

8. Part of a continuous women's movement?

Was WEL part of a continuous women's movement that had ebbed and flowed during the previous century, or was it part of something new, the eruption of middle-class radicalism in the 1960s? Those who have written about the 'new' social movements tend to stress the timing of their appearance – when basic material concerns were satisfied and the increased number of university-educated young people could turn their attention to 'post-materialist' issues. The angry women's movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s emerged from anti-war and student movements and at first were slow to identify with their polite predecessors, as exemplified by an article in the 1974 collection of WEL papers, *From the Gilded Cage*, which confidently began: 'The women's movement in Australia is now a full two years old'.¹

It is possible that every new wave of feminist protest starts out with sharp critique – not just of male-dominated society but also of preceding feminist organisations – and there may be stronger criticism of a mother's generation than of earlier generations.² Looking back, however, the succeeding waves of the women's movement seem remarkably similar. The rationale for women needing separate political space, free of the tutelage of men, remains consistent over generations of feminist activism: women wanted to be able to organise in their own way and identify their own political priorities. Even at the beginning of the new wave these continuities were felt quite strongly in some places, such as Perth, where Irene Greenwood of the previous generation of feminists taught the younger women how to set out chairs for a meeting. 'In a circle dears,' she said. 'Not in rows. Feminists don't sit in rows to talk, they sit facing each other'.³

The 'new' women's movement increasingly identified with and appropriated at least the more heroic moments and symbols of the movement's earlier history.⁴ One of the clearest manifestations of the shift to identifying with a continuing women's movement came with the change in the political colours used by the 'second wave'.

While at first red was often used, signifying closeness to other radical movements, from 1975 the International Women's Day marches in the major Australian cities were appropriating the purple, green and white used by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in the big London suffrage demonstrations before World War I.

Although the WSPU colours were originally adopted in another country, and for the purpose of distinguishing organisations within the suffrage movement from each other rather than unifying them, in public memory they had come to have much broader significations of sisterhood and feminist identity. Women who wore these colours, or even just purple, felt they showed that their wearers were part of a continuing struggle to achieve equality. Wearing the colours gave a sense of pride and identity, a feeling of 'connection with our foremothers' and of being 'part of herstory' (even though purple, green and white had not been adopted until 1908, when the struggle for the vote in Australia was largely over).⁵

The theorists of the 'new' social movements of the 1960s, particularly those in North America, tended to define social movements in terms of engagement in non-institutionalised and disruptive forms of action and hence to assume that movements had quite a limited life-span. These theories were usually based on the experience of male-led movements. By contrast, the idea of 'abeyance', introduced by Verta Taylor, throws useful light on the trajectories of WEL and its predecessors.⁶ Abeyance theory helps us to see the women's movement as persistent over time, with periods of intense activity interspersed with more unobtrusive activity, including the celebration of anniversaries and commemorative events. Viewed through this lens, WEL was part of a continuous movement stretching back over time, not simply part of the phenomenon of new social movements.

[[Insert Figure 08.01]]

WEL—Victoria 20th anniversary celebration, L to R, Katy Richmond, Jan Harper, Jocelyn Mitchell, Iola Mathews, Val Byth (co-ordinator), Joyce Nicholson, Beatrice Faust. *The Age*, 2 December 1992, p. 18.

Joe Sabljak/courtesy The Age.

Women's movements have always operated at different levels and used diverse modes of action to a greater extent than can be captured by a singular focus on disruptive protest events. While 'dissent events' have been important⁷, as for other social movements, in attracting media attention and getting a message out to a broader public, empirical evidence suggests that disruptive protests are not the primary defining feature of women's movements. In countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the first wave of the women's movement rarely engaged in disruptive action as understood by today's social movement theorists. The fact that the first wave was 'polite' would disqualify it as a real social movement for some theorists, despite the challenge it represented to dominant norms and attitudes.

For over a hundred years the Australian women's movement engaged in advocacy, conducted through deputations, submissions and conferences, and only from time to time engaged in direct action. There has been continuity in terms of constituting woman as a political subject and seeking to remove the barriers to equal citizenship – but if we stayed with the definition of social movement as entailing disruptive or direct action, we should have to disregard women's advocacy as an indication of the presence of a movement. This, however, appears counter-intuitive and suggests that we need to look beyond such a definition if we are to adequately account for women's political history.

Another problem with defining social movements by reference to the use of disruptive forms of action relates to the interpretation of the relationship between social movements and the state. For some writers, disappearance off the streets and into public institutions is a sign that a movement is over because it has succeeded – bringing new people and new perspectives to the policy process. For others it is a sign of co-optation, of buying off revolutionary potential. But social movements do not just disappear into existing public institutions. They may be responsible for creating a new constellation of institutions reflecting a movement's values and perspectives – for example, the institutionalising of women's movement values in services such as domestic violence refuges.⁸ The absorption of activists into running women's services might deplete the number available for political action, but it provides the opportunity

to model women's movement values for the ever-larger numbers of women seeking help.

Perhaps, instead of focusing on non-institutionalised and disruptive forms of action, we should focus more on the kind of elements highlighted in European social movement theories – the mobilising of collective identity and the sustaining of challenging discourses. When women's movements were in abeyance, this oppositional discourse only occasionally broke the surface of public life, continuing in a subterranean fashion through roneoed newsletters and correspondence, while the lack of acknowledgment of women's political history in schools and universities, and the absence of feminist publishing, further restricted public awareness. Nonetheless, women's advocacy groups preserved feminist norms and perspectives through decades that were unreceptive to such claims-making and were there to welcome the resurgence of feminist energy at the beginning of the 1970s.

WEL's predecessors

The early winning of the vote in Australia by no means signalled an end to women's movement organisations. In the post-suffrage era the 'non-party idea' took on renewed forms in all States, with the goal of getting women to use their vote effectively. One early example was the Women's Political Association, created by Vida Goldstein in Melbourne, which supported her various campaigns for federal parliament and in 1913 circulated a questionnaire to all Victorian candidates for federal parliament seeking their views on equal pay, equal opportunity for women in the new Commonwealth public service, equality in family law and protection of women from trafficking.

The non-party organisations proclaimed the need for women to stand together, regardless of class or party, to achieve equal citizenship and to protect the interests of women, children and the home. Their platforms generally included equal pay and equal opportunity, equal divorce laws and guardianship rights, and the right of married women to retain their nationality. There were also welfare-oriented demands relating to juvenile justice and child protection and the appointment of women as

police, prison officers, jurors, Justices of the Peace and magistrates. There was also advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal women⁹, although many demands were couched in the dominant discourse of 'Britishness'.

The idea that women must use their new political rights in order to become equal citizens became part of the continuity of the women's movement. Equal citizenship meant equality of opportunity, responsibility and reward.¹⁰ The idea that women had the responsibility as well as the right to contribute to public life appears in various forms in WEL's statements of aims, for example: 'WEL Australia is an independent organisation dedicated to creating a society where women's participation and potential are unrestricted, acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards' (1998). This understanding framed the long campaign by the non-party associations and continued by WEL to ensure that women served on juries on an equal basis.

WEL's most obvious predecessor was the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV), founded in 1921 by Bessie Rischbieth of the WA Women's Service Guilds and active for 60 years. It was Australia's first national women's advocacy body, and the conduit for emerging international norms of equal citizenship through its affiliation to the International Alliance of Women (IAW).¹¹ At its height the AFWV included twelve affiliated bodies from around Australia and played an important role in strengthening the international connections of Australian feminists. Some of its State-based affiliates, the Leagues of Women Voters and the Women's Service Guilds, outlasted it.

The establishment of a Women's Bureau to monitor women's employment was something the International Alliance urged on all its national affiliates, and the AFWV engaged in decades of lobbying before this was achieved in the 1960s.¹² It persisted with rating parliamentary candidates on their attitudes to equal pay and equal opportunity, and in 1966 its long-standing goal of the abolition of the Commonwealth marriage bar was finally achieved. In 1969 the AFWV was one of three women's organisations granted leave to intervene in the equal pay case before the Arbitration Commission. It had been involved in earlier national wage cases – for

example, intervening in the early 1950s when employers applied to reduce women's wages from 75 to 60 per cent of the male basic wage.

The rating of candidates on equality issues by first-wave women's organisations was continued up until, and in some countries beyond, the arrival of Women's Liberation. The Swedish affiliate of the IAW, the Frederika Bremer Association (founded in 1884), was still interviewing party leaders about their position on women's issues in the 1960s. The Swedish association also regularly analysed party manifestoes for what they offered women. In Sydney, the United Associations of Women (UAW) wrote to candidates in the 1972 federal election seeking their views on equal pay, ILO Convention ratification, family planning clinics and child-care centres. As the UAW historian noted somewhat tartly, they were already administering their questionnaire while WEL was still constructing its election campaign.¹³

But by the 1970s, after so many decades of maintaining feminist advocacy through hard times, the AFWV membership was ageing and dwindling. Already in 1966 the head of the Women's Section in the Department of Labour had written to the departmental secretary that the AFWV was 'very strongly feminist in the narrower sense of the word – its methods and policies are those of fifty years ago'.¹⁴ At its 1972 congress the AFWV's president, Mrs R.D. Collman, was reported as saying: 'Perhaps over the years we have not been forceful enough to achieve our aims ... We have been working for women's rights for a long time and are only too happy to see the emergence of keen young organisations with similar aims'.¹⁵ She invited representatives of Women's Liberation and WEL to the triennial congress, and the AFWV joined in the lobbying on issues such as the sales tax on oral contraceptives.

Despite the welcome extended to the new generation, the older organisations were sometimes put out by how promptly they were eclipsed by WEL's high media profile. An activist from the Victorian League of Women Voters complained that the *National Times* appeared to think that WEL was the only women's organisation in Australia, instead of simply the newest.¹⁶ Indeed, through lack of historical background, WEL was sometimes guilty of behaving as if it had invented an issue long the province of older women's organisations. A good example was the campaign by WEL–Tasmania

to ensure equality in jury service (defeated by the Legislative Council in 1974 and not achieved until 1996).

In South Australia the League of Women Voters advised WEL on methods, including its own long-standing use of carefully prepared candidate questionnaires. When Ellinor Walker gave the valedictory address at the last meeting of the League in 1979, it was in the expectation that WEL could carry on the League's work, and a donation was provided for this purpose.¹⁷ Walker had been a member and office-bearer of the League since 1914. She had wanted to join immediately after hearing an inspirational lecture on feminism by Vida Goldstein in 1912, but promised her father she would wait until she turned twenty-one. Viv Szekeres, a member of both WEL and Women's Liberation, has written about her delight in encountering League women at a meeting on prostitution law reform. The League women were probably well into their eighties, but their ideas were radical and they presented them with confidence:

I came away feeling quite optimistic about our future as women. After all we would one day inevitably find ourselves the same age as the women from the League. For me to find a group of much older women who defied society's expectations for them to be either invisible or silent was reassuring. These women were still in the public arena fighting for what they believed to be right.¹⁸

The continuity between WEL and first-wave women's political advocacy was even more evident in Western Australia and was epitomised in Irene Greenwood. Greenwood was a hereditary feminist whose suffragist and pacifist mother, Mary Driver, had been a president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Western Australia and an office bearer in the AFWV. During World War I Driver had climbed aboard a naval ship anchored at Albany to ask the Minister for Defence to close the hotels when the New Zealand troops were in town.¹⁹ Her daughter inherited the feminism and pacifism but as a grown woman enjoyed a vermouth bianco. As a child in Albany Greenwood had watched her parents writing up minutes by oil lamp and she too became an organisation woman. She became a professional radio broadcaster in the 1930s, encouraged by journalist and broadcaster Linda Littlejohn of the United Associations in Sydney and, like her mother, became an AFWV office-holder. She represented the AFWV on the National Advisory Committee for International Women's Year and spoke at the Women and Politics Conference in 1975. While she

was in Canberra she addressed over 100 women at a WEL meeting on her life in the women's movement – emphasising the continuity of endeavour over the century.

The Perth-based Women's Service Guilds (founded 1909) had been a political home for Greenwood and her temperance mother. At about the time that WEL was being established in the eastern States, the Guilds were trying to recruit young blood. They called a meeting of daughters of members and out of this in March 1972 came the Harvest Guild, with Wendy Fatin as its president. She in turn helped recruit women politicised by the anti-Vietnam War movement and Women's Liberation

But when the young women of the Harvest Guild heard that on the other side of Australia WEL had been created, they decided they should be part of it. Four of them, together with Pat Giles from Women's Liberation, travelled to Canberra for WEL's national conference in January 1973. They returned to set up the new organisation in Perth, using their Women's Liberation and Guild networks. WEL meetings were held in the Guilds' headquarters in Harvest Terrace, opposite Parliament House, and its establishment sounded the death knell for the Guilds' hopes of recruiting younger members.

Issues of sexual morality continued to mark a dividing line between the older and newer women's organisations. The older organisations had promoted sexual restraint for both sexes and had been deeply opposed to the regulation of prostitution, which they saw as directed only to making it safe for men. By contrast, WEL was campaigning for prostitution law reform and the rights of sex workers. The AFWV and its affiliates continued to be wary of moves to legalise prostitution, and hopeful that as equality between the sexes increased prostitution would decrease.²⁰

Talks in the late 1970s, mediated by Greenwood and Giles, led to the AFWV taking the decision to wind itself up in 1982 and pass on its international role to WEL. WEL inherited the role of the national affiliate of the IAW, benefiting from the latter's status with a plethora of international bodies including the ILO and diverse UN agencies. WEL members Pat Giles and Pat Richardson joined the IAW Board and in 1989 WEL, together with the Victorian League of Women Voters, hosted an IAW

congress in Melbourne. In 1996 Giles became world president of the IAW and went on to serve three terms running up to its centenary in 2004.

[[Insert Figure 08.02]]

IAW Congress, Sri Lanka, September 2002. L to R, Pat Richardson (WEL/IAW Membership Secretary), Priscilla Todd (WEL/IAW Secretary), Irene Dunsmuir (Union of Australian Women, Victoria), Chandrika Bandaranaike (President of Sri Lanka), Pat Giles (WEL/IAW President), Una Ellis (IAW hon. member), Pat Goble (League of Women Voters, Victoria).

Pat Richardson

One continuing concern of the IAW from the earliest days was the trafficking of women. This re-emerged as a major issue in the 1990s, again illustrating the continuity between the goals and actions of the women's movement from the past into the present, even though the issue of sex work had itself become divisive. The earlier generations of feminist activists had seen prostitution as incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, or with improvement in the status of women. This position was maintained by AFWV through the 1970s and continues in the IAW, strongly backed by its Scandinavian affiliates. In Sweden law reform in 1999 criminalised the buying of sex while decriminalising its sale, resulting in a significant decrease both in prostitution and trafficking.

Back in Australia, despite the differences over prostitution, the Women's Service Guilds supported WEL's campaign for women's policy machinery and equal opportunity legislation. But the Guilds' membership dwindled to become a single Guild before finally dissolving in 1997, after almost 90 years of lobbying for women's equality.²¹ The League of Women Voters in Victoria is the last AFWV affiliate still in existence. In late 2004 Kerry Lovering took over both as League President and as Convenor of WEL, and in 2007 was helping plan the celebration of the forthcoming centenary of women's suffrage in Victoria.

In hindsight it seems obvious that WEL was part of a long tradition of women's non-party advocacy. At the beginning, however, the generation gap and the lack of media

coverage of the older organisations meant that few WEL members had any idea of their activities. WEL women, like those in Women's Liberation, tended to think they were doing something entirely new.²² The subsequent flourishing of the discipline of feminist history helped to strengthen the sense of being part of a continuous movement rather than a new one, and counterbalanced the tendency of young activists to believe that they had invented feminism.

Did reformism kill the women's movement?

WEL has sometimes been blamed for placing too much emphasis on 'moving into government'. It has been pointed out that without an effective women's movement working on the outside, it will not be long before a government will decide it is 'politically safe to purge itself of the demands of the women's movement'.²³ From this perspective, the Australian women's movement came to place too much reliance on Labor governments as a vehicle for achieving reforms:

Many activists went from the streets into government bodies, universities and non-government organisations and, in the case of Women's Liberationists, into services for women. The dependence on an ALP government for funding then took its toll on many who previously had fought the system from without. The ensuing demobilisation left the movement ill-equipped to challenge the attacks that came during the 1980s and '90s from both ALP and Coalition governments.²⁴

WEL members did seize opportunities to influence policy from the inside, which did mean that fewer women with political and policy skills were available for community-based politics. While women within government were able to direct resources to women in the community and enable more diverse groups to organise, dependence on public resources rendered these groups vulnerable to political change. The ebbing of the community-based women's movement in turn deprived feminists within government of their political base, for there was no longer a visible presence in the community for politicians to appease. Beyond women's services, whose policy advocacy and community education became increasingly constrained by competitive tendering and under-resourcing, there was little ongoing community activity to enlist support for change.

While it is widely accepted that feminist policy interventions within government cannot succeed without an outside political base²⁵, what is less clear is what determines the life-cycle of protest movements. In general the direct action phase of women's movements around the world did not seem to last much beyond five years, regardless of engagement or otherwise with the state. There is the natural phenomenon of burnout among those actively engaged in promoting social and policy change. As Iola Mathews observed as early as 1977, many dropped out simply because they could not stand the pace for long: 'With a few members and a shoe-string budget, it has always been difficult for anyone to be actively involved for long without being over-burdened with work'.²⁶

It can be argued that the ebb and flow of the women's movement in the late 20th century was very similar to the cycle that had affected earlier manifestations of the movement. Reflecting this cycle, the word 'feminism' itself dropped in and out of fashion. In the 1930s, a long-time feminist activist in the United Kingdom observed the strong hostility shown by young women to the word 'feminism' and all it was assumed to connote. She pointed out that these young women were themselves products of the women's movement and the difficult and confusing conditions in which they lived were in part due to the changeover from old to new conceptions of women's place in society.²⁷

In Australia too, 'feminism' came to connote something old-fashioned. An article published in the *Bulletin* in 1965, not long before the arrival of the 'second wave', pointed out there were no folk-songs for feminism and that feminists had been made to seem ridiculous soon after the achievement of political rights. The Feminist Club in King Street in Sydney was described as a 'pleasant backwater', while 'hard-core feminists' clustered around the League of Women Voters. The League, like the other affiliates of the AFWV, engaged in polite lobbying through letter-writing to ministers and other authorities. The Business and Professional Women's Association, with its engagement with equal pay, was seen as the most active and effective feminist organisation.²⁸ This image of feminism made it perhaps unsurprising that even when the second wave arrived, young women wanted to be seen as liberationists, not as feminists.

The term ‘feminist’ became important for WEL members as they rediscovered the continuity of the women’s movement. The 1980 *WEL Papers* began with a period woodcut and a 1915 definition:

Mother, what is a feminist?

A feminist, my daughter,
Is any woman now who cares
To think about her own affairs
As men don’t think she oughter.²⁹

The term was to fall out of favour again among young women, however, and become a flashpoint for the inter-generational tensions of the 1990s. The pressures of combining work and family would be seen as the ambivalent legacy of feminism to the new generation. Moreover, for WEL, the media images of feminism, such as ‘ugly, hairy legs, separatists, man-hating, fat’, were a barrier to the recruitment of young women.³⁰ While these images were different from the scrawny, bespectacled and beaky-nosed images of the suffragists, they were just as hostile. The setting up of ‘Young WEL’ groups in the 1990s was not, in the long term, sufficient to overcome these problems, despite recruitment drives during university orientation weeks and a successful Young Feminism conference in Melbourne.

Quite apart from the limited lifespan of direct action and generational conflicts, there is also the more general phenomenon of youth disengagement from politics, at least as that term has traditionally been understood. In all Western democracies youth are now much less likely to join political parties or advocacy organisations, or even to vote, than the baby-boomer generation. The problem of how to engage young women who are not already politically engaged is a difficult one. As Eva Cox has commented:

The younger generation is much more cynical about the political process – and it is very hard to find an argument as to why they should be involved. There is a sense in which it is all happening ‘out there’, it is all global. It is all elsewhere, it is all too hard.³¹

To some young women, including those doing gender studies at university, the increased salience of ‘diversity’ meant that a politics based on an assumed sisterhood

appeared hopelessly simplistic. They saw the transfer of energies into micro-politics or ‘small acts of disruption’ as an indication that broader social movement solidarity was no longer possible in a world where diversity rather than sisterhood had taken centre stage. While feminist activism was still possible in different locations, the women’s movement as such was seen to be over.³² For others, however, identification with the struggles of the past and the linkage to the struggles of the present were strong enough to constitute evidence of its continuity. While they might not turn out to a demonstration to defend the community-based child-care program, the industrial relations system or gender-neutral tax principles, they could be relied on to protest against threats to abortion rights.

The emotional life of movements

Questions about the emotional life of social movements were not prominent when the new wave first appeared, but more recent research has emphasised not only the emotions that bring recruits into social movements, such as anger at injustices, but also the emotions that keep them there. While it may be hard to ‘maintain the rage’, the satisfactions of friendship can sustain continuing connection with a movement. This is particularly important when political opportunities contract and there are no longer the immediate payoffs that made participation so rewarding. Verta Taylor has pointed out how central the emotional life of movements is to their survival in hard times.³³ WEL was like other movement organisations insofar as the intense activity of the early days created enduring bonds. Lives as well as campaigns were shared and groups were often sustained by personal friendships.³⁴ On the negative side, these emotional ties could lead to organisational exit when ties were severed or when feelings were hurt, and serve as a barrier to the recruitment of younger women.

Only a decade after its founding, Kate White predicted that for the rising generation WEL would seem as middle-aged as the League of Women’s Voters and the AFWV had seemed to WEL. While WEL had been youthful and slim in the 1970s, by the 1980s it was already ‘a little thicker around the waistline’.³⁵ Attention turned in the 1990s to initiatives to attract young women, but they reported feeling patronised by more experienced older members. However, the existence of strong emotional bonds

between long-standing members of social movement organisations has a positive as well as a negative side. While they may be an obstacle to organisational renewal, they may also enable organisational survival through long periods of abeyance.

One of the common features of both waves of the women's movement is the importance of newsletters as a means of maintaining community. In 1981 the editor of *Equality*, published for more than a quarter of a century by the NSW League of Women Voters, attended the celebration of the 100th issue of *WEL-Informed*, the most important and long-lasting of the WEL newsletters. In the 1970s and 1980s *WEL-Informed* was put together by a group led by Dorothy Simons and including Jan Aitkin, Edwina Doe, Diana Wyndham and cartoonist Chris Smith. Rosemary Webb, a member of the group in the late 1970s–early 1980s, describes the experience:

The editorial group was a self-contained, supportive, inclusive women's collective. Those years were pre-desktop publishing and producing a print-ready journal meant literally cutting and pasting copy to fit a predetermined number of pages. Because of this the monthly meetings were at Ashleigh Gallagher's publishing business in Artarmon, with the collective arguing layout and pasting up content around a large worktable while sharing feminist perspectives and trading updates on WEL campaigning. The work and the range of expertise in the collective meant we could all contribute to and pick up technical skills in media and layout, as well as honing our negotiating skills through being just one remove from policy action. People were dedicated – most managed to turn up every month. In retrospect this was impressive, given that we all had work and carer commitments. And paste-up couldn't start 'til early evening when the room was free, so someone would bring snacks along, usually borrowing Diana's gleeful line 'I bought it myself'.³⁶

Newsletters were produced by all WEL groups, with names such as *Broadsheet*, *WEL-Read*, *Alive and WEL*, *Ink-WEL*, *WEL-Spoken*, *WEL-ACTivist* and even at one stage *SWELter* (in Darwin). They provided gender analysis of the news of the day and often reproduced articles by feminist journalists such as Yvonne Preston, Adele Horin or Anne Summers. In Cairns, the newsletter produced for decades by Joan Trewerne provided a feisty dialogue with North Queensland sexism and the *Cairns Post*.

Humour was an important part of the newsletters, which featured feminist cartoons such as those by Judy Horacek. They also drew on the cartoons entered in the national

awards for feminist cartoons run by WEL–WA in the 1990s.³⁷ An ever-popular feature was the ‘pig pen’ item, with sexist remarks of the month – for example, Justice John Gallop saying in an ACT custody case: ‘Despite some serious errors of judgement in the past – such as taking the children to peace rallies and demonstrations – she had emerged as the parent who was more emotionally mature’.³⁸ Also popular were Sir Charles Court’s remarks on retiring as Premier of Western Australia: ‘My wife has played an important role in my career. She always packed my bag, sometimes at a moment’s notice. She also brought up our five sons practically single handed ... There is nothing as beautiful as family life.’³⁹

Building on such traditions of exposing the sexist remarks (and assumptions) of public figures were the Ernie awards in Sydney, with which many WEL members were involved. The Ernies, instigated in 1993 by Meredith Burgmann, a Labor parliamentarian who became President of the NSW Legislative Council, were awarded for the most sexist or unhelpful comments made by public figures during the year and came in different categories including ‘repeat offender’, won by John Howard in 2003 for his comment that paid maternity leave as a solution to balancing work and family was ‘intellectually insubstantial’. As many women as could be fitted into the parliamentary dining room (about 400) attended the annual dinners, where the awards were decided by the volume of booing, refereed by ‘boo monitors’.

Inspired by the Ernies, in Canberra WEL launched the Greys in 1999, named after Greg Cornwall, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, who had suggested women’s poor performance in the ACT election might have reflected men’s resentment at the ‘special treatment of women’. Comments were put up on a ‘wall of shame’ on the WEL–ACT website during the year and there was a boo-off, often at the Canberra café Tilley’s, to decide the winner. Subversive activities of this kind help keep feminist discourses alive and maintain community. Laughing at sexism is just one aspect of how feminism gets handed on, along with the newsletters and e-lists that preserve feminism as a living language, waiting for its revitalisation by new speakers.

Characteristic of the ‘second wave’ and also an important part of its emotional life was the flowering of a feminist subculture, with feminist books, film, video, art and music.

It was no longer true (if it ever were) that there were no folk-songs for feminism. In earlier chapters we encountered the importance of songs such as 'I am Woman, Hear me Roar' and 'Don't Be Too Polite Girls'. Also popular was Robyn Archer's 'Menstruation Blues', an energetic blues treatment of a formerly taboo topic and Judy Small's 'A Heroine of Mine' (about Jessie Street). The song book prepared for the 1975 national WEL conference included some raunchy numbers but also 'Domestic Service' a version of Waltzing Matilda written by Edna Ryan and including the lines:

And her ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong
Matilda won't make any more morning tea.

The changing character of International Women's Day

While feminist culture had continuing vitality, street marches, street theatre, sit-ins and other forms of direct action by the women's movement became less common after the 1970s. In the West, the period of radical political action of the women's movement is generally seen as ending in about 1979. One striking illustration of the movement's changing repertoire is the trajectory of International Women's Day (IWD) celebrations. From 1928 the Communist Party organised IWD rallies and marches in Australia with men forming the majority of participants. In the 1950s and 1960s the Communist-inspired Union of Australian Women (UAW) attempted to revive IWD.⁴⁰ Street rallies were hard to organise, due to the attitude of State and local authorities, but UAW members sometimes engaged in peace walks with slogans printed on aprons or shopping bags to get around the ban on placards. Closely watched by ASIO, other IWD functions featured international themes and included luncheons, concerts, folk dancing and even an exhibition of Russian dolls.⁴¹

Then suddenly, in 1972, the big street marches of Women's Liberation arrived, and new open-ended collectives took over IWD, displacing the UAW stalwarts. Women's Liberation, WEL and union women tussled with young Trotskyists on the organising committees and a full range of activities took place on the day, from rallies and marches to street theatre, feminist songs and women's dances in the evening. In 1972 the street theatre held after the march was 'The Stages of a Woman's Life', portraying each stage of acquiring womanhood and marriage up to addiction to Bex powders.

By the 1990s, however, IWD marches had shrivelled and were again being replaced by a range of less disruptive events. These ranged from large United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) fund-raising breakfasts and lunches (for example, with over 1000 women present in Sydney), to government and university functions and forums and even ‘corporate networking events’. Women’s units and information services put out extensive calendars of events sponsored by local councils, and other agencies, but they were celebratory rather than claims-making like the street marches of the 1970s. In Sydney in 2008 Anne Barber of WEL, together with Beth Eldridge of the Older Women’s Network, tried to revive IWD. With the help of the City of Sydney they organised for almost 200 handsome purple, green and white banners to be flown in the Central Business District, with sponsors including the Office for Women and the YWCA, and donations from unions. This provided a striking visual backdrop for the 100th anniversary of an event begun by socialist women in New York. Like the IWD banners flying outside the ACT Legislative Assembly (initiated by former WEL-ACT Convenor, Judy Downey, when advising the Chief Minister) they helped illustrate the shift to commemoration rather than contestation.

It was not only IWD that changed its character as the women’s movement moved into a different phase. Reclaim the Night marches had been held in Australia since 1978 and provided a symbolic statement of the right of women to go out at night safely, without a male protector. They were dramatic occasions with candles, drums and whistles, and sometimes firesticks and other elements of street theatre. At their height they attracted about 6000 marchers in both Melbourne and Sydney as well as thousands in other cities. The events were usually organised by a collective and women’s services were often involved. In Perth and Sydney, WEL played a particularly important role.

[[Insert Figure 08.03]]

Reclaim the Night march, Sydney, mid-1990s.

WEL–NSW office.

Reclaim the Night dwindled in the capital cities in the late 1990s and was largely ignored in the mainstream media. In 2006 the Sydney march was organised by young women from the Sydney University women's collective, who upset some of the older participants by being unaware of the tradition that men should not be included among the marchers – an issue increasingly the subject of dispute.⁴² In Adelaide, however, Reclaim the Night was being revived that year by the Office for Women headed by former WEL-ACT Co-Convenor, Sandy Pitcher, and involving more groups like Filipina women.

Meanwhile, White Ribbon Day on 25 November had gained increased media visibility. Initiated by Canadian men in 1991, in the aftermath of the Montreal massacre of women engineering students, it was subsequently endorsed by the United Nations as a statement of men's commitment to stop the violence against women. With its Saatchi & Saatchi ads and footballer sponsors, the White Ribbon campaigns, co-ordinated by UNIFEM with the Australian Federal Police and other partners, gradually displaced the more contentious repertoire of Reclaim the Night.

Protests over rape in war also changed their character. In the early 1980s, hundreds of women, including WEL women, were involved in Anzac Day actions. Sixty-one women were arrested in Canberra in 1981 and the following year 750 women laid a wreath before the official march began and then stood on the hill above the War Memorial holding their banner 'In memory of all women raped in all wars' so that all could see it during the official ceremony.⁴³ However, while the visible actions around Anzac Day disappeared, in the 1990s Australian feminist lawyers were helping establish new international norms whereby rape was defined as a war crime. Hence the change in political repertoire did not necessarily mean an end to political engagement, although it might now be taking place in more distant forums such as those provided by multilateral bodies.

Remembering the past

What is the role of 'memory work' in sustaining social movements once the initial period of intense engagement and direct action is over? In the United Kingdom, the

achievement of the vote was followed by the creation of groups such as the Suffragette Fellowship, which focused on preserving the memory of the heroic days of the women's movement through setting up archives and getting banners returned from the police. Later, when they had succeeded in having a statue of Mrs Pankhurst put up at Westminster, there were annual ceremonies in front of it.

These activities enshrined a particular narrative of sisterhood and of women's collective agency – the 'sisterhood is powerful' theme that was to re-emerge in the second wave. As we have seen, Pankhurst symbols, such as the purple, white and green of the WSPU, took on new life in the 1970s as a symbol of the women's movement in general. The same cycle, from militant protests to commemorative activities, can be perceived in the more recent wave. The Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common, for example, famous in the 1980s, was formally closed after almost 20 years to make way for a commemorative and historic site, which includes a nearly two-metre high sculpture of a campfire within a circle of seven Welsh standing stones, and a spiral sculpture with the words 'You can't kill the spirit'.

In Australia, the ageing membership of first-wave women's non-party organisations became increasingly absorbed in commemorative activities. For example, by the 1980s the League of Women Voters in Victoria was conducting annual events celebrating the proclamation of women's suffrage and of women being able to stand for Parliament. In recent years these have included annual young women's leadership seminars at Parliament House. The League also organised memorials for suffragist Vida Goldstein, including a plaque in the grounds of Parliament House, on which flowers were placed as part of its annual commemorations. The cultivation of public memory of women's political achievements is an important function of commemorative activities and is often linked in this way to encouraging more women into political activity.

After the initial burst in the 1970s and 80s, many WEL members were unable to continue with such intense policy engagement, but still enjoyed the community provided by commemorative activities. The confidence-building they had experienced tended to lead to full-time careers, and where women continued to be active it was

often through more specialised vocational bodies. The same patterns within WEL–New Zealand led to its disbanding as a national organisation in 2004. But while few were available anymore for submission-writing, hundreds of women could be gathered for milestone commemorative events such as celebrating the 20th and 30th anniversaries of different groups, and the writing of their histories.

In Perth, the centenary of women’s suffrage provided outstanding commemorative opportunities. In 1997 WEL successfully applied for funding for a ‘mile-long’ suffrage banner to commemorate a famous WCTU suffrage petition of the 1890s. WCTU members had collected signatures on sheets of foolscap, which were pasted onto a ‘mile-long’ length of cloth and rolled up for presentation to Parliament.⁴⁴ The commemorative banner consisted of 220 panels prepared by women’s groups and schools, celebrating women’s diversity and struggles over the century, and featured panels by continuing WCTU groups with their white ribbons, as well as panels by Indigenous women and women’s units in government. Hundreds of women carried it in the IWD march in 1999 and it was again displayed at the launch of the suffrage precinct in Kings Park. The following year WEL made a CD-ROM to record the artwork and history of the project.

[[Insert Figure 08.04]]

Carrying the suffrage banner on International Women’s Day, Perth 1999.

Val Marsden.

In Sydney the Anne Conlon Memorial Lecture, inaugurated by the Women’s Advisory Council after Conlon’s early death in 1979, was to be important feminist gathering for the next 20 years. Conlon had been a founding member of WEL and contributed to major submissions on industrial and poverty issues before joining the Women’s Co-ordination Unit in the Premier’s Department. In Melbourne the Mary Owen Dinner, in honour of another leading WEL member, became a major event in feminist calendars. Inaugurated in 1986 to mark Owen’s retirement as co-ordinator of the Working Women’s Centre, the dinner was also held annually for 20 years, attracting around 600 women and featuring prominent feminist speakers. In Canberra the ongoing Pamela Denoon Lecture was inaugurated in 1989 in memory of the

former co-ordinator and regularly attracts an audience of around 300 for speakers ranging from politicians to judges and cultural figures, including Aboriginal activists.

The election of an avowedly conservative federal government in 1996 had a significant impact on WEL. In the face of the unreceptive attitude of the Coalition government to policy advocacy on gender equity, there was a search for 'good news' stories that might sustain WEL values in a hostile environment. One such story was the 30th anniversary in 1996 of the abolition of the Commonwealth marriage bar, which had for so long cost married women their jobs. A forum was organised and a history prepared, documenting the feminist struggles against the bar and the manoeuvres of the Menzies government to ward off reform. In 1961, for example, a federal election year, the Menzies Cabinet decided not to lift the bar, but also not to reveal the decision, 'so as not to provoke the feminists'.⁴⁵ The 'feminists' undoubtedly included the AFWV, whose election questionnaire that year had included the issue.

WEL's celebratory forum, and the launch of the documentary history by the Public Service Commissioner, Peter Shergold, resulted in a meeting room in the Public Service Commission in Canberra being named in honour of Merle Thornton for her role in the campaign. Another Canberra initiative was Women's History Month, devised by WEL executive officer Helen Leonard and launched in 2000. In her life before WEL, in the Nursing Mothers' Association, Leonard had established Breast-feeding Awareness Month. Women's History Month was a response to the conservative political environment and the need to find projects that were unthreatening but kept alive feminist values. WEL had lost its operational funding and there was a desperate need to find a 'safe' project that might attract future funding from a very conservative federal government. So unlike the other commemorative projects described here, Women's History Month had the subtext of trying to generate funds that could support WEL's ongoing policy and advocacy work (for example, through paying the rent for the national office).

Women's History Month became popular with Commonwealth and State libraries and collecting institutions and became a major event each March. It did not serve its intended purpose of helping shore up WEL's financial position, however. After

Leonard's sudden death in October 2001, Women's History Month was taken over by the National Foundation of Australian Women and has continued to flourish. The NFAW has initiated other successful commemorative activities, including the Australian Women's Archive Project and the 30-year celebration of International Women's Year.

Both the NFAW Archives Project and the Jessie Street National Women's Library reflected the determination of second-wave activists that this time around knowledge of women's contribution to history would not be lost. The Jessie Street Library was in part the brainchild of Lenore Coltheart, originally active in WEL in Darwin and subsequently a political scientist and biographer of Jessie Street. The Library has flourished, despite frequent changes of location in its early years – it moved into the Ultimo Community Centre in late 2005. It is staffed by volunteers and relies on fund-raising events and talks, including those organised for Women's History Month. In 2006 the Chair of the Library Board was Jozefa Sobski, also Convenor of WEL–NSW. Meanwhile the National Library of Australia has been assiduous in recording feminist activists for its oral history collection, both as interviewers and interviewees, so that the joy as well as the heartbreak of 1970s feminism might be conveyed to later generations.

Another commemorative project honouring a feminist active in WEL, both in Sydney and Canberra, is the annual Clare Burton Lecture, initiated in 1999 after her sudden death from cancer. The lectures involve collaboration between a number of universities, State women's advisers and surviving gender equity agencies and are delivered in each capital city, helping raise funds for a memorial scholarship to support research in gender equity. Meanwhile, in Sydney, the annual Edna Awards were founded by WEL in 1998 to honour Edna Ryan's life and tireless campaigning. When she died in 1997 at the age of 92, all the major broadsheets and tabloids ran stories and obituaries with headlines such as 'a fighter to the finish'.⁴⁶ The Ednas honour feminists in a range of categories, including 'Grand Stirrer', awarded in 2006 to Tegan Wagner, the 14-year old victim of group rape who identified herself to encourage other victims to speak out. In 2001 WEL–Victoria followed this trend by establishing the Vida Goldstein Awards to provide recognition of feminist endeavour.

But while feminist memory is being well preserved, one of the failings of the recent women's movement may be the failure to develop or maintain popular publications. Feminist newsletters and websites provide resources for the already converted rather than making feminist insights available to a broader audience. Joan Bielski suggests that feminist writers and academics now tend to talk to one another and have difficulty in sharing their ideas or inspiring others – unlike Betty Friedan or Germaine Greer a generation or so ago.⁴⁷ Feminist blogs, sharing insights, frustrations and commentary, may be a partial exception for a younger generation.

Conclusion

[[Insert Figure 08.05]]

Still marching! Jenny Forster and Rhianna Keen carrying the WEL banner, International Women's Day, Sydney 2006.

Gail Radford

WEL has become part of the continuing history of the Australian women's movement, and its own organisational history has reproduced some of the patterns of earlier phases of the women's movement, from which at first it seemed so different. WEL, like its predecessors, has an outstanding record of policy engagement and women's advocacy. It shared much of their repertoire while giving the women's movement a new professionalism and media visibility. Unlike many of its predecessors, WEL was initially blessed by a favourable political environment that enabled it to make some rapid changes to the political agenda.

Against the odds, WEL made discrimination against women visible to politicians and persuaded them of the need for legislative remedies. To remove the onus from the victim to bring about change, WEL pressed on to make organisations responsible for identifying and removing the stumbling blocks for women, and brought issues from women's lives, such as child care and domestic violence, onto the centre stage of electoral politics. It also finally disposed of the formal barriers to equal pay, if not the gender bias in work evaluation. It introduced, at least for a time, an understanding into

government that policy was likely to have a different impact on men and women and thus that it was important to subject policy proposals to expert gender analysis.

WEL not only helped to bring about these large changes for women in the policy environment, it also touched the lives of a generation of women who became caught up in its activities. It gave many a new confidence that things did not have to go on being more of the same; that women could shape their own future. It produced the joy of being taken seriously, of making policy not the tea. Seeing change coming out of a Gestetner machine was an empowering experience and few looked back. Thanks to WEL, women even began to appear in political science textbooks.

From the 1990s, however, shifts in the political landscape and the increased dominance of the language of the market made it more and more difficult for equity arguments to be heard. WEL was reduced to having to argue for domestic violence prevention in terms of the cost to the economy of lost working days and the use of emergency services, not in terms of women's rights. Nevertheless, like its predecessors, WEL continued to commemorate and affirm feminist values and to spin off feminist endeavours in a range of unexpected locations and vocations – even feminist firefighters.

To see WEL as part of an ongoing women's movement that has taken different forms over time, some more visible than others, helps situate it in relation to whatever the future holds. Ultimately WEL was unable to prevent the whole series of market-oriented 'reforms' that undid so much of what it was trying to achieve in terms of employment equity and social provision. But while the immediate successor generation may be able to see WEL's failures more clearly than its achievements, that is not the end of the story. The records of WEL have been stored up for the future, to inspire women with the idea that there is such a thing as sisterhood, and that it can be powerful. It is an idea that will come around again.

¹ WEL, *From the Gilded Cage*, p. 43.

² Dahlerup, 'Continuity and waves in the feminist movement'; Sawer et al, 'Generations of advocacy'.

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- ³ Quoted in Wendy Fatin, 'Celebrating WEL's 30th Birthday: From the Guilds to WEL', *Broadsheet*, 1973.
- ⁴ Dahlerup, 'Continuity and waves in the women's movement'.
- ⁵ Sawyer, 'Wearing your politics on your sleeve', p. 53; Maddison & Scalmer, *Activist Wisdom*, p. 232.
- ⁶ Taylor, 'Social movement continuity'.
- ⁷ Scalmer, *Dissent Events*.
- ⁸ Bagguley, 'Contemporary British feminism'.
- ⁹ Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*; Paisley, 'Federalising the Aborigines?' pp. 248–66.
- ¹⁰ Martin, 'Polite Lobbying', p. 206.
- ¹¹ The IAW was formally constituted as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in Berlin in 1904, became the International Women's Alliance in 1926 and took on its current name in 1946.
- ¹² Eileen Powell, Report to the AFWV 14th Triennial Conference 1966; Russell & Sawyer, 'The rise and fall of the Australian Women's Bureau'.
- ¹³ Mitchell, *50 Years of Feminist Achievement*, p. 76.
- ¹⁴ Alison Stephen to Henry Bland, 21 September 1966, National Archives MP 1143/1/0, 62/4100/74.
- ¹⁵ 'So What's New about Women's Lib?', *Sun*, 11 September 1972.
- ¹⁶ Louise Mackay, Letter to Editor, *National Times*, 24 November 1975.
- ¹⁷ Jones, *In her own name*, pp. 227–8; 333–4.
- ¹⁸ Szekeres, 'Out of the limelight'.
- ¹⁹ Murray, *Voice for Peace*, p. 1.
- ²⁰ The NSW League of Women Voters, *Equality*, no. 225, December 1978, Dawn Section, pp. 3–4.
- ²¹ For the history of the Women's Service Guilds see Davidson, *Women on the Warpath*.
- ²² Curthoys, 'Australian feminism since 1970', p. 15.
- ²³ Szramka, 'The interrelationship between interest groups and social movement organisations', p. 107.
- ²⁴ Margaret Allum, '... and ain't I a woman', *Green Left Weekly* 416, 16 August 2000.
- ²⁵ Eg, Outshoorn & Kantola, *Changing state feminism*.
- ²⁶ Iola Mathews, 'WEL's first half decade', *National Times*, 8 October 1977.
- ²⁷ Strachey, Introduction, p. 10.
- ²⁸ Patricia Rolfe, 'Whatever happened to feminism?', *Bulletin*, 4 December 1965, pp. 18–22.
- ²⁹ *WEL Papers: 1980: A New Era for Women*, p. 2.
- ³⁰ Sarah Maddison, convenor of Young WEL in NSW, 'Why feminism is a dirty word', Interview with Jan Bowen, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1998.
- ³¹ Eva Cox in Bowen, *Feminists fatale*, p. 134.
- ³² Nash, 'A movement moves', pp. 325–6.
- ³³ Taylor, 'Social Movement Continuity'.
- ³⁴ Martin, 'The Women in WEL', p. 8.
- ³⁵ Kate White, 'Is the women's movement turning inward?' *National Times*, 20 May 1983; Harris, *Women's Electoral Lobby*, p. 1.
- ³⁶ Rosemary Webb, personal communication, 4 February 2008.
- ³⁷ Goldflam et al, *Hysterical Women and Hysterical Women '96*.

³⁸ Justice John Gallop in *Canberra Times*, 24 December 1988; *WEL National Bulletin*, February 1989; *WEL-Informed*, March 1989.

³⁹ *WEL-Darwin Newsletter*, August 1982, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Curthoys & McDonald, *More than a Hat and Glove Brigade*.

⁴¹ Stevens, *A History of International Women's Day*, p. 23.

⁴² Information from Lucy Honan, 13 August 2007.

⁴³ Dowse & Giles, 'Australia'.

⁴⁴ Ross, 'Votes for Women in Western Australia', p. 47.

⁴⁵ Cabinet Decision 1667, 24 October 1961; E J Bunting, Advice to the Prime Minister on 'Married Women in Public Service', 3 April 1962, in Sawer, *Removal of the Commonwealth Marriage Bar*, pp. 16, 17.

⁴⁶ E.g. 'Fighter for women until the very end', *Herald Sun*, 11 February 1997; 'Feminist fought the good fight', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 1997; 'Feminist godmother Ryan a fighter to the finish', *Australian*, 11 February 1997.

⁴⁷ Bielski, 'Australian feminism 2004'.