

The Women who made Canberra Exhibition.¹

Floor Talk

Canberra Museum and Gallery

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My life in Canberra

Dr Gail Radford AM²

The exhibition contained a display of a number of objects and photographs that Dr Radford had provided to illustrate her life in Canberra. She refers to these in her talk.

Introduction

I would like to welcome you all and thank you for coming. Particularly my veterinary colleague, Dick Roe, we were classmates at university.

The title of my talk today is “My life in Canberra”. This can be divided into three phases, firstly, a feminist activist in the 1970s, secondly, a Director of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) in the public service from October 1975 until I left Canberra to work overseas in June 1992 and, thirdly, I returned to Canberra in the early 2000s to research and write about the history of the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) and EEO at the Australian National University.

For much of this time I had a parallel career in veterinary science, as a small animal practitioner and research worker.

You will be relieved to know that I am not going to cover all three phases in detail, but instead will concentrate on my life as a feminist activist, as all but two

¹ The exhibition *The Women who made Canberra* was at the Canberra Museum and Gallery from 24 November 2012 until 17 March 2013. At the time that Canberra was celebrating one hundred years as the national capital, it was considered timely to look at the considerable changes in women’s lives that had taken place in this period. Ms Rowan Henderson was the curator of the exhibition.

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of the items in the display are from this period. I collected the objects and photos in the display as part of my research in the 2000s.

But first let me start at the beginning, give you some idea of my background and why a vet became a feminist activist.

Arriving in Canberra for the first time

My first memory of Canberra is of Lawley House, the hostel that was on Brisbane Avenue. We had just arrived in Canberra and I went downstairs and complained to the receptionist that the blinds in our room had holes in them. I was told sharply that we were lucky to have blinds. When the blinds wore out they would be not replaced!

Welcome to Canberra!

It was May 1967, my husband, Peter Wilenski, and I were newly married and we had come to Canberra as he had been offered a position in the Department of External Affairs. We had both been student politicians at Sydney University, where I had studied veterinary science and he had studied medicine. We had returned from overseas where we had both been doing further study.

I soon started working at the John Curtin Medical School with a team researching the immune system of sheep. We moved out of the hostel and rented a house in Red Hill. The landlady had made a long list of the pets that tenants were not allowed to keep. It did not include sheep so I brought a lamb home from work to mow the lawn for us.

Just as we were nicely settled into life in Canberra, we were posted to Vietnam.

The Dean of the Sydney University Vet School was delighted that I was going to Vietnam, a sentiment not shared by our parents as the Vietnam War was in full swing. The Dean was delighted because the Australian Government aid program

had sent his equipment for making animal vaccines to a laboratory in Saigon, but the staff did not know how to use it. But I did!

Back to Canberra as a radical feminist

In Vietnam I had my first experience of discrimination against wives. I was told that I could not work with the Australian vaccine equipment, as wives of diplomats were not allowed to work. I was flabbergasted! Instead, I decided to work with an American team making vaccine for pigs, Swine Fever Vaccine or Hog Cholera Vaccine as the Americans called it.

In 1968 we were posted to Ottawa where I did post-graduate research on cardiovascular physiology. These were turbulent times in North America, with anti-Vietnam marches, demonstrations complaining about the lack of action on Civil Rights and the beginnings of the Women's Movement.

For the last few months of my time in North America I lived in a town house in Boston. A member of Women's Liberation lived on the first floor and a Black Panther lived in the basement. So you could say that my education in these matters started before my return to Australia.

I returned to Canberra in October 1970 a quite different woman from the young wife of three years earlier. On my way back to Australia I stopped in New York City and visited feminist bookshops where I purchased the latest literature, and flew back to Canberra reading Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.

Canberra Women's Liberation

You will not be surprised to learn that very shortly after I arrived I joined the newly formed Canberra Women's Liberation.

Women's Liberation was meeting in a house in Canning St in Ainslie that was the Canberra home of the Moratorium movement, which opposed Australia's

involvement in the Vietnam War, opposed conscription and helped to hide draft dodgers.



Display cabinet with Women's Liberation T-shirt and tea towel, book and public service reports (Photo Gail Radford)

In one of the display cabinets you can see one of the T-shirts I used to wear. It is white with the orange Women's Liberation symbol on the front, a clenched fist in the centre of the female symbol. The clenched fist came from the Black Power Movement.

It was made in the screen-printing workshop in the garage at Canning Street. Screen-printing was very important in those days as we could not afford professional printing.

Now, ASIO was very suspicious of Women's Liberation, perhaps because we were meeting in the Moratorium house. ASIO was bugging the phone there and at the home of Biff Ward, a founding member of Canberra Women's Liberation.

Another organization that did not look upon Women's Liberation very kindly was the press. We were all bra burning rat bags to them. I must say that the only burning of bras that I witnessed in those days was done by ABC television; bras were thrown by ABC staff into a burning kerosene tin in their studio, as an introduction to a program on Women's Liberation. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain a video of this program although the ABC sent me a video of an excellent program they made on the Women's Electoral Lobby

That is not to say that we all wore bras, the bra-less look under T-shirts was very fashionable amongst young Women's Liberation members.



Women's Liberation street theatre, Civic, March 1972

In the display is a photo of Women's Liberation members performing street theatre in Civic on International Women's Day in March, 1972, so you can see what we were wearing then. Speakers explained the Women's Liberation demands of the right to work, equal pay, equal opportunity for work and education, free 24-hour child care and pre-school, free, safe contraceptives and safe, legal abortion on request.

By 1972 Women's Liberation had moved to their own home, the Women's House at 12 Bremer St, Griffith. Trying to raise the money to pay the rent was a continuing problem. Women Liberation had a stall in Civic each month for a number of years

where they sold items they had made in the screen-printing workshop. The proceeds went towards the rent.

Beside the Women's Liberation T-shirt in the display cabinet you will see a well worn red tea towel with the slogan "shitworkers of the workers of the world unite". That was bought at one of these stalls.

Despite its bad press, Canberra Women's Liberation was a serious group. We used to study and debate Women's Liberation literature from the USA and UK and examine the writings of the early feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft. In October 1970 I had bought a copy of *Sisterhood is Powerful* in New York City. It was hot off the press. You can see it in the display cabinet, in front of the Women's Liberation T-shirt.

I believe that this was the first copy of *Sisterhood is Powerful* in Australia. It is an anthology of writings from the Women's Liberation Movement and you can see from its battered condition that it was well read by the Canberra Women's Liberation Group. The American feminist Robin Morgan edited the book. Robin visited Australia in 1990. When I explained its importance to us, she wrote in it, "For Gail, because Sisterhood is **still** powerful 20 years later!" Unfortunately, the book in the display cabinet is not open so you cannot see Robin's inscription.

For many of us philosophical discussions about women and society and how to build a better world were all engrossing. But others, myself included, wanted to do something to improve things right away. We formed the Canberra Women's Liberation Action Workshop.

Firstly, in 1972 we prepared a submission advocating no fault divorce to a Senate inquiry into the divorce laws. Secondly, in the same year we agreed that we would start a branch of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) in Canberra.



Display with description of WEL, Superwoman T-shirt surrounded by photos, other objects in cabinet. (Photo David Paterson)

WEL begins in Canberra

WEL started in Melbourne in February 1972 when Beatrice Faust gathered together a group of women to discuss an article in *MS* magazine where women had rated the candidates for the US Presidential elections. They decided to do something similar in Australia.

WEL would interview all the candidates for the forthcoming Federal elections on issues of concern to women and publish the results. For this they would need help from women all over Australia. Bea embarked on a tour of capital cities to spread the word.

I arranged a meeting on 3 May 1972 for people to hear Bea Faust talk about WEL. The meeting was held at the Women's House in Griffith. Twenty to thirty people attended, they were mainly members of Women's Liberation and the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA). A member of ALRA went out to the airport to pick up Bea but came back and reported that she was not on the plane!

This left me to talk about WEL, relying on information I had gleaned from ALRA newsletters. The meeting was enthusiastic about the idea of forming a WEL

group in Canberra. At the next meeting we discovered that we must have office holders, if we were to comply with the WEL constitution. Now Women's Liberation did not believe in hierarchies but we decided that we would do it anyway but continue to work as a team. I would be Convenor and three others would be Deputy Convenors.



Back to the screen-printing workshop again! In the display is one of my WEL T-shirts from the 70s, with WEL in the middle of the female symbol.

There is also a photo of two WEL members resting on the lawn at the back of the Women's House in Griffith after screen printing, with the T-shirts spread out on the lawn to dry. On the right is Meredith Hinchliffe who is a well known figure today around the galleries and museums in Canberra. She calls this photo "The photo of my legs". If you look at it you will see what she means.



WEL members Kirsty McEwin and Meredith Hinchliffe (Photo Chris Ronalds)

As part of our campaign to attract new members we made bumper stickers. They were very popular in those days and you soon saw many WEL stickers travelling around

Canberra on cars with the message *Join Women's Electoral Lobby*. You can see one of these in the display cabinet, it is printed in black on orange .

On the flyer advertising this talk is the *Canberra Times* photo of our first demonstration. It shows WEL members outside the Coles Supermarket in Civic, which, of course, is not there today. Many WEL members today would be surprised to see this photo; I will explain why in a moment.



*L to R Patricia Fyfe (Rees), Dorothy Darroch (Broom), Barbara O'Dwyer, Margo Snyder (Collett).
(Photo Canberra Times)*

In the demonstration WEL members sorted out their weekly shopping in front of Coles. Unnecessary packaging, plastic bags etc, was put in a trolley with the notice, “Rubbish. You pay for it.” Glass and tin containers were put in other trolleys with information about where to take them for recycling.

The demonstration received good coverage on the Channel 9 national news, as well as in the *Canberra Times*.

Bea Faust criticised such activities as not being core feminist business. “You must stick to core feminist business” she said. WEL–ACT was undaunted,

however, it had been good publicity for WEL in Canberra and importantly attracted new members.

In the main our members were young married women with children. They were angry. Like me, they had experienced discrimination in their daily lives and were not going to put up with it any longer. What did they want? High on the list was available, affordable and good quality childcare; equal pay for work of equal value; cheap, reliable contraceptives and, as many were also members of the Abortion Law Reform Association, access to safe, legal abortion.

Very similar to the Women's Liberation demands, but to many they would appear more reasonable. For example, rather than free 24-hour child care, WEL was talking about available, affordable and good quality child care.

Next, WEL embarked on a program to educate the candidates and the public in general about what mattered to women in the ACT. We organised public education campaigns or "blitzes" on family planning and contraception; the employment problems of women in the ACT; lack of childcare; retraining opportunities for women; and discrimination and equal opportunity. We handed out well-researched information sheets on these topics, organised demonstrations and prepared press releases. We sent these to the press of course but also to relevant members of the government and opposition.

At this time WEL was spreading rapidly around Australia. In the display there is a photo of me talking to two of the office holders in Sydney, so you can see what I looked like in 1972. I was a glamorous young person with long hair, quite different to today.



L to R Gail Wilenski (Radford), Wendy McCarthy, June Surtees (Williams) discussing WEL business in Sydney. (Photo Wendy McCarthy)

Interviewing candidates

While WEL–ACT had been busy with education programs, WEL–Victoria had finalised the questionnaire for the candidates. WEL–ACT not only interviewed candidates for the ACT and surrounding electorates but also many sitting Members for other WEL groups. For the latter we used what I think of today as the Scarlet Pimpernel approach, “They seek him here, they seek him there.” etc.

When a sitting Member told the WEL group in his electorate that he was too busy in Canberra to be interviewed in his electorate, a WEL member from his electorate would phone WEL–ACT. We would then arrange to interview the Member here. However, if the Member told us that he was too busy with parliamentary business to see us before he had to return to his electorate, we would phone the WEL group in his electorate and tell them what plane their Member would be arriving on. A member of the local WEL group would meet him at the airport to arrange a time to interview him in the electorate. We had a

lot of success with these tactics, also a lot of fun.



1970s bumper stickers and poster in display (Photo Gail Radford)

The 1972 elections

The results of the WEL survey were analysed by WEL–Victoria and released in late November. Each WEL group released its own results. They were very newsworthy and received excellent publicity around Australia.

In the ACT Pat Eatock, a Black Liberation candidate, was given full marks and Kep Enderby, the sitting Member and Labor candidate, was second with 91%. On Election Day, 2 December 1972, WEL–ACT members handed out information sheets at the polling booths with summaries of the results of the WEL questionnaire for all ACT candidates.

Kep Enderby was returned. We had not expected Pat to win but she was the best candidate from our point of view. She had come to Canberra to join the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawn in front of Parliament House; as she had a baby with her we had invited her to live in the Women's House. As she says today, she learnt a lot about feminist politics because her bedroom was our meeting room and she had to stay up until the meetings were finished. In turn, she taught us a lot about black politics.

Gough Whitlam elected

WEL was delighted when Gough Whitlam, the newly elected Prime Minister, announced that he would meet a number of WEL's demands. WEL's agenda on contraception and family planning was to be implemented and the equal pay case before the Arbitration Commission was to be re-opened to support equal pay for work of equal value.

For me there were two surprises. The Prime Minister was to appoint an adviser on woman's affairs to his personal staff and my husband, Peter Wilenski, was to be his Principal Private Secretary!

Before the election Peter had taken leave from his public service job and prepared material for Gough. I had not taken much interest in this work, nor realised its significance, as I had been so busy with WEL, vet practice and starting work as a Research Assistant in the Zoology Department at the Australian National University. My only contribution to Peter's work had been suggesting that Gough should have an adviser on women's affairs on his staff!

There was no summer holiday for WEL–ACT in January 1973, as it organised WEL's first national conference in the middle of a heat wave. Women came to the conference from all over Australia. They stayed up all night talking, excited by WEL's successful first year, little realising that there would be years and years of hard work to follow.

Now back to the display. You will have seen a large purple Superwoman T-shirt dominating the display. Women who were short-listed for the job on Whitlam's staff came to Canberra in March 1973. The press had said that the one chosen would have to be a "Superwoman".

Our screen-printers whipped off to the workshop and made each of the candidates a Superwoman T-shirt. A Canberra woman, Elizabeth Reid, was appointed to the job.



Never ones to let a marketing opportunity slip by, we made more Superwoman T-shirts and sold them to raise money for the rent at the Women's House. They were very popular!

Wife of the Whitlam entourage

1973 was also a very busy year for me. In addition to my other activities I had wifely duties again, this time not as a diplomatic wife but, due to Peter's job, as a wife of the Whitlam entourage. I attended dinners at the Lodge and other social events with Ministers and other movers and shakers in the Government. These provided great opportunities for lobbying.

I remember one occasion when I had reluctantly agreed to go to lunch at the Lodge, too busy I said. Peter assured me that it would be an informal affair. I turned up in a Women's Liberation T-shirt and jeans to find it that it was a formal and important lunch with Rupert Murdoch and his wife. Once again I was a failure as a wife. But Margaret Whitlam stepped into the breach. "Look at Gail" she said, "wearing the peace symbol".

On another occasion I was at discussions about Whitlam's proposed visit to China, when the Chinese Ambassador leaned forward to us and said perhaps the wives might like to visit China. I piped up that I would be very interested to look at the position of women in China. As a result I had a very interesting and informative trip. I was very impressed with their work based child care, crèches for sick children at work, how they gave due recognition to retired workers when they visited factories and how these retired workers looked after the children when they returned home after school.

Back in Canberra my feminist friends were very interested to hear about my trip. China was not a tourist destination in those days. It was very difficult to visit.

I also followed my research interests in China. I visited scientists who were working on the physiology of acupuncture. They could not speak English and I could not speak Chinese, but scientists have a way of communicating. As we peered down microscopes, the interpreters gave up and went and had a cup of tea. For a number of years they sent me papers about their work. This astounded Peter, as China was a very closed society at this time.

Legislative Assembly elections 1974



But I digress, back to the Nation's Capital. There are a few other items in the display that I want to mention before I close.

A small one, that may have escaped your attention, is the WEL How to vote card for the ACT Legislative Assembly elections in 1974.

This is important for a number of reasons.

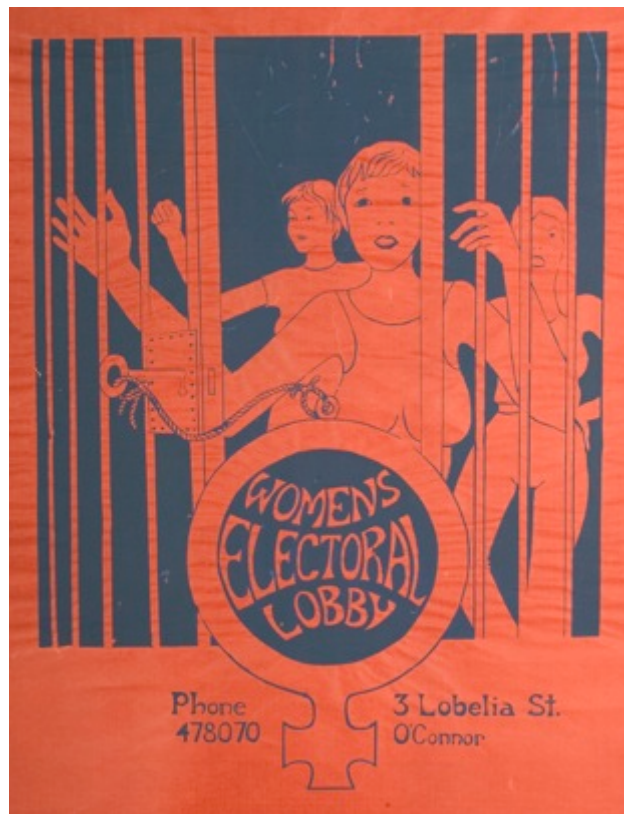
- It shows that WEL in Canberra concentrated on local as well as Federal elections.
- It was the first election for the ACT Legislative Assembly. Before that there had been an ACT Advisory Council with elected and appointed Members.
- The two candidates that WEL recommended, Susan Ryan and Ros Kelly were both elected to the Legislative Assembly. They were the first women to sit on the Assembly.
- Susan sat on the Assembly for two years before being elected to the Senate. Ros served a full term and was then elected to the House of Representatives.

- Susan had been one of WEL's Deputy Convenors in 1972 and Ros joined WEL at a later stage.

International Women's Year-1975

Now let's fast forward to 1975 International Women's Year.

The Women's House had moved to Lobelia St in O'Connor. In the display is a photo of a red poster with women opening the bars of a cage. It is advertising WEL at the new address. The design is by Carol Ambrus; she was the artist of the Women's Movement in Canberra, she taught us to screen-print and designed many posters and T-shirts, including the Superwoman T-shirt. She is still living in Canberra, in the depths of Tuggeranong, and still exhibiting her work today.



Poster design by Carol Ambrus

In many ways the artists are the unsung heroines of the Women's Movement. I am constantly amazed at their energy and creativity. Another is Julie McCarron-

Benson, who said to me at WEL's 40th anniversary dinner in November 2012 "I must paint your portrait." When I returned from summer holidays she said, "We must get on with this right away, I have already booked the carrier to take it to the Archibald." "What?" I said, "You are going to enter a painting of me and my dog in the Archibald Prize?" This is what she did. I think that it is a better likeness of the dog than me, but let that pass.

1975 was the year that WEL decided to question its effectiveness. Fed up with the slow pace of change, particularly within the bureaucracy and parliament in Canberra, members decided that they must work from within as well as lobbying from outside.



The T-shirt in the display "Make policy not coffee" was the harbinger of things to come. Women wanted to be in a position to make the policy. Some, as I have mentioned, stood for election to the parliament, others, myself included, decided to work in the bureaucracy.

(Photo Rob Little)

Equal Employment Opportunity

This brings me to the next phase of my life in Canberra. In 1975 I saw a job advertised in the Public Service Board, the Director of Equal Employment Opportunity. I applied for this job and then left for the two International Women's Year Conferences, one at the International Labour Organisation in Geneva and the second the United Nations Conference in Mexico. It was while I was in Mexico in June 1975 that I was told that I was going to be given the EEO job.

I had been sitting on the National Committee on Discrimination in Employment and Opportunity since 1973, where we had been dealing with discrimination on a case-by-case basis. I thought that there must be a better way to overcome discrimination in the workplace, so went from Mexico to Washington and Ottawa to look at the operation of EEO programs in North America. I resolved to introduce these into Australia. In short, this is what I did.

It took time, of course, and many enthusiastic staff members helped me. There is no time to talk about it today. Sufficient to say that I joined the Public Service Board in October 1975 and continued to work on EEO until I left Canberra to take up a position at UNESCO in Paris in June 1992. I should point out that these programs were not only for women, but also for Aboriginal Australians, people with disabilities and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

There are two publications in the display as a gesture to this period of my life in Canberra. They are in the display cabinet in front of the Women's Liberation T-shirt. One is a report on progress with the EEO programs at the time that the Public Service Board was abolished in July 1987. The second is a report of the Public Service Commission, where I worked after the Board was abolished.

Before I close, however, I want to tell you how I started in the public service under a bit of a cloud. This was due to my husband's association with the Whitlam government, which by late 1975 was not as popular as it had been when first elected, particularly with the Murdoch press.

My appointment to the EEO job was leaked to the press during the big Women and Politics Conference, which was held at the Australian National University in September 1975. The press attacked me for ten days, "jobs for the girls" they screamed.

The conference had been receiving bad press and the attack on me was the final straw. Women marched into Civic and staged a sit-in in the offices of the *Canberra Times*!

Still, every cloud has a silver lining. Rupert Murdoch entered my life again. I sued one of his newspapers and obtained enough money to buy a small yellow Honda car. I called it Rupert Bear and drove around Canberra in it for a number of years!

Return to the Australian National University

I returned to Canberra in the early 2000s to work with Professor Marian Sawer at the ANU on a book on the history of WEL. I have talked about WEL's first few years in Canberra but if you want to learn more about WEL's history you should read our book, *Making women count: a history of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia*.

For those who would like to read something shorter I have some copies here of a paper I wrote for the Australian Women's Archive Project on the history of the first forty years of WEL in Canberra.

I am still in Canberra, researching and writing, but concentrating on discrimination in employment and on the history of Equal Employment Opportunity in Australia.