

*We've come a long way  
but we're not there yet*



**The History  
Organisation  
and**

**Achievements of  
WEL NSW**

**Women's Electoral Lobby NSW Inc**

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***Joan Bielski AO***

The author, *Joan Bielski AO*, has been a member of WEL NSW since it was founded in 1972. She was active on education and training issues and the nexus between education and employment. She was a Research Officer of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships (1974-1977) and in 1977 she was appointed by the NSW Government to implement its policy of equal opportunity in education and training to counter discrimination against women and girls. On retirement in 1984 she continued to work for WEL. In 1992 she was instrumental in WEL initiating the Women Into Politics coalition of women's organisations, whose objective is to lobby the political parties to include more women in the executive levels of their organisational structures and to select more women for winnable seats in our parliaments. Joan was awarded the AM in 1988 for services to women and girls' education and was made an Officer of the Order of Australia, AO, in 2004 for services to women in political life.

# HISTORY of WEL NSW

**Women's Electoral Lobby NSW** is the NSW self-incorporated branch of WEL Australia. It is proud of its many years of advocacy for women's rights and of the many reforms which have resulted from that advocacy.

From the start, WEL has been a non-party national political organisation. It is dedicated to creating a society where women's potential is realised, where women's participation in all aspects of society is acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards.

## How WEL began

In March 1972, **Beatrice Faust**, a Melbourne academic and abortion reform advocate, addressed a meeting in Sydney at the house of **Julia Freebury**, the Sydney organiser of the Abortion Law Reform Association, about forming a women's lobby for the purpose of interviewing all candidates for the 1972 federal elections about their attitudes to issues being enunciated by the Women's Liberation Movement. She said that such a lobby group had already formed in Melbourne. After discussion, **Caroline Graham**, **June Surtees** (now **Williams**) and **Wendy McCarthy** agreed to become co-convenors. The founding members were already connected through their involvement in childbirth education, women's health issues, abortion law reform and Women's Liberation. They contacted other women through these networks and the first public meeting was held on 17 June 1972; 40 women attended. Within six months, attendance at meetings in Sydney was more than 100 and by January 1973, it had 670 members and WEL branches were established in every state.

Women from all walks of life were joining. They tended to be in their early 30s, married, many with small children and working in and trained for 'feminine' white-collar occupations such as teaching, nursing and office work – the lot of most women in mid 20th century Australia. A few were academics, whose research skills were later to ensure that WEL's submissions, such as that to the Poverty Enquiry in the early 1970s, were accurate and well argued. A few older women, such as **Edna Ryan**, had been activists in education, local government and union circles and brought their expertise and their well-developed political skills to the organisation. Others quickly developed the political skills necessary to make submissions on policy issues, organise meetings and conferences, write for the media, address public meetings, and to speak on radio and TV. They also quickly learned to trust one another and to trust the skills and expertise members brought to the organisation. All felt for the first time an excitement never experienced before, of working with other women for their own and their sisters' betterment.

Neither side of politics welcomed WEL, each trying to label it and hinting that it was a front for the other side. Unions saw WEL as 'meddling in their business', i.e., meddling in matters they had not solved for their women members, from whom they had taken equal union fees for nearly a century.

WEL was quickly labelled as anti-family by clerics and conservative opinion makers but also criticised by some in the women's movement who saw it as 'too middle class' and 'reformist'. Anti-family WEL was not and never will be; it advocates for equality between spouses and partners, and between marrieds and singles. It was in part middle class in that members were predominantly white-collar workers. Reformist we were and proudly we still are. We accepted that Australia was and is

a conservative society and that reform must be fought for inch-by-inch and day-by-day, and that reform, not revolution, was the most likely way to win results.

In the early years, WEL NSW had the great good fortune to have **Barbara Coddington** as our volunteer co-ordinator. Barbara's superb administration underpinned all our efforts. Her skills made for successful meetings and conferences, ensured the action groups functioned, submissions were completed on time and that WEL always responded to the media. She kept the membership records and welcomed new members—the life-blood of the fast-growing organisation. Now a management committee carries out these functions.

## The Notorious Questionnaire for Candidates for the 1972 Federal Election

WEL's first major activity in 1972 was to develop a national questionnaire, to be put to each federal candidate standing for election, and to develop an interviewing technique that would ensure fairness to all candidates and parties.

A team of WEL members in Melbourne wrote the questionnaire, with substantial input from WEL NSW members, **Eva Cox, Edwina Doe** and **June Surtees**. Reluctant parliamentary candidates were interviewed by teams of two or three WEL members in each electorate. The results were collated and candidates rated for their understanding and commitment to women's issues. The results were published amid great excitement by the media, all eager to exploit the novelty of women publicly espousing views on issues previously thought to be too scandalous for frank public debate, such as abortion and fertility control, or else simply ignored, such as women's economic disadvantage and so on.

## Media Management

**Wendy McCarthy** organised what we only afterwards realised was a sophisticated media campaign to publicise the results of the WEL questionnaire. She ensured that national, state and local media all got exclusives. Many politicians were extremely discomfited by the publication of their poor ratings and some of their more inane and ill-considered responses to questions.

Ever since 1972 WEL NSW members have frequently participated in public debate in the media. Wendy McCarthy's 1972 debut, her media flair and media management skills set the standard and this meant that WEL was frequently in the news, always credible, in demand by the media as 'good talent'. Since then many members, such as **Eva Cox, Edna Ryan, June Surtees, Dorothy Simons, Joan Bielski, Helen Leonard, Jane Gardiner** and more recently **Sarah Maddison** have all been effective media performers on WEL's behalf. WEL NSW has always been able to put forward a skilful and articulate spokesperson with a feminist perspective on issues such as abortion, prostitution, sexual assault, education and employment.

## HOW WEL WORKS: ORGANISATION and ACHIEVEMENTS

WEL both initiates action on issues of relevance to women's equality and intervenes in public policy matters when women's interests are involved. All WEL branches and WEL National carry out their lobbying through submissions, media comment, letters and dialogue with governments.

Since 1972, WEL NSW has operated on the same lines as its sister WEL organisations in other states, working through a management committee and volunteer action groups and a national co-ordinating committee. WEL developed the concept of national and state action groups to pursue a specific issue as and when needed. WEL NSW has participated at the national level in the development of national policy through consultations, conferences and submissions to successive federal governments and has appeared for WEL Australia in the national industrial courts. WEL NSW has set up local action groups to pursue specific state issues such as lobbying for state anti-discrimination legislation (1975-77) or reform of the rape laws (1986-88) under the superb leadership of **Jocelyn Scutt**.

WEL action groups wax and wane as circumstances demand. On some of the more persistent issues, groups have hived off to become specialist lobbies in their own right. Child care, abortion and education are all areas where separate lobby groups have been set up. WEL state groups collaborate on particular issues as the need arises. Sometimes a state group which has expertise on a particular issue will act for all states. WEL maintains a watching brief on all women's issues and will act when a crisis occurs at national or state level. Campaigns include submissions, letters to key politicians and newspapers, and media articles.

An example of a state group acting for WEL Australia occurred when Victoria intervened in the 1995 High Court case of *CES vs Superclinics*, where women's right to abortion was challenged. WEL NSW immediately raised money from within its ranks to support WEL Victoria's *amicus curiae* intervention (as a 'friend of the court') in the case to ensure that women's right to abortion as a social and political issue was the focus of argument rather than the arguments of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Catholic Health Care Association. Consequently, the main litigant withdrew the case.

## **An Example of WEL In Action: The Industrial Relations Group**

An example of WEL trusting an issue to its own experts occurred when the late **Edna Ryan**, an experienced unionist, WEL NSW activist and women's workforce historian, acted for all states, appearing for WEL Australia in national industrial courts. Edna gathered around her an Industrial Action Group, made up of women with similar interests and skills, such as the late **Anne Conlon** and **June Surtees** (now **Williams** and until recently Commissioner for Equal Opportunity in WA). Together they developed WEL Australia's expertise on industrial issues and made many magnificent and significant contributions to improvements in women's workforce conditions.

It was an Australian first when WEL intervened 'in the public interest' in the Commonwealth Bank Officers case against the ANZ and Others to oppose the union's application to prevent the employment of part-time workers in banks and to obtain pro-rata pay, equal working conditions and career paths for part-time employees, mainly women, comparable to full-time employees. **June Williams** appeared for WEL NSW before the Arbitration Commission. Regrettably only the right to part-time work, without pro-rata pay and conditions, was won and women, the majority of part-timers, have been disadvantaged ever since. In the mid-1970s, however, WEL was already working to establish a family-friendly workplace.

In late 1973, **Edna Ryan** persuaded the federal Minister for Labour and Industry to agree that the Commonwealth would support the Australian Council of Trade Union's national wage case, if the ACTU would seek the extension of the male minimum wage to women. The ACTU did so and in February 1974, Edna presented WEL Australia's case to the National Wage Bench for the extension of the minimum wage to women. Again in 1978, as WEL's advocate, Edna argued, in meticulous detail, the case for maternity leave before the Full Bench of the Arbitration

Commission – this with only partial success. These reforms changed forever the industrial landscape for working women of all classes in Australia.

About this time WEL NSW also raised the then great sum of \$150 to obtain a barrister's opinion as to whether, under its foreign affairs powers and its international obligations, the Commonwealth had the right to legislate anti-discrimination legislation. When assured that the Commonwealth had such powers, WEL began lobbying the then Minister for Labour and Industry to enact such legislation. The government changed and the matter lapsed until 1984, when Senator **Susan Ryan**, a foundation member of WEL ACT and by then a Cabinet Minister in the Hawke government and Minister for Women was instrumental in having the Sex Discrimination Act enacted.

WEL remained strong and involved in industrial issues. In 1996, WEL NSW member **Juliet Richter** was very active as WEL's spokesperson in a coalition of women's groups which successfully campaigned for key amendments—among them adequate equal pay provisions and various anti-discrimination provisions—to the new Howard government's Workplace Relations Bill. Juliet, in the Edna Ryan tradition, was WEL's advocate before the Industrial Relations Commission, presenting submissions on discrimination in awards and on the impact of enterprise bargaining on women. In the late 1990s she was also WEL's advocate in the National Pay Equity Coalition before the Commission in the so-called award simplification hearings, as well as the next equal pay hearings. She was involved in the preparation of a joint National Pay Equity Coalition-WEL submission to the Pay Equity Inquiry conducted by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

## Other WEL NSW Campaigns

**From 1974 to 1976, WEL lobbied both major political parties to introduce legislation outlawing discrimination in NSW on the grounds of sex.**

WEL put forward a draft bill modelled on South Australian legislation. The substance of the draft, which eventually became law, was extended to cover discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity. Members active in this campaign included **Helen Coonan** (now federal Minister for Communications), **Lori Brennan, Joan Bielski, Di Ward, Anne Conlon** and **June Surtees** (now **Williams**). Lobbying on this issue meant many hilarious evenings were spent talking to uncomprehending male parliamentarians at Parliament House in Sydney. After a change of government, the Wran government passed the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act in 1977.

While WEL realised that the Act was an imperfect instrument for changing practices, customs and social attitudes, it was a public commitment to equality for women and has been the means of many women gaining redress in cases of discrimination. Major successful cases brought by women were the Port Kembla steel workers for equal treatment in conditions and promotions, in 1985, and the case brought by Melinda Leves in 1987 when she complained of discrimination against girls in technical education in NSW high schools. In the latter case, WEL NSW assisted Ms Leves with advice and raised the money to get the case into court and to pay for the expert witnesses. Both were landmark cases that changed work and education for women and girls in NSW.

Through the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1977), thousands of NSW women, Aborigines and people of ethnic origin have challenged discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status and ethnic origin in employment, the workplace, education, the supply of goods and services and other areas of public life. Most of the states enacted anti-discrimination legislation before the Commonwealth did so. However in 1984 on the initiative of then Minister for Education and for Women,

Senator **Susan Ryan**, the federal Sex Discrimination Act was passed. This meant that anti-discrimination legislation was effective nationwide.

### **WEL NSW Lobbied the NSW Government for the Establishment of the Women's Co-Ordination Unit In the Premier's Department**

WEL NSW saw that there was a need for an advocacy unit in government to ensure women's interests were not overlooked in mainstream government administration as they had been in the past. Among the women who developed a submission to the NSW Government were **Liz Windschuttle, Anne Conlon, Juliet Richter, Eva Cox** and **Joan Bielski**. The Unit was subsequently established in 1977. Later it became the Ministry for Women, and in 1995 it became the Department for Women. Since it began, the Unit and the Department, under the leadership of women well versed in women's affairs and under Ministers from both sides of the political spectrum, has been active in pre-budget discussions and, with input from women's non-government organisations and advisory councils, has been active in nearly all matters relating to government policy and its impact on women, and in putting women's issues, women's disadvantage and women's welfare before the NSW government. Regrettably, in mid 2004 the Department was disbanded as a budget economy without consultation with women's NGOs. It was replaced by the Office for Women, with a greatly reduced staff and budget, in the Premier's Department.

### **In 1976 WEL NSW Began Lobbying for Reform of the Rape Laws**

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, under the leadership of **Jocelyn Scutt** and **Di Graham**, WEL NSW established action groups to work for reform of the probate laws, equal rights to marital assets on divorce and rape law reform, then all very disadvantageous to women. All resulted in significant law reforms. Especially important were the reforms to rape law. WEL put forward a draft Bill on Rape and Other Sexual Offences, drafted by **Jocelyn Scutt**. The WEL submission was central to the NSW Attorney-General's Department Supplementary Report on Rape in 1977 and to the debate at the Rape Law Reform National Conference, 1980. It was also the basis for amendments to the NSW Crimes Act, 1981, and for changes in the ACT and Tasmania. It subsequently influenced the NT Criminal Code, changes to the Victorian Crimes Act and relevant laws in New Zealand. The WEL draft Bill was significant in that it was the first time that a definition of what is NOT consent was determined and this became an integral part of the interpretation of rape law. (See *Rape Law Reform*, edited by Jocelyn Scutt, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1980 – which includes WEL's *Draft Bill on Sexual Offences, Appendix 11, page 265.*)

### **Fertility Control Continues to be a Central Feminist Issue**

WEL NSW has been active in organisations working to improve women's access to fertility control. In 1973, WEL formed a family planning action group because it believed the NSW Family Planning Association should be run on feminist lines. With this in mind, the original members of the Family Planning Group, **Celia (Dorothy) Nolan, Emmi Snyder** and **Dorothy Simons** decided to try to get some WEL members on the FPA Board. This led to a fully-fledged takeover in 1975. Now, in 2005, it sounds easy, but it cost much blood, sweat and tears and the efforts of practically all WEL NSW members. It changed the FPA's emphasis and led to greatly increased services to women and to training programs for nurses and doctors. **Wendy McCarthy** was very much part of the public education campaign

and went on to become the FPA's National Executive Officer in the mid-1980s. WEL members were also active in the establishment of the Preterm Foundation, which established one of the first abortion clinics in Sydney.

## Some More Recent Campaigns

In the latter half of the 1980s, WEL NSW convened a coalition of more than 60 women's organisations, which successfully opposed the NSW Trades and Labour Council's attempt to have discrimination in recruitment in employment transferred to the industrial relations jurisdiction. WEL's case was that recruitment was the major area of discrimination against women and that the unions did not have a record of opposing discrimination against women. They have since become more active in opposing workplace discrimination.

WEL continues to maintain its interest in industrial and workplace matters. In the tradition of Edna Ryan, in 2004 WEL Australia was granted leave by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to intervene in the Family Provisions Test Case brought by the ACTU. This case seeks to build flexible working practices, extended parental leave and the right to part-time work into industrial awards. As usual the WEL case was a collaborative effort by women with expertise in industrial relations. The WEL submissions were led by **Jenny Earle**, of WEL ACT, supported by **Suzanne Hammond**, (NSW) and **Gabrielle Marchetti** (Victoria).

WEL members **Sandy Killick**, **Jenny Earle** and **Nicole Kelly** are part of a consortium, including the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and the Departments of Industrial Relations of the Universities of Queensland and NSW, that is involved in a three-year research project on how families use parental leave and how well it works for them. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council.

During the 2004 federal elections, WEL monitored the policies of the parties and the candidates and distributed *The Thinking Voter's Guide to the 2004 Federal Elections*, which rated policies according to their relevance to women. The major political parties targeted women as mothers and as members of families. They paid lip service to women by offering a baby payment, but it was designed more to boost the birth rate than to assist women. The policies did not promise paid maternity leave and would do little to alleviate the discrimination against married women workers that is inherent in the tax and superannuation systems.

## WEL: THE ASSOCIATION

### The Newsletter

Since its inception in 1972, WEL NSW has regularly published a newsletter, copies of which are lodged in public libraries. *WEL-Informed* is a source of feminist news and comment, and is especially valuable for members not able to get to meetings or those based in country areas. For 14 years, in the days before computers became readily available, the newsletter group led by **Dorothy Simons**, **Edwina Doe** and **Diana Wyndham**, produced *WEL-Informed*, publishing not only news but analytical articles and stories with a feminist slant. **Jane Gardiner** as editor took us into the electronic age in the 1990s. The newsletter is now emailed to most members but is posted to those without email.

## **Membership and Friendship**

WEL NSW (and nationally) from its inception has been a network of like-minded women, from which many lifelong friendships have been formed, based on a common worldview and on work for the women's movement. WEL has become the public face of feminism in Australia, a contact point for women wanting to involve themselves in the feminist cause. It provides a place where many women are confirmed in their feminist consciousness and where they gain the insights, the confidence, and the communication, political and organisational skills which have enabled them not only to be successful advocates of women's causes but which also have enabled them to advance their careers in public administration, the professions, business, community organisations and politics. Many of the founding members have become national figures in their fields.

WEL's major achievements have been to put women's issues on the political agenda, making women's issues proper politics, and successfully demanding reforms for women, especially in the area of employment. WEL's efforts are directed to effecting change through government action and legal and institutional change. Matters previously not canvassed in public debate are regular items for public discussion. WEL is part of a larger movement which has changed forever the visibility and image of women in the family, the public sphere, the public consciousness and public policy.

## **Feminism on a Shoestring**

WEL NSW has always been under-resourced, reliant on members' annual subscriptions for its main income, supplemented from occasional fund-raising events and the rare legacy. It has been feminism on a shoestring, dependent for its success on the commitment of many volunteer members, too many to mention here, whose work has been critical to WEL NSW's achievements.

## **THE FUTURE**

Australia has entered a period of political, social and economic conservatism.

Despite our efforts, patriarchy is still alive and well in government, the family, the workplace and in all the nation's major institutions. Fortunately, while many gains and changes which have occurred cannot be reversed, many of the programs and some of the legislation which women have taken for granted have been disbanded or reduced in effectiveness. Examples are the loss of the federal government's Women's Bureau which collected statistics on women's employment issues; the tinkering with the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 in favour of male teachers; the downsizing of the Office for the Status of Women, its transfer to a line department, the Department of Family and Community Services, and its renaming as the Office for Women, with reduced staff and functions, immediately after the 2004 federal elections. Similarly, in June 2004, the NSW Department for Women was renamed the Office for Women, and located in the Premier's Department, with reduced functions. As well, we are witnessing the demise at all levels of government of programs designed to ensure equal opportunity in public employment.

Governments feel free to wind back or water down gains made in education and employment and to limit the activities, through budget cuts, of agencies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board. Women now must realise the fragility of the gains of the past 30 years. Many of the issues we thought were won may have to be fought all over again -- and again. Some women have been taught by the media and our

opponents to decry feminism as passé on the grounds that women now have it all. This is despite the fact that violence against women is 80 per cent of all the 408,100 acts of violence in the home reported annually in Australia, the cost of which is calculated at \$8.1 billion in hospitalisation, justice and prison administration. (*Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy Report*, July 2004).

Many of the pre-1970 women's organisations, such as the YWCA, have taken on the modern feminist agenda. These organisations are more likely to be seen by governments as 'safe' and consequently are able to attract government grants. Some of these organisations provide services to women – which is much favoured by funding bodies. As well, there is now a proliferation of women's organisations and other organisations that promote the environment or peace, all vying for women as members. These may well be more attractive to younger women.

Equal pay for work of equal value has not been realised and women's average weekly earnings is less than that of men – between \$230 and \$300 per week less. (ABS Average Weekly Earnings, May Quarter, 2004. Cat. 6302.0). Education and training are becoming more costly and less accessible. Childcare continues to be scarce and increasingly expensive. The tax system is skewed against married working women and the national superannuation scheme indirectly discriminates against women. The right to abortion is constantly under threat.

## **There is still a job to do**

WEL is designed to influence governments, public policy and public institutions. WEL is a critic of the system, an advocacy organisation, not a service provider. Our pleasure and satisfaction comes from working together to assist women in realising their potential.

The challenge is for WEL to evolve and review its mode of operation and strategies in this era of individualism, minimalist government, economic rationalism, business triumphalism, political apathy, union decline, employment insecurity, time poverty, compassion fatigue and increasing political and social conservatism.

WEL NSW welcomes as members women who are beneficiaries of the feminist legacy; women with a passion for justice; women with the skills, money and jobs unheard of 30 years ago. We need to engage more women in the work of providing expert advocacy and of enunciating the issues and the fight for women's rights.

**The future is ours,  
as long as we stay in the struggle**

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**FEMINISM IS ALIVE AND WEL**



**THINK WEL BEFORE YOU VOTE**



1973: A group of founding members of WEL NSW including Zula Nittim, Eva Cox and Di Graham at an early WEL NSW planning meeting held at the home of Wendy McCarthy (pictured below).

[photo from personal collection: Joan Bielski]

