

Reflections on WEL–ACT's first year.

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WEL–ACT's 40th Anniversary Dinner
The Brassey of Canberra
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At the 30th anniversary dinner I was given five minutes to talk about WEL in the 1970s. Tonight I have been given seven minutes to talk about 40 years! I have worked out a compromise.

I prepared a short history on WEL–ACT for the Australian Women's Archives Project, with the help of Marian Sawer and Erica Fisher. You have been given a copy of this. When I say short, it was meant to be two pages, but grew to six. I hope you won't be insulted if you don't find your name there.

I don't intend to go over all the 40 years of our history, just pick out a few points from our early days, some of my memories and reflections on our first year, and touch briefly on the results. Carmel Niland has read my notes and said that it was what she would have said, so it must be all right.

Also, I want to mention an exhibition that opened at the Canberra Museum and Gallery today called *The Women Who Made Canberra*. While you are in nostalgic mood you might like to go along and see the WEL and Women's Liberation memorabilia in the exhibition.

Now here is some background to remind you of the early 1970s. There were anti-Vietnam War marches and Women's Liberation was meeting in the Moratorium house in Ainslie. ASIO was bugging the phone there and at the home of Biff Ward, a founding member of Canberra Women's Liberation. The ASIO records on Women's Liberation and WEL were very useful when we were writing WEL's history. ASIO also took photos of those attending the first meeting of Women's Liberation, from a van across the street. Unfortunately these were not so useful, none were good enough to include in the WEL history book.

When Women's Liberation moved to its own house in Griffith, Pat Eatock and her baby joined us from the Aboriginal Embassy in front of Parliament House.

If you drove into Civic from Woden you saw students with a big sign outside the South African Embassy inviting you to 'toot' your horn if you were against apartheid. It seemed that everyone 'tooted'. This must have driven the staff mad, particularly at peak hour.

In April 1972 Bea Faust wrote to Canberra Women's Liberation asking if we would join the newly established Women's Electoral Lobby in questioning candidates for the forthcoming federal election. Those of us who were fed up with sitting on the floor at meetings and discussing theory accepted with alacrity. We wanted to do something practical we said.

Bea also asked if we wanted to establish a separate branch of WEL in the ACT or to work as part of New South Wales. No way would we be part of New South Wales. We told her that we would set up our own subcommittee in Canberra.

We embarked on a campaign to attract new members and were very successful. In the main they were young married women with children. They were angry. Many had experienced discrimination in their daily lives. What did they want? High on the list was childcare; equal pay; cheap contraceptives and, as many were also members of the Abortion Law Reform Association, access to safe, legal abortion.

Last night I was listening to a Four Corners program about WEL from October 1972. In this I was earnestly telling viewers that WEL was a straight reformist group, not like Women's Liberation that wanted a totally changed society, a revolution. Also, Women's Liberation wanted you to examine your position in the family. We just wanted a few obvious reforms like equal pay and changes to the abortion laws.

Did we really believe this? Were we so naïve? Did those of us from Women's Liberation really abandon the idea of radical changes to society? I think not. But I do think that we were naïve in thinking that all the reforms we wanted could all be as simple as putting The Pill on the free list.

In time we learned. We had teachers such as Beryl Henderson, an older English woman who joined us and had been fighting for abortion law reform all her life, and Edna Ryan who had been campaigning for equal pay for just as long.

The interviewer asked me if we would stand candidates in the forthcoming federal election. I said, 'No, not now, but maybe in three years time. It will depend on the climate at the time.' I made this up of course, little realizing that Susan Ryan, one of our Deputy Convenors, would be standing for election to the Senate in 1975.

So we were 'angry', what else? Rosa Walden said 'fearless'. I think that she was right; we had no idea what we were taking on. I would say to lobbyists just walk through Kings Hall confidently, you know where you are going. Straight across Kings Hall, first corridor on the right, he is in the second office on the right.

So what else? We were having 'fun', working together, to use the Women's Liberation phrases we had discovered, 'sisterhood' and 'joy in the struggle'. We made life long friends. Many are here tonight.

Another Women's Liberation slogan was 'The personal is political'. Although I was assuring viewers in October 1972 that it was Women's Liberation not WEL that was asking women to examine their personal lives, the enthusiasm with which WEL members embraced 'no fault divorce' in later years suggests that a certain amount of examination went on here.

WEL-ACT was very pleased when we were organizing the first WEL national conference in Canberra in January 1973. WEL's first year had been a success. However, as I discussed with Gail Freeman tonight, we had a few problems with the organization. At a planning meeting Gail had pointed out that many more women were coming to the conference than we had anticipated. How would we fit them in? I said, 'Hire a tent'. That was what we did. The Nauru solution!

We were not pleased when WEL-ACT was attacked as being too successful, too big for our boots. We thought that we were just being helpful when we interviewed so many sitting members, sorted out rows between Victoria and New South Wales and massaged the Canberra Press Gallery. What really caused the problem were the

sessions we organized at the conference on how to run a successful national lobby. We were accused of trying to take over WEL!

In time all this was forgotten and it was inevitable that, given our location close to the Federal parliament and bureaucracy, in the years ahead WEL–ACT would play a major role on the national scene, supporting the national office and national campaigns. After all, we were the group with the troops on the ground in Canberra and could provide instant assistance when needed.

At that first conference were we thinking of the years of hard work ahead? No, we just got on with it. Joined sub-committees and worked doggedly in our areas of interest. Women took the skills they had learned in WEL into the bureaucracy, into parliaments and newly established women's organizations. As many women became too busy to be active in WEL, new recruits joined and carried the organization forward.

What happened to my obvious reforms in the ACT? Abortion — young women joined WEL and lobbied with older members. All references to abortion were removed from the criminal code in the ACT in 2002. It is still a work in progress in some other areas of Australia.

Equal pay—as I marched with the childcare workers on Saturday, I thought equal pay reminds me of a long car trip with small children. We pause for another court case. 'Are we there yet?' they ask. 'No, not yet' I say. And on we go.

Did we achieve the Women's Liberation aim of changing society? We were certainly the catalyst for changing the society for the better for our children. Is it perfect? No, not yet.

But tonight is not the time to dwell on imperfections. Everyone here has contributed to the changes in society. Tonight is the time to celebrate those successes and share these stories. But first some food and then we will hear Susan's story.