

## **Women's Changing Conception of Political Power\***

*Professor Marilyn Lake*

Today I would like to talk about the history of women's political thought in this country, in order to identify the discursive frameworks that gave meaning to the political careers of women such as Edith Cowan, Dorothy Tangney and Carmen Lawrence. I would also like to say something about the gendered traditions of political power that have shaped women's modes of doing politics and the ways in which the history of politics has been understood and misunderstood. This year is the 75th anniversary of Cowan's election (as an endorsed Nationalist, that is Liberal, candidate) to the Western Australian Parliament in 1921; and it is fifty-three years since Dorothy Tangney was elected to the Senate as a Labor representative from Western Australia in 1943; fifty-three years since people gathered in the Senate galleries to hear, to witness, a woman speak in the Senate. There seemed to be much anxiety about her speech—her 'voice' and 'delivery', could she actually speak? How would she speak? Would she shriek or would she whisper? It was almost as if some men had never heard a woman speak before—and maybe, in truth, they hadn't. In the event, there was relief all round, because even though suffering from influenza, the senator moved the Address-in-Reply—so the papers reported—in a 'clear, well-modulated voice' and she delivered her speech with 'confidence'. Fellow senators congratulated this university graduate and teacher on her 'fluency' and 'thoughtfulness'.<sup>1</sup>

I recently read Senator Tangney's parliamentary speeches for myself and found them not only fluent and thoughtful, but full of startling contemporary relevance. Tangney, a gifted

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\* This article is based on a lecture given by Professor Lake in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 20 September 1996. Professor Lake is a professor in the School of History, La Trobe University, Melbourne

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 25 September 1943; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 1943.

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scholarship student who matriculated at fifteen, was a proud graduate of the University of Western Australia (she was particularly pleased to stress that it was, uniquely, a ‘free’ University) and in her contribution to the 1943 budget debate she made a passionate plea for increased public funding of universities. As we know, this is a very topical issue right now as another woman senator, Amanda Vanstone, presides over the worst cuts to university budgets since the war. I come from a university which has announced, as a consequence, that it will have to cut 250 staff. So I would like to share Senator Tangney’s remarks with you before proceeding to speak to my larger theme. ‘Assistance should be given’, she said,

... not only to university students, but also to the universities themselves, because we must look to the universities for our leaders in the arts and sciences. We must have leaders if we are to succeed as a democracy. We have now established the principle of equality of opportunity for university students, and we must also give some assistance to the universities themselves, most of which are floundering at present in financial difficulties. Yet their graduates must rise to international standards and obtain international recognition.

She stressed the implications of ill-funded universities for national life as a whole and finished with a flourish, reminding her listeners of the extent of government support for other items:

The Government subsidizes the production of wheat, pigs and almost everything under the sun. Why should it not subsidize brains?<sup>2</sup>

Why not indeed? Now it seems to me that Tangney’s speech should not only be remembered as a thoughtful and fluent document from 1943, but that it might be adopted as a veritable rallying cry by her successors in the Senate in 1996. Tangney’s speech might live again, as a ‘well-modulated’ rejoinder to the hysterical excesses of economic rationalism.

Dorothy Tangney is an interesting political figure, in that, like many Labor Party women before and since, she attempted to combine feminist values (though always disavowing the label) with the masculinist orientation of the Labor Party. She was a key proponent of Labor’s social security policy during World War Two and in her speech supporting the Unemployment and Sickness Benefits Bill in 1944, she simultaneously invoked that classic symbol of masculine degradation—the unemployed and dependent man—as well as the plight of the unpaid care-giver woman. Thus, on the one hand, she called up the experience of the Depression, when fathers (such as her own) were humiliated by their dependence on their daughters for their livelihood:

We must realize what a serious effect it would have on the morale of a man to be dependent upon his children for his means of livelihood, at a time when he was willing to work and employment could not be found for him.

On the other hand, she commended the Government for introducing what she called ‘a new phase of social security’ in the legislation—that is:

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<sup>2</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 14 October 1943, p. 550.

the protection which is being offered to young women who are forced to stay at home to care for aged and invalid parents.<sup>3</sup>

Tangney pointed out she had received 'hundreds of letters from women in that position' and argued that spinsters—whose work in caring for their parents prevented them from entering paid labour—were just as entitled to state support as were widows, women who had once married. In this recognition of both the importance of care work and of women's right to economic independence, Tangney joined a long tradition of political thought, a feminist tradition of political thought that had its beginnings in the early years of the twentieth century.

It is significant I think that in these social security discourses of the 1940s men were being promised 'freedom' (as they so often are)—freedom from want, freedom from fear—while women were being offered 'protection'. It is significant, too, that while unemployment benefits **were** introduced at that time, incomes for single women who gave up their lives to caring for their parents, as argued for by Tangney, were not. As the Melbourne *Herald* reported on her departure from politics in 1968:

She went in fighting and came out the same way for still unsuccessful causes—equal pay for women, legal aid for deserted wives, pensions for spinsters who stay home to look after elderly parents ...<sup>4</sup>

Tangney was not well rewarded by her Labor colleagues. As another newspaper reported, she had not been offered a ministry during the six years of Labor government or even a shadow post during the next nineteen years in opposition, despite being much better qualified than most of her male colleagues. Asked about the prospects of other Labor women, she replied as she departed: 'I am sorry for the women of the party'.<sup>5</sup>

Dorothy Tangney's significance is usually defined in 'first woman' terms; the first woman in the Senate, the first Western Australian woman to enter federal Parliament, the first Labor woman in the federal Parliament. These are very much male definitions I think: the standard of relevance is masculine. I would like to offer a different perspective and suggest that it might be more illuminating to see Tangney's political career as the end of a story, rather than its beginning, or, rather, as the culmination of a well-established tradition of women's politics, a tradition of protectionist politics that saw the role of the state as promoting the welfare of the people, and in particular taking care of the vulnerable, the weak and the defenceless. But as a Labor politician, Tangney also attempted a cross-over in extending 'social security' to vulnerable men and she continually stressed the mutuality of men's and women's interests.

Tangney thus announced in her Address-in-Reply:

... it is not as a woman that I have been elected to this chamber. It is as a citizen of the Commonwealth; and I take my place here with the full privileges and rights of all honorable senators ...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 6 February 1944, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Herald* (Melbourne), 5 June 1968, p.21.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 24 September 1943, p. 30.

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But almost despite herself she returned again and again in her representations to the needs of women, ‘man-powered’ women, stranded women, women deserted in the United States by bigamous US servicemen. Tangney joined a long line of women activists who imagined the state as their own surrogate, as a projection of the maternal selves: protecting, nurturing, caring for life that was all too fragile. As the leading NSW organisation, United Associations of Women, formed in 1929, explained in its ‘Aims and Objects’:

Woman’s point of view is not the same as man’s. Her sense of values is different, she places a greater value on human life, human welfare, health and morals. The changed attitude of people to these questions which has taken place in countries where women have the vote can be attributed to the more direct influence of women. It behoves women to use their power to the fullest extent possible to bring greater security and happiness into the lives of the whole community.<sup>7</sup>

We might notice in this assessment of womanpower, that power was to be realized in the use of the vote as women’s major collective resource; but there is also an assertion that the story of women’s politics is a story of **success**. Women’s political activism, the UAW asserts, had produced ‘the changed attitude of people to these questions’—the questions of human welfare, life, health and morality.

I want to endorse this assessment in proposing—contrary to popular wisdom—that the story of women and politics in twentieth century Australia is a story of **success**. I want to thus challenge what I have called elsewhere the ‘women-as-political-failures’ thesis.<sup>8</sup> Women have a long tradition of effective political activity in this country and a distinctive tradition of political thought—they were vociferous in articulating their ideas about citizenship and government—but all this has been rendered invisible by masculinist definitions and histories of politics. What research shows, however, is that women, in relationship with each other, forged a distinctive tradition of politics in this country. It was women who imagined the state in Australia as a welfare state—a protectionist state that would care for the vulnerable, the dependent, the weak. This project was premised on the understanding that men had failed in their pre-ordained role as women’s and children’s natural protectors, the role set out in nineteenth century elaborations of ‘separate spheres’ as found in texts such as John Ruskin’s ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’.<sup>9</sup> Men, feminists began to believe, were themselves too predatory for the task. As American feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, caustically observed: ‘As a matter of fact, the thing a woman is most afraid to meet on a street is her natural protector’.<sup>10</sup> Thus did feminists come to imagine a maternalist welfare state, in at least two senses: first, it focussed on the needs of mothers and children and asked what sort of society they needed and

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<sup>7</sup> United Associations of Women papers, Mitchell Library, ML MS 2160/Y4481.

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn Lake, ‘Feminist History as National History: Writing the Political History of Women’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 27, no. 106, April 1996.

<sup>9</sup> John Ruskin, *Of Queen’s Gardens* quoted in Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Rupert Hart Davis, London, 1969, pp. 91-6.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Marilyn Lake, ‘Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 49, October 1996.

how they might best prosper, and second, it understood women's nurturing capacities as providing them with special qualifications to shape national life and work as agents for the state. It was an effective politics in that it brought together the protectionist mission of Australian feminism—forged in the conditions of a colonial frontier society—and the distinctively Australian view of the state as an emancipatory force.<sup>11</sup> It was a politics whose early successes were cause for national pride, as was evident in the boast of labour activist, Lilian Locke Burns, in 1919:

In no other part of the civilised world, as far as one can ascertain, is so much being done by the State in the way of providing for mothers and children as in the Australian Commonwealth ... In Great Britain and some other countries which lay claim to some share in democratic reforms, the mothers are only protected (if protection it may be called) under some form of social insurance. In the American States also very little has been done so far in this direction beyond some attention to delinquent children and the usual institutional efforts that we find in most countries which have evolved beyond the barbaric stage. Neither in England nor America do we hear of any such humanitarian provision as the Australian maternity allowance ...<sup>12</sup>

A similar politics informed the campaigns of white women activists for Aboriginal reform in the 1920s and 1930s, campaigns which, again, are barely known about today. Women such as Mary Montgomery Bennett, Bessie Rischbieth and Edith Jones worked tirelessly to achieve land and educational rights for Aboriginal people, recognition of women's bodily integrity and the rights of citizenship.<sup>13</sup> They led the way in demanding that Aboriginal affairs be made a Commonwealth responsibility, a cause later to be espoused by Dorothy Tangney in the Senate. Mary Bennett explained her efforts to render Aboriginal girls economically independent in a letter to her colleague, Bessie Rischbieth, president of the Australian Federation of Women Voters:

The money thus earned goes back to the workers. It is enough that the women and girls can be self-supporting and are self-supporting. Economic dependence is the root of all evil ... But the women intrinsically are fine and ready for a position of respect and independence. This is why I have asked that they shall be permitted to invoke and obtain the protection of the law of the land.<sup>14</sup>

This was the point of political action for these feminists; to obtain from the state the protection of the law of the land, specifically to demand that the state provide for the economic independence of women, all women, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, mothers and

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Labor Call*, 26 June 1919, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Fiona Paisley, 'Ideas have Wings; White Women Challenge Aboriginal Policy 1920-37' Ph.D. thesis, Women's Studies, La Trobe University 1995; Fiona Paisley, "'Don't Tell England'! Women of Empire Campaign to Change Aboriginal Policy in Australia Between the Wars', *Lilith*, 8, Summer 1993; Fiona Paisley, 'Feminist Challenges to White Australia 1900-1930s' in Diane Kirkby (ed.), *Sex, Power and Justice*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Rischbieth papers, National Library of Australia, MS 2004/12/23.

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non-mothers. Thus did they push, from Edith Cowan through to Dorothy Tangney, across parties and across states, for equal pay in the workforce and state payment for those who performed the vital work of caring for the young and the old, the sick and the disabled.<sup>15</sup>

The heyday of this women's politics—the golden age of women's citizenship—occurred in the post-suffrage decades—between 1910 and 1950—during the **very** years usually written off as a trough between the two 'waves' of feminism which we are always hearing about. It was in fact during these middle years—the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s—that women's citizens' organisations and an amateur mode of doing politics flourished—in autonomous non-party groups such as the Women's Service Guild, the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the United Associations of Women, the Feminist Club, the Victorian Women Citizens' Association, the Housewives' Associations, the National Council of Women and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union—and overseas in the British Commonwealth League and the Pan-Pacific Congress based in Honolulu. Thus the 1943 Charter Conference was attended by representatives of ninety different women's groups.

Thousands of women citizens were engaged in different forms of participatory politics in these years. As women citizens, they developed distinctive goals and different modes of doing politics. Their campaigns were led by dedicated, vociferous and energetic 'amateur politicians' such as Rose Scott, Vida Goldstein, Muriel Heagney, Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street, Edith Jones, Ruby Rich, Edith Waterworth, Mary Bennett and Cecilia Downing. Downing was president of the Federated Association of Australian Housewives, which, with 139 999 members in 1940, was the largest women's organisation in Australia. As its historian, Judith Smart, has noted, while Downing has all but disappeared from public memory, the name of contemporaries such as Edith Lyons survives (and indeed has a new lease of life, we hear, in 'the Lyons Group'). The reason, says Smart, is clearly that Lyons was known in the masculine public domain of parliamentary politics.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, masculine conceptual and historiographical frameworks have rendered obscure the real political history of women.<sup>17</sup>

But did these women **do** anything? What did they achieve? (Women are always being told we don't 'do' anything—men used to explain that we were not in History, because we hadn't 'done' anything. And they say this to the 'weary sex', as William Lane rightly called women in his novel *The Workingman's Paradise*). So what did the activism of these citizen women achieve? In pursuit of their vision of protecting the vulnerable they campaigned successfully for a variety of reforms: the Maternity Allowance of 1912, free maternal and infant welfare clinics, women's hospitals, limits to the availability of alcohol, censorship of sexually explicit films and literature, women's rights to bodily integrity, child endowment (first in New South Wales and then federally in 1941), children's courts, and the appointment of women to a range of public positions in which women and girls might otherwise fall into men's hands. That is, feminists first worked to have women appointed to public positions, not as a right of access to 'careers', but as a way to protect the vulnerable; they were successful in securing the

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<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'The Independence of Women and the Brotherhood of Man', *Labour History*, no. 63, November 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Smart, "'For the Good That We Can Do': Cecilia Downing and Feminist Christian Citizenship' *Australian Feminist Studies*, no. 19, Autumn 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'Feminist History as National History', *op. cit.*

appointment of women as police officers, gaol warders, doctors, lawyers, magistrates, justices of the Children's Court, members of juries, factory inspectors, health inspectors. When Bessie Rischbieth set out to record the political history of women in her 1964 book *March of Australian Women* she also emphasised these sorts of reforms: 'The preoccupation of these groups as voters has had a direct bearing upon legislative enactments, such as State Children's Acts—the establishment of Children's Courts—the appointment of Women Police—the inclusion of women as Justices of the Peace—and women on Jury Service'.<sup>18</sup>

This is the untold story of the women's welfare state mobilised to protect the vulnerable, especially women and girls, from degradation, from violence, at men's hands. We are all more familiar with the story of the men's welfare state, the Labor story whose mission was to rescue men from the degradations inflicted by capitalism—especially the degradation of unemployment. But because women in the past determined their political goals in frameworks now deemed unprogressive, as historian Jill Roe has remarked, it has perhaps been difficult for feminists today, as well as men, to recognise their political achievements as such.<sup>19</sup> The Maternity Allowance of 1912, for example, has often been dismissed as a patriarchal pro-natalist bribe, a bribe to women to have more babies—a Baby Bonus—but Labor women (whose victory it was) were in no doubt about its meaning. Labor women applauded the Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, for conferring 'this instalment of the mother's maternal rights, and we hope', they said, 'when the finances permit, to also have a child pension'.<sup>20</sup>

Labor women led the way in formulating a political platform that would both provide social/cultural recognition of the work of mothering, as well as economic independence for all women.<sup>21</sup> The radical and threatening aspect of their programme was their plan to disconnect motherhood from wifehood, that is, they objected to the idea that the cost of mothering should be dependence on a husband. Women shouldn't have to choose between mothering and economic independence, they said, and they shouldn't have to combine the arduous work of care with work in the labour market, because that was a recipe for exhaustion, that was why William Lane called women 'the weary sex' and that was why Labor women coined the slogan 'One Woman One Job'. Thus did Labor and trade unionist women such as Muriel Heagney, Lilian Locke Burns, Jean Daley and Nelle Rickie call for motherhood endowment as state income to pay for women's work of care; and it was a goal eagerly taken up by Nationalist candidate, Edith Cowan, in 1921, who also advocated equal pay, the appointment of women justices to children's courts, women's right to practice as lawyers, and as we shall see, a reduction in the number of politicians.

This women's political tradition, which crossed party lines and was advocated inside parliaments and outside, which was espoused by Edith Cowan at the beginning of the period and Dorothy Tangney at the end, and by many many women in between, was animated by

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<sup>18</sup> Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, 1964, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Jill Roe, 'Chivalry and Social Policy in the Antipodes', *Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 88, April 1987, pp. 402–5.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1996, p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'The Independence of Women and the Brotherhood of Man', op. cit.

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twin principles: that the state should recognise and pay for women's work of caring and that all women should be rendered economically independent of men, whether their husbands or fathers. These demands posed radical challenges to conventional political economy and to masculine privilege and not surprisingly neither was successful. During the 1920s, however, activist women, confident of the justice of their cause and of the rights of citizens, considered they were on the brink of victory. In 1927 a Royal Commission was appointed to enquire into the feasibility and desirability of childhood and motherhood endowment. Hundreds of women rallied to give evidence. Most stressed the rights of the woman citizen and her child. Often the male Royal Commissioners and the women witnesses seemed to talk past each other—for while the female witnesses referred to the 'mother' or the 'woman citizen', the Royal Commissioners spoke continually of 'the wife'—(in that wonderful Australian way, as in 'the wife couldn't be here today'). The Royal Commissioners were clearly astonished at the feminist programme. Thus did this exchange take place between feminist, Irene Longman, who would also enter Parliament, and the Royal Commissioners:

'Your theory is that the State should pay the wife for services rendered to the State?' 'Yes, we say that her services to the state are as great as those of the men, and therefore, that those services should be paid for as an independent economic unit.'

The Commissioners were aghast:

'Women could live apart from their husbands? ... That is an alteration of the existing conditions.'

'Yes, absolutely. It is revolutionary, and that is what we wish.'<sup>22</sup>

This exchange stands as a moment of triumph in the political history of women and a gesture of defiance, but ultimately the women were unsuccessful in this most radical of demands. The Royal Commissioners decided against a scheme of motherhood endowment as it would indeed have constituted, as they said in their report, a 'revolution in the family'—the ending of the wife's dependence on the husband would undermine the 'organic unity of the family.'<sup>23</sup>

The significance of this tradition of political thought is in its definition of the meaning of 'welfare' from the perspective of women's experience of the world: the demand for a social order that recognised the facts of human interdependence—people's need for care—alongside people's right to independence and individuality. Such a definition of welfare also suggests a different sort of Charter of Rights incorporating 'the right to care' and 'the right to independence', applicable to everyone, to men and women. The right to care should not be allowed to cancel out the right to independence and vice versa. And the 'care' in right to care should be understood as both verb and noun—that is people should neither be denied their right to care for others, nor be denied their own right to be cared for.

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<sup>22</sup> Australia. Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances. *Minutes of Evidence*. Parliamentary Paper, 1929, vol II, pp. 7–8; quoted in Marilyn Lake, 'A Revolution in the Family; the Challenge and Contradictions of Maternal Citizenship in Australia' in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (eds), *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

What conclusions then might we draw for today?

First, a feminist politics worth the name must attempt to incorporate the subjectivities and interests of women who aspire to lead lives in the public world of politics, paid work and the professions as well as those who spend much of their lives at home caring for others, for the disabled, for children, old people, those who are emotionally, psychologically or physically unwell. Otherwise these real divisions between women will be successfully exploited by other brands of politics, as is beginning to happen now. Historically, feminism has swung away from a maternalist, broadly humanitarian orientation towards a woman-focussed individualism and interest in self-fulfilment. In reaction against older maternalist ideologies, post-60s feminism embarked on a project of self-expression, that to many today resembles masculine self-aggrandisement.

As a result feminists sometimes seem better able to deal with racial, class and sexual differences (at least at the conceptual and rhetorical levels) than with what we might call the difference of desire, the desire to stay at home and care for children and the desire to leave the home and pursue a profession. To regain ground, feminist politics, I would suggest, must speak to those different desires, to the experience of self-sacrifice as well as the ambition for self-fulfilment.

Second, although this politics of welfare about which I have spoken was once a women's politics, it need not be so. 'Women in politics' is no substitute for a political program. Putting women into Parliament is no substitute for re-thinking our social goals and how we might achieve them. It is the vision we need to recapture, the idea and the ideal of a compassionate state that attends to the complexity of human beings, all of whom are at once independent and inter-dependent. One result of more women entering Parliament has been to subsume women's agendas into the broader economic agendas of the major political parties; and the increasing importance of women in the leadership of the market-driven Liberal Party effectively makes the point that women do not 'naturally' favour a welfare state. It has been interesting to observe how, in Victoria, Liberal Attorney-General Jan Wade has sought to address women's concerns about their physical safety within the framework of Liberal Party politics.

Third, feminists in the middle decades of the twentieth century made much of their rights and responsibilities as citizens—and political activity was conceptualised as an expression of citizenship. Politics was a form of public service and there was no real distinction drawn between women's activities inside and outside parliaments. As Marian Simms has noted, when Edith Cowan entered the Western Australian Parliament, she was already a member of twenty-four other community organisations.<sup>24</sup> So whereas men heralded Cowan and Tangney as 'firsts', from women's perspective they continued to be activist citizens like themselves. As we noted, Dorothy Tangney declared proudly that she entered the Senate as a 'citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia'. Perhaps we might honour women's tradition of political thought by renewing the vision of politics as a service rendered by citizens, rather than a career in pursuit of ever larger emoluments. In a recent article in the *Age*, Judith Brett

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<sup>24</sup> Marian Simms, 'Edith Cowan: Feminist or Philanthropist?' in Brian de Garis (ed.), *Fred Alexander: A Tribute*, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA, 1988, p. 78.

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deplored the ever increasing tendency of politicians to act as if their parliamentary careers were mere preludes to the serious business of life, making serious money. 'Although the public is willing to pay its parliamentarians', she wrote, 'it does not like to think that the main reason they stand for election is the self-interested chance of the salary, perks and contacts for a future post-parliamentary life. The public likes to believe that its representatives are motivated by the desire to serve the public ...'<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Edith Cowan thought the same and one of her campaign planks in 1921 was the 'reduction in numbers of members of parliament and no further increases in salary'.<sup>26</sup> No wonder she lost her pre-selection!

In this brief review of the history of women's political thought it has become clear that conceptions of political power have changed quite dramatically. Once conceptualised as a collective resource, symbolised by and actualised in the vote, political power is now, as often as not, spoken of as something to be acquired individually by women through affirmative action programmes. Thus to Carmen Lawrence writing in 1994, the 'expansion of the political consciousness of Australian women' meant not their increased discussion about human welfare of the organisation of work or enhanced opportunities for self-government at all levels of their lives, but an increase in the 'numbers of women ... gaining political office and rising to positions of real power'.<sup>27</sup> In this scenario political power is conceptualised as the preserve of a few.

In conclusion then, I would suggest, now that parliamentary politics is no longer seen to be an expression of citizenship, but a choice of career, it becomes ever more urgent that all the rest of us reclaim our citizenship and initiate discussion about the welfare of our society and the people in it, about the means to achieve the security and freedom of the many, rather than the aggrandisement of a few, about the best means to empower the community and enjoy our 'commonwealth'.

**Questioner** — The question I would like to ask, inspired by your brilliant retrospective, is that both from the human rights point of view and as an expression of political maturity in this country, I feel that in the next millennium we should start off by having a 50/50 representation of women both in positions of power in politics and also in senior government offices. Would you like to comment?

**Professor Lake** — Yes, I think that is a terrific idea. Actually, one of George Bernard Shaw's suggestions for reform many decades ago was that if each electorate had two representatives, one always to be a woman, that would also achieve that. Yes, I would like to say that a 50/50 representation is important for two reasons. One is, of course, that it is not a truly democratic government until both sexes are equally represented, and secondly, to revert to the last part of what I was saying, precisely because professional politics is a career, woman should have equal opportunity to that, just as they should have equal opportunity to all other careers. But I suppose what I would also like to say is that that is not enough. It is not enough to focus on that as the goal. Rather we have to do some serious hard thinking about the sort of society we

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Brett, 'How Much Should a Member of Parliament be Paid?', *Age*, 30 August 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Cowan, *A Unique Position: A Biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan, 1861–1932*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Carmen Lawrence, 'Personal Comment', *Australian Feminist Studies* 19, Autumn 1994, p. 10.

want to build in the next millennium—what its organising principles will be—and that is much more difficult and it requires much more work.

**Questioner** — Germaine Greer recently wrote a provocative article, that you might have seen, in which she said that for women to have sufficient numbers in any institution, to actually have some power, would indicate that that institution itself had lost power, that power had moved on. I am just wondering what you think about that idea?

**Professor Lake** — Yes, indeed that has often been said. I think the economist, Margaret Power, long ago made that point about women moving into professions or into jobs—that as soon as the numbers reached a certain point men all departed. And so, yes, that also could be applicable, I suppose, to the campaigns that might be increasingly successful to get women into Parliament. It is nevertheless important to persist with those campaigns. The discourse on power is extremely interesting, I think. I have just been re-reading Mary Wollstonecraft, back in 1792, and interestingly she had quite a different take on power, that is that she said women had lots and lots of power, it is just that it was illegitimate power. That is, that they had lots of power by virtue of their sexuality, by virtue of their position in the home, by virtue of their relationship to men, it was just that that was a sort of discredited illegitimate form of power.

What I am saying, I suppose, is that power is much more complex, I think, than the discourse about women getting power implies, and that there are many sources of power, and that as the early feminists said, there is also a huge amount of power in a democracy in our vote, and I think it is really important that Australia still has compulsory voting by the way; I think that is an immensely progressive force that we should retain.

The issue of the representation of women in Parliament is extremely complex because it is so tied up to deeper things about the division between public and private life, and it is actually one of those processes where the concrete products of previous historical decisions, that is, for example, the decision to have the national capital here in Canberra, miles away from where the majority of women and men live, was an extremely gendered decision. I mean, it had enormous implications for women's participation in politics which were not, I think, realised and discussed at the time. They were realised, interestingly, by Rose Scott, and one of the reasons she opposed federation, was because she saw, as she kept saying again and again in the 1890s that a big, new national capital would remove power from the hands of women. She was extremely prescient on that issue.

**Questioner** — Professor Lake, do you believe that more women in Parliament will lead to a greater degree or expression of citizenship?

**Professor Lake** — My whole talk was about that. I would like to stress citizenship as being a much, much more complex and various activity. I think, as I said, we should all regain our active citizenship, that citizenship involves political participation at all levels of our lives, and that more women in Parliament is just one level, I suppose.

**Questioner** — There is an assumption that is being put forward by many women, that just by the mere fact that greater numbers of women are in Parliament, it will reflect this sensitivity that women are seen to have.

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**Professor Lake** — Indeed, I know that assumption well. As I said, as history moves on, I mean, in Victoria where we have had fierce Liberal women in power for some time who do terrible things to the welfare state, one cannot any longer believe that women have particular values in that regard, or particular sensitivities.

**Questioner** — Professor Lake, a question to do with social education in view of our media today. How do you see the role of social education educating, if you like, the citizens in regard to what you have discussed today?

**Professor Lake** — Yes, well that is an interesting question. Flying up on the plane, I happened to read Stuart Macintyre's essay on the results of the civic expert group that he chaired and the report that they did about how to incorporate citizenship and civics into education. He did not come up with any precise answers, but he thought it was a very good thing, and I do too. It is a complicated thing, and I have participated in workshops in which teachers talk about how to do it, and what more can I say, except that I think that we all have to be encouraged to have greater faith and optimism in our capacities as citizens. One of the interesting things about this women's activism which, as I said, flourished in the 1910s and '20s and '30s, was precisely because they were still very optimistic, they were elated, they didn't take for granted their citizenship, they thought they were immensely empowered.

**Questioner** — I think it would help women in politics and politics generally if there were to be an all-up limit of office in Parliament of about ten to twelve years. Would you care to comment?

**Professor Lake** — Yes, that is a really interesting point. I was thinking about that myself when I was sketching the history of the way that there has been a quite dramatic shift in our understanding of what a career in politics is about, from 1900 to today. It is quite dramatic, and this has been written about in other countries as well, similar countries like Canada. That is the professionalisation of politics, for a start, and secondly, there are limits on people being in other sorts of terms of office. I think that is absolutely right. I agree with that precisely, because I think for politics to return to being seen as a form of citizen's service, it cannot be continually seen as a lucrative career which will provide you well in the afterlife.