys and published pro-life form guides for candidates. This formidable opposition meant that policy change in the abortion area required strenuous and exhausting campaigns, still being fought in the late 1990s and the early years of the new century.

## **Reform and revolution**

As mentioned earlier, many founding WEL members had originally belonged to Women's Liberation groups. While Women's Liberation members saw themselves as engaged in revolution and were critical of reformism, in practice there was much overlap, particularly in Canberra.<sup>52</sup> Gail Wilenski had already been taking Women's Liberation down the path of submission writing, with a submission to a Senate inquiry into divorce in June 1972. At the same time in Melbourne, Women's Liberation was preparing its submission for the 1972 equal pay case in the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission. Yet it was consciousness-raising rather than submission-writing for which Women's Liberation was known. Women's Liberation was also hungry for ideas that would provide a systematic explanation of the world and rival masculine grand theories. In some ways WEL was a reaction to this search for grand theory. This is not to suggest that WEL members were necessarily hostile to theory, just that they were anxious to set about remedying the wrongs already visible to them. Prominent Women's Liberation members, such as Helen Garner and Anne Summers, criticised this 'jumping on the Labor bandwagon' to press for piecemeal reforms.

Nonetheless, WEL and Women's Liberation worked together in the capital cities to establish women's services and women's centres, they marched in the same International Women's Day marches and in Canberra they played cricket against each other. Major joint actions included the historic Women's Commission in Sydney in 1973 – where some 150 women testified about their experience as mothers, workers, wives, sex objects and medical patients, in the presence of hundreds more. Another notable joint action was the 'Women's Embassy' outside Parliament House in Canberra in May 1973, emulating the Aboriginal Tent Embassy of the previous year.<sup>53</sup> The Women's Embassy was organised in support of the McKenzie-Lamb Bill, an attempt by Labor backbenchers to legalise first trimester abortions in the ACT. As there were no women members of the House of Representatives, women had to have an embassy outside instead. Although no women were able to contribute directly to the parliamentary debate, the Bill's mover, David McKenzie MP, quoted a WEL survey of 2000 women.<sup>54</sup> Outside, Right to Life arrived in force on the day the vote was to be taken. The Right to Life marquee 'towered' over the Women's Embassy and supporters of the Bill were greatly outnumbered, despite

the WEL loudspeaker broadcasting 'I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar' over and over again.<sup>55</sup>  
The Bill was defeated.

[[**Insert figure 01.08**]]

WEL–Diamond Valley marching with Women's Liberation, Melbourne, early 1970s.  
*Sandy Turnbull (Kilpatrick).*

But despite overlapping membership and joint activities, WEL groups tended to be conscious of the barriers the media images of Women's Liberation posed to policy influence. It was thought that to recruit a broader range of women, 'the respectability of WEL's image is very important, especially in some States and country areas'.<sup>56</sup> WEL iconography was less threatening than that of Women's Liberation. When producing buttons for the Women's Liberation demonstration against the 1968 Miss America contest in Atlantic City, Robin Morgan had placed the clenched fist of male radicalism within the women's symbol, a visual jolt. She had used the radical colour of red on a white background, calling the colour 'menstrual red' to deter lipstick manufacturers from appropriating it. Instead of the fist, WEL placed its acronym within the women's symbol, and used a variety of colours. Purple, green and white were not popularised as women's movement colours until 1975.<sup>57</sup>

Spokeswomen stressed that WEL stood for 'obvious reforms', like equal pay, and did not threaten the home. It appealed to women who found the personal journey Women's Liberation offered too frightening, but were interested in working with other women on particular issues. At a large Canberra meeting on the topic of the relationship between WEL and Women's Liberation some of the new WEL recruits appeared shocked by the more confrontational style of the 'women's libbers'.<sup>58</sup>

A subtext of some of the media coverage of Women's Liberation and contributing to its bad press was the issue of lesbianism. Women's Liberation had become identified in some eyes with political lesbianism, the idea that 'sleeping with the enemy' led to unacceptable compromises with patriarchy. Although WEL founder Beatrice Faust had taken on a role, characteristic of the times, of heterosexual public relations officer for the

Australasian Lesbian Movement, WEL was accused of being pusillanimous on the issue. The lesbian critique was that WEL was too concerned with erasing any impression that they were 'just a bunch of lesbians' and gave priority to being taken seriously by the media and by government. They thought that if WEL was serious about sex role stereotyping it should give as much support to homosexual law reform as it had given to abortion law reform.<sup>59</sup>

Despite differences of opinion, the 1974 WEL national conference adopted four resolutions relating to homosexuality, including law reform, discrimination in public service recruitment and issues of child custody. There was no equivalent to the drama in the United States where the founder of the National Organization for Women, Betty Friedan, was convinced that the 'lavender menace' would do irreparable damage to the women's movement.<sup>60</sup>

While seeking to change the way policymakers understood the world, WEL was doing so through the language of equal opportunity rather than a language of revolution, making it easier for policymakers to pick up its demands. In its lobbying styles, WEL also set out to allay the fears aroused by confrontational styles of dress and demeanour. Its delegations were well-dressed, well-spoken and armed with facts. They acknowledged the strategic advantages of having a more radical group to the Left of them:

Some prickliness existed between WEL and Women's Lib in the early years but generally it was an effective partnership in that Women's Lib presented far more radically than WEL so, by comparison, our demands seemed more 'reasonable'. A bit tough on the activists! They were very committed though and didn't seem to mind, just thinking we were too faint-hearted.<sup>61</sup>

## **Direct action**

While WEL was honing its skills as a lobby group engaging with the policy process, it was also displaying its social movement origins in various forms of direct action, from street demonstrations, to 'WEL on the trams', to vigils and pickets. The social

movements of the 1960s had, for the first time, brought large numbers of the university-educated onto the streets to participate in protest actions. For the first time, in 1972 middle-class women swelled the ranks of those marching on International Women's Day. WEL affirmed its movement identity and solidarity through participating in expressive events such as International Women's Day and Reclaim the Night marches, as well as engaging in more instrumental forms of collective action.

In Victoria, the advertising of the entrance examination for the administrative division of the Victorian Public Service for 'males only' was grist to the mill of the new organisation. Beatrice Faust collected application forms and, with other WEL and Women's Liberation members, drummed up applications, getting seventy young women to apply. Two slipped through, Beata Parker and Hilary Erwin, receiving letters headed 'Dear Sir' that gave them exam numbers. WEL then organised television and press coverage and picketed the Exhibition Building in Melbourne on 24 June 1972 to make sure they were allowed to go in. ASIO was watching these plans carefully and filed the map showing where to picket the building. The picket was attended by 'one very senior police officer, several lesser ranks, two policewomen and two paddy wagons' as WEL Secretary, Pamela Thornley, noted in a letter to *The Age*.<sup>62</sup>

Thanks to the television crews the women were admitted and the police paddy wagons were not required. However, despite doing very well in the examination, the women failed the medical test—on the grounds they were female. The situation had become increasingly ludicrous and WEL pursued the matter with Premier Rupert Hamer. By September WEL received a letter promising that in future women would be able to enter the Administrative Division on the same terms as men. This meant that women for the first time could share the public service career structure rather than hitting the ceiling at Clerk Grade 2.<sup>63</sup>

The following year, seeking a less 'middle-class' issue than entrance to administrative positions, WEL—Victoria organised a 'WEL on the trams' day. About fifty WEL members boarded trams, asking passengers if they thought women should be able to be

drivers. Although women had been allowed to drive trams during World War II, the communist-led Tramways Union had subsequently been successful in excluding them. Women were not allowed to progress beyond the position of conductor and hence were ineligible for promotion. In May 1973, the union threatened to hold stop work meetings if women were allowed to become trainee tram drivers, on the grounds that 'if women were allowed to drive trams a number of positions as ticket examiner, depot-starter and inspector would be open to them'.<sup>64</sup> Exactly.

The demonstration received good press coverage, which continued in 1974 when Hilary Freeman (McPhee) and Di Gribble conducted interviews on the issue of peak-hour trains and trams being cancelled for lack of drivers and guards. The Tramways Board was still refusing to have a confrontation with the union over women being allowed to train for the positions.<sup>65</sup> The breakthrough was finally achieved late in 1975.

## **Lobbying**

At the same time as taking direct action such as the picket of the public service exam or a shopping-trolley protest against superfluous packaging in Canberra, WEL was embarking on a different kind of action, the preparation of submissions to government. A tariff inquiry in mid-1972 provided an opportunity to enter this previously all-male domain and raise the issue of the duty imposed on contraceptives. At this time, not only were there ubiquitous State and Territory laws banning the advertising of contraceptives, there was also a range of imposts, from sales tax to tariff duties, that made them unnecessarily expensive. As WEL pointed out, the sales tax of 27 per cent on the pill was the same as that for mink coats.

WEL was assisted by a professional Canberra lobbyist, Peter Cullen, in drawing up an impressive submission calling for the general tariff on contraceptives to be reduced to the British preferential rate. This first incursion into professional lobbying received good press coverage, including an editorial in *The Age* and a long article in the *Australian Financial Review*. The Canberra *Women's Liberation Newsletter* was somewhat more

sceptical: 'It's all called "learning how to play the male chauvinist pigs' game" – so you can beat them at it'.<sup>66</sup>

[[Insert Figure 01.09]]

Poster screen-printed for WEL–NSW, Canberra, September 1972.

*Design: Carol Ambrus.*

WEL's intervention in the Tariff Board inquiry helped ensure that family planning issues were high on the agenda of the federal Labor Party, poised to win the forthcoming election. Within a week, the shadow minister for health, Bill Hayden, told the *Age* that a Labor government would not only remove the sales tax on contraceptives but would make them free on prescription and support the development of a network of family planning clinics. In December, the newly elected Whitlam government acted to remove the sales tax on contraceptives, repeal the ban on advertising contraceptives in the ACT, add the pill to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and provide funding for international family planning programs.

The Tariff Board submissions were the harbinger of a major strand of WEL activity over the next thirty years – the preparation of well-researched submissions to public inquiries on issues ranging from economic policy through to industrial relations, education and training, paid maternity leave, child care and social security. Some 900 submissions over these years are a testament to WEL's record of sustained policy engagement. As we have seen, the word 'submission' now meant something completely different for women.

But while WEL is often seen as a lobby group primarily targeting government, it was not only politicians who were being lobbied. WEL–Tasmania recommended its members buy small parcels of shares so they could speak out at shareholder meetings. In New South Wales, 'even in the early seventies we knew we had to lobby some of corporate Australia: Nestlé on infant formula, Drake Personnel on employment practices, Mark Foys on window displays'.<sup>67</sup> WEL was also encouraging the development of new women's groups in unions and having considerable impact in public service and teacher unions.

## **Repertoires old and new**

Social movement theorist Charles Tilly has developed the useful concept of ‘repertoires of contention’ to refer to the combination of forms of political action used by social movements to present their claims.<sup>68</sup> Repertoires may be inherited from the past, borrowed or adapted from other social movements, or involve innovation on the basis of existing and available forms of action. In seeking to draw attention to issues and to get them on the public agenda, WEL drew on existing models of collective action but also innovated within them.

Some of its activity, particularly in its early years, drew directly on recent social movement and Women’s Liberation repertoires. This meant action in the streets, such as the march on Parliament with condoms on sticks, the picket of the Victorian public service exams, the Women’s Embassy in Canberra and the symbolic action on Melbourne trams. But WEL also inherited older repertoires, stretching back to the suffrage era.

The rating of political candidates, for example, had a long history in the women’s movement. What was new in this case was the professionalism of the WEL approach. Journalists were impressed by the social science credentials of those who designed the questionnaire and that the results were ‘to be put through a computer’ at Melbourne University.<sup>69</sup> The processing of results by computer was seen as giving them a scientific objectivity. The media skills of WEL members, some of whom were journalists while others were quick learners, also helped raise the profile of what was quite a traditional advocacy technique.

The candidate survey was for a time used by WEL groups everywhere, from Hobart to Darwin to Perth, and in local government as well as in State and federal elections. Increasingly, there was a big effort to educate candidates in advance of actually administering the candidate survey. For example, in the run up to the 1974 federal election Canberra WEL members helped co-ordinate and write a five-page background

brief on education, workforce and child-care issues. Illustrating their ‘insider’ resources, they stole a march by hand-delivering copies to sitting Senators and Members at the very instant of the double dissolution of Parliament. Similar briefing was distributed to candidates in the WA State election in the same year.

Another snap federal election in 1975 meant further demands but candidate surveys still received good coverage, as did the award of the wooden spoon for ignorance of women’s affairs to a Liberal candidate for a blue-ribbon Melbourne seat.<sup>70</sup> The WEL survey in the 1974 Queensland State election found candidates generally still deplored the need for child-care centres.<sup>71</sup> As the candidate survey and form guide lost its novelty value, however, WEL concentrated on surveys of party election policies, something it sustained over decades. The format and presentation varied over time, seeking to attract the fickle attention of a media focused on the ‘horse-race’ aspects of elections rather than policy issues. Candidate education continued in other forms, such as the ‘Survival Kit for WEL–Informed Candidates’ used in the 1980 federal election. It provided handy statistics to assist politicians, said to be often still five to ten years behind voters in their attitudes.<sup>72</sup> In the 1990 federal election, Victorian candidates were given briefing papers together with purple and green WEL highlighter pens.

A new performance element introduced in 1972 was the Meet the Candidates meetings, at which WEL members and others would cross-examine candidates on issues of concern to women. This struck some seasoned activists as a novel format for election meetings, bringing candidates of different parties together on the same platform.<sup>73</sup> Gender roles were being reversed, with women performing as experts and testing the knowledge and attitudes of often nervous male candidates. As we shall see in chapter 4, media stories frequently used terms such as ‘women grilling the candidates’ or even ‘candidates under fire from women’. The first such meeting was held at the time of a by-election for the NSW State seat of Mosman.<sup>74</sup> About 200 people attended to hear the candidates answer questions on survey issues such as equal pay, maternity leave, abortion law reform, the sales tax on contraceptives, and child care. The DLP candidate, Neil Mackerras, brother

of psephologist Malcolm Mackerras and conductor Charles Mackerras, said that in his experience women were more interested in getting married than having a career.

Other well-attended meetings held during the 1972 federal election included those in the federal electorates of Angas, Bass, Bennelong, Berowra, Bonython, Boothby, Brisbane, Chisholm, Canberra, Hawker, Kingston, New England, Northern Territory, Petrie, Riverina, Sturt and Sydney. In Boothby, Labor candidate Anne Levy enjoyed the occasion immensely as the sitting member, Sir John McLeay, was ‘obviously flustered and antagonising his audience with every word he uttered’.<sup>75</sup> Levy was later the first woman in Australia to be a parliamentary presiding officer. The candidate meetings generally attracted audiences of several hundred and received good media coverage. They could be organised more readily than full candidate surveys and became a standard part of the WEL repertoire for elections at all levels of government.

One variation was leaders’ meetings that brought together party leaders in a public forum and another was women candidates’ meetings. WEL–ACT, for example, began regular breakfasts for Territory elections with women candidates being given a few minutes to present policies and then to respond to questions from the floor. An even harder test was to have candidates answer questions drawn from a hat on the gender impact of policies.

WEL members also attended many election meetings held by the parties. At a Liberal Party meeting in the seat of Flinders in 1972 those at the front heard someone say, ‘Ask the woman at the back, she’s not with that group’. The woman at the back proceeded to ask why only \$5 million had been budgeted for child-care centres. Then came the instruction, ‘No more questions from women’.<sup>76</sup> At another meeting that was being televised, Di Gribble ‘wasted’ precious television seconds by responding ‘I’m no lady’ when addressed as ‘the lady up the back’.

Other social movements soon borrowed the ‘Meet the Candidates’ device as part of their own repertoires. The environment movement and conservation councils started to organise election meetings at which candidates could defend their party’s environmental

credentials. Councils of Social Service began to do likewise to scrutinise social policy credentials.

### **The quest for sex discrimination legislation**

Things happened quickly after Labor won government in December 1972. On his second day in office, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam authorised the reopening of the equal pay case, which the previous government had opposed, and gave Mary Gaudron the government brief. On the third day, he announced the lifting of the sales tax on the contraceptive pill and on the sixth day, a substantial contribution to the UN Fund for Population Activities. Soon ILO Convention 111 on discrimination in employment and occupation was ratified, and paid maternity leave and even a week's paternity leave were introduced into the Australian Public Service. Funding was found for child care and for the Supporting Mothers' Benefit. The new women's services received support, including women's refuges, rape crisis centres and women's health centres. The adult minimum wage was extended to women.

WEL had been lobbying for all of these Whitlam government initiatives, but was less successful in an area it became particularly identified with: the achievement of sex discrimination legislation. In November 1972, WEL–ACT had achieved a commitment from Senator Lionel Murphy, soon to be Attorney-General, that legislation to prohibit discrimination against women would be an early priority in government.<sup>77</sup> 'The need to remove discrimination against women is obvious,' he said, but the new government was quicker to move on race than on sex discrimination.

The Whitlam government introduced the Racial Discrimination Bill into parliament in 1973, relying on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination to provide Constitutional authority. This was controversial, as the use of the external affairs power to enable the Commonwealth government to move into the human rights area was as yet untested. WEL demanded, unsuccessfully, that the Bill be amended to include sex along with race in each of its clauses. WEL welcomed the Human Rights Bill of 1974, which relied on the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights, and would have provided some redress for sex discrimination. This Bill lapsed with the 1974 double dissolution of the federal parliament and in any case was on somewhat shaky ground, as the covenant had not yet entered into force.

It was not until late in the life of the beleaguered government that the Office of the Attorney-General circulated a memorandum on a 'Proposed Bill to Prohibit Discrimination against Persons by Reason of their Sex or Marital Status'. It was to be one of many pieces of the reform agenda that were postponed indefinitely by the dismissal in November.

In South Australia WEL was more fortunate, with the passage of the first sex discrimination act in Australia in 1975. In New South Wales, lobbying was also under way for the *Anti-Discrimination Act* passed two years later. Nor were efforts abandoned at the Commonwealth level: after 1975 a campaign for federal legislation gradually built up momentum despite persistent blocking by the National Party at Cabinet level, a story told in chapter 5.

### **Setting up the wheel of women's affairs**

Another major public policy change associated with WEL was the setting up of women's policy machinery in government. Even Prime Minister McMahon, whose government had recently opposed equal pay, announced in his 1972 election policy speech that his government would set up a Royal Commission into the Status of Women. Such commissions had been established in the United States and Canada, and WEL had suggested Australia follow suit. Labor front-bencher Clyde Cameron, on the other hand, was dismissive: 'We shouldn't have to wait two or three years for a Royal Commission dominated by men to discover the many self-evident examples of discrimination against women.'<sup>78</sup>

The idea of a Royal Commission was quickly superseded by the pace of change under the Whitlam government. Not only did Cameron, as Minister of Labour, respond favourably

to WEL's call for his Women's Bureau to be upgraded<sup>79</sup>, but action was also taken to appoint a Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister, an idea originating with Gail Wilenski. The appointment of Elizabeth Reid in 1973 became an important step in the evolution of government machinery for women. When the *Sydney Morning Herald* asked women's organisations what women wanted from the new Women's Adviser, only WEL mentioned the need for additional staff.<sup>80</sup> By 1974, a section to provide support for Reid had been established in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

WEL's concern with such machinery of government issues marked it out from women's organisations elsewhere and said much about its founding members and the political opportunities opening up for them. Feminists like Sara Dowse were being recruited into ministerial offices as press secretaries and research officers.<sup>81</sup> The use of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration to develop and promote WEL's ideas on the design of women's policy machinery is described in chapter 5. The wheel model of women's policy machinery devised by WEL, with its focus on policy monitoring rather than program delivery, was to become a good practice model disseminated by the United Nations and a forerunner of the 'gender mainstreaming' approach to women's policy adopted internationally at the Beijing Conference in 1995.

Closer to home, the wheel model was what WEL successfully lobbied for across Australia. WEL members migrated into government to head these new units or to re-energise older units, such as the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labour. In particular, WEL women such as Kim Boyer in Tasmania, Deborah McCulloch and later Carol Treloar in South Australia, and Carmel Niland and later Helen L'Orange in New South Wales, played pioneering roles in establishing women's policy machinery at the State level.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile, another initiative promoted by WEL (and by the overlapping group, Women in Australian Government Employment) was also taking off. This was the creation of equal employment opportunity (EEO) structures in the public service. Much care was taken to distinguish EEO programs from women's policy machinery. While women's

policy units were concerned with the effects of policies on women in the community, EEO was concerned with employment issues only. WEL was able to convert not only the government but also the opposition to the cause of EEO: in 1974 Liberal frontbencher Malcolm Fraser visited WEL in Melbourne and stressed his party's commitment to an EEO section in the Public Service Board, so that the public service could become a pacesetter. WEL expressed its delight: 'In 1972 would anyone have thought seriously that the Liberal Party would have consulted WEL before drafting its policy? Or that Mr Fraser would have missed a session of the House to attend a meeting with WEL?'<sup>83</sup>

Meanwhile, Gail Wilenski had been gaining expertise in EEO on the national committee overseeing ILO Convention 111, and in 1975 was appointed to head the new section in the Public Service Board. Wilenski's appointment was attacked as an example of 'jobs for the girls' because of her husband's prominence in the Whitlam government. The attack was badly timed, coming as it did while the International Women's Year Women and Politics Conference was being held in Canberra. Carmel Niland read on air a telegram from 400 women protesting over the Opposition's treatment of the appointment. Wilenski reverted to her professional name of Gail Radford soon after joining the public service and her EEO reputation was built under that name.

**[[Insert Figure 01.10]]**

WEL–ACT members Carmel Niland and Rosa Walden being interviewed by Claudia Wright at 2CA , 4 September 1975.  
*Ann Graham (Keira Lockyer).*

Another initiative of the Whitlam government was the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, a peace offering after the defeat of the McKenzie-Lamb attempt at abortion law reform. Justice Elizabeth Evatt headed the Commission and WEL members Joan Bielski and Alison Ziller joined it as research officers. Its recommendations, delivered under the Fraser government, became benchmarks for policy in areas such as family planning and sex education, the treatment of rape and domestic violence, the rights of adoptive children and relinquishing mothers, anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunity programs, work/family issues and retraining programs for sole parents.

Another landmark was the release of the Schools Commission report *Girls, School & Society* in 1975, to which many WEL members had contributed. Its analysis of the ways in which schools had limited girls' opportunities and its recommendations for curriculum and organisational change set the agenda for reform for the next twenty years.<sup>84</sup> Serious advances were also being made in the child-care area. The Whitlam government had been elected with a commitment to a year's free preschool but no child-care commitment. Preschools were organised on a sessional basis and so were unsuitable when both parents were in the workforce. WEL plunged into a battle to redirect funds to long day care, competing with the strongly organised and experienced kindergarten lobby that had a close ally in the Education Minister. As part of its commitment to more participatory processes, the Whitlam government allowed community groups to have direct access to Cabinet committees, and the first time that such groups were able to present their case directly to Cabinet ministers was in relation to child care. Soon after her appointment, Elizabeth Reid arranged for the 'United Women's Action Group' (WEL women from four States and the ACT) to see the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet Committee on Social Welfare. They were under-prepared for such an early high-level intervention and argued with each other in front of Cabinet, according to a highly critical account by Anne Summers.<sup>85</sup> According to participants, there was no such disagreement, although Alma Morton was ticked off afterwards by other WEL members for contradicting the Prime Minister when he confused kindergartens with child care. Morton put the incident down to the middle-classness of WEL.

**[[Insert Figure 01.11]]**

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam with child-care delegation of WEL members. L to R, Pamela Gorring, Suzanne Dixon (Wills), Alma Morton, Winsome McCaughey, Michelle Grieve (Renshaw), Helen Molony (McConaghy).

*The Age*, 10 May 1973, *Home News*, p. 3.

*The Age Archives, courtesy The Age.*

NSW Labor women succeeded in having a serious commitment to child care put into the ALP platform before the 1974 election, but only a few months later WEL had to undertake a major national campaign to hold Labor to its election promises. The campaign put child care firmly on the policy agenda and WEL women soon became

expert in writing funding submissions. They were involved in setting up many community-based centres and in persuading local government to enter the field. In South Australia, two WEL members wrote the new TAFE course for child-care trainees in 1973–74 and then got the jobs teaching it.

Over the years, WEL retained a watching brief over the women's policy and EEO machinery it had helped create in the heady period of the 1970s. Although it was to be joined by more specialised advocacy groups on specific policy issues affecting women, it was the only women's organisation that could consistently be relied on over the next thirty years to go public whenever restructuring, relocation or Budget cuts threatened the continuing existence or effectiveness of women's units in government.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sun*, 22 January 1973, pp. 7, 8, 32.

<sup>2</sup> 'Women plan for greater role', *Mercury*, 22 January 1973, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, *Autobiographical writing*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lake, *Getting Equal*, p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> Fasteau & Lobel, 'Rating the candidates'.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholson, 'Destination uncertain', in Grimshaw & Strahan, *The Half Open Door*, pp. 152–153.

<sup>7</sup> Aitkin et al., 'The World of WEL (NSW)', p. 186; McCarron-Benson, *WELWomen*, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Debats, 'Reminiscing about WEL', p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Glezer et al., 'WEL strategy, 1972', p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> 'The dilemma of a woman voter', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Sally White, *Age Women Voters' Guide*, 20 November 1972, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *National Times*, 20 November 1972; *Age*, 23 November 1972; *New York Times*, 26 November 1972.

<sup>13</sup> Reid, 'Creating a Policy for Women', p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> 'It's all very WEL to woo women voters', *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 November 1972, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Information from Deborah McCulloch and Karla Tan, who provided the authorisation.

<sup>16</sup> Telegrams to Gail Wilenski, 10 and 11 November 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Hooper, 'The Emergence of Contemporary Feminist Groups in Australia', Appendix 1.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Beatrice Faust to Biff McDougall (Ward), 3 April 1972.

<sup>19</sup> 'Women want the answers', *Advertiser*, 18 July 1972; '13 "angry" SA women to lobby MPs, unions', *Sunday Mail*, 22 July 1972. In its 20th anniversary history, WEL–South Australia was able to list 1000 past and present members (Slonieć, *WEL*, pp. 43–48.

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- <sup>20</sup> ASIO files on WEL (1972–73), National Archives of Australia, Series No. A6122, Accession No. 2004/00686598.
- <sup>21</sup> Robinson in Preddy, *The WEL Herstory*, p. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Degens, *From Canberra to Coffs Harbour*, p. 134.
- <sup>23</sup> ‘Canberra: City of Unemployable Wives’, *Australian*, 30 June 1972.
- <sup>24</sup> Helen Bell & Susan Smith, ‘The Socio-Economic and Political Characteristics of the members of WEL’, 1973 survey quoted in Martin, ‘The Women in WEL’, p. 12.
- <sup>25</sup> ‘The march of Women’s Lib gathers strength’, *Advertiser*, 30 July.
- <sup>26</sup> Attwood, ‘Rescue and a Gift’, p. 19.
- <sup>27</sup> Survey of WEL membership, *Broadsheet*, 2 (3), 1974.
- <sup>28</sup> Luck, ‘Not a dinner party’, p. 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Jones, ‘Rebel of God’s Police’. Cf Doe, ‘Report on the Survey of WEL members at the 1975 WEL National Conference’.
- <sup>30</sup> Eatock, ‘There’s a snake in my caravan’, p. 25.
- <sup>31</sup> Letter from Patricia Jones, Secretary WEL–Tasmania to Miss E.M. Backhouse, Acting General Secretary, Tasmanian Teachers’ Federation, 29 May 1974.
- <sup>32</sup> Maureen Worsley, Letter, *WEL–ACT Newsletter*, No. 17, 11 June 1974, p. 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Debats, ‘Reminiscing about WEL’, p. 10; cf, Ryan, Autobiographical writing, p. 35.
- <sup>34</sup> McCarthy, *Don’t Fence Me In*, p. 102.
- <sup>35</sup> Ryan, Autobiographical writing, p. 33.
- <sup>36</sup> McCulloch, ‘Twenty-One Years Old!’
- <sup>37</sup> Kate Basham, Letter to family in the UK, 6 September 1973.
- <sup>38</sup> Meredith Ardlie (Stokes), WEL history survey.
- <sup>39</sup> Don Aitkin, ‘Women, it’s time to change tactics – be single-minded’, *National Times*, 16–21 April 1973, p. 3.
- <sup>40</sup> ‘WEL is a Feminist, Non-Party Political Lobby Group’, WEL–Sydney, c. 1977; see also ‘What is WEL?’, WEL–ACT nd (c.1973).
- <sup>41</sup> Preddy, *The WEL Herstory*, p. 6.
- <sup>42</sup> Katy Richmond, Letter to *The Age*, 4 November 1972.
- <sup>43</sup> Iola Mathews, ‘Contraception: Most women fear and dislike the pill’, *National Times*, 4 June 1977.
- <sup>44</sup> Doe, ‘Report on the Survey of WEL Members at the 1975 WEL National Conference’, p. 2.
- <sup>45</sup> Hooper, ‘The Emergence of Contemporary Feminist Groups in Australia’, p. 14.
- <sup>46</sup> ‘All’s well’, *Bulletin*, 13 January 1973, p. 11.
- <sup>47</sup> Bernie McWilliams, ‘Sexist Discrimination in Employment’, *WEL–Brisbane Newsletter*, May 1975, reprinted *WEL–ACT Newsletter*, 31 October 1975, p. 12.
- <sup>48</sup> Helen Glezer interview by Gail Radford, 16 February 2002.
- <sup>49</sup> ‘Minister on women’s side over unfair pay scales’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1973; ‘WEL wants Government to ratify equal pay convention’, *Australian*, 24 May 1973; ‘A word to give 500 000 women a rise’, *Australian*, 26 May 1973.
- <sup>50</sup> Bielski, ‘Women in the Workforce’, p. 75. (Paper presented at the first WEL–NSW State conference.)
- <sup>51</sup> ‘Women’s rights’, *Australian*, 21 November 1973, p. 5; Geraldine Pascall, ‘For conduct unbecoming of WEL’s seal of disapproval’, *Australian*, 17 November 1973.

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- <sup>52</sup> In the WEL history survey 32 per cent of the respondents from WEL–ACT had a Women’s Liberation background, compared with 24 per cent of those from elsewhere.
- <sup>53</sup> The other organisation involved was ALRA.
- <sup>54</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Vol. 83, p. 1968, 10 May 1973.
- <sup>55</sup> Allan Barnes, ‘Conscience yields to muscle’, *Age*, 11 May 1973.
- <sup>56</sup> *WEL–NSW Newsletter*, 20 June 1974, p. 15.
- <sup>57</sup> Sawyer, ‘Wearing your politics on your sleeve’.
- <sup>58</sup> WEL–ACT, Minutes, 6 March 1973.
- <sup>59</sup> Reade, ‘Struggling to be heard’, p. 213; Castley & Daniels, ‘WEL and sex roles’, p. 6.
- <sup>60</sup> Cohen, *The Sisterhood*, pp. 250–51; Rhode, ‘Media Images, Feminist Issues’, p. 695.
- <sup>61</sup> Comment by Enid Conochie, WEL history survey.
- <sup>62</sup> Pamela Thornley, Letter to the Editor, *Age*, 28 June 1972.
- <sup>63</sup> Nicholson, ‘The Women’s Electoral Lobby and Women’s Employment’, pp. 47–8.
- <sup>64</sup> Union secretary quoted in Hooper, ‘The Emergence of Contemporary Feminist Groups in Australia’, p. 21; ‘Women Drive for Equality’, *Herald*, 25 August 1973.
- <sup>65</sup> Hilary Freeman & Diana Gribble, ‘Our say: Let women man trains and trams’, *Herald*, 5 April 1974, p. 4.
- <sup>66</sup> Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, August 1972, p. 3; Megan Stoyles, ‘Women’s Electoral Lobby slates sales tax, custom duty on the pill’, *Australian Financial Review*, 26 July 1972, p. 3.
- <sup>67</sup> McCarthy, *Don’t Fence Me In*, p. 102.
- <sup>68</sup> For example, Tilly, *Social Movements*.
- <sup>69</sup> ‘Candidates quizzed by Tas. women’, *The Examiner*, 24 November 1972, p. 12; Noel Rait, ‘Women label the Federal hopefuls’, *Advertiser*, 9 November 1972; Anne Summers ‘Women out to rock the vote’, *National Times*, 1–6 May 1972, p. 7.
- <sup>70</sup> WEL activist Eve Mahlab had been an unsuccessful contender for Liberal preselection in Higgins.
- <sup>71</sup> ‘WEL survey shows candidates “paternal”’, *Courier-Mail*, 27 November 1974.
- <sup>72</sup> Kristine Neill, ‘Hell for women and horses’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 1980; Helen Dash, ‘Canberra kit ensures survival’, *Courier-Mail*, 15 October 1980.
- <sup>73</sup> Edna Ryan, Autobiographical writing, p. 24; Anne Levy in Sloniec, *WEL*, p. 3.
- <sup>74</sup> WEL member Anne Conlon happened to be standing as a Labor candidate in this safe Liberal seat, as had Edna Ryan almost twenty years before.
- <sup>75</sup> Sloniec, *WEL*, p. 3.
- <sup>76</sup> *WEL–Victoria Broadsheet* 1 (10), November 1972, p. 14.
- <sup>77</sup> Cited in WEL–ACT Submission to the Attorney-General’s Department, ‘Human Rights for Women’, 19 November 1973, p. 2. See also Scutt, ‘Legislating for the Right to be Equal’, pp. 230–31.
- <sup>78</sup> ‘End this bias against women now – Cameron’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 1972.
- <sup>79</sup> ‘Minister asked to upgrade the status of women’, *Canberra Times*, 24 May 1973.
- <sup>80</sup> ‘What women want from their adviser’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 April 1973.
- <sup>81</sup> Mungo MacCallum, ‘The women who govern Labor’, *Nation Review*, 9 August 1973.
- <sup>82</sup> For more detail see Sawyer & Groves, *Working from Inside*.

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<sup>83</sup> *WEL-Victoria Broadsheet*, 3 (26), April 1974, pp. 5–6.

<sup>84</sup> Ryan, *Catching the Waves*, pp. 151–2.

<sup>85</sup> Summers, 'Women', pp. 194–5. Cf 'Women's delegation gets PM's ear on women's issues', *Age*, 10 May 1973.