




CHAPTER FOUR

“Never made to follow, never born to lead”: women in the NSW ALP¹

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The NSW Branch of the Australian Labor Party (NSW ALP) has always had a reputation as a combative, male-dominated environment. Journalistic accounts of the Branch describe it as a machine, dominated by “hard-boiled, cynical numbers men”, who are ruthless, aggressive and ambitious.² These men are able to instil “respect and fear” in their followers via “headkicking, kneecapping, and armtwisting”.³ Factional brawling, participants claim, is far from distasteful; rather it is “positive incentive to the young political gladiators ... looking for a good stoush, like young bucks testing their new antlers”.⁴ In this world of hyper-machismo, women are represented as either absent or peripheral. Indeed, it has been claimed that when women have played an active part in the NSW ALP, it has been mainly as supporting actors, as loyal political wives or sisters and mothers from staunch Labor families where Party membership is passed down from parent to child like a family heirloom.

At the same time, the political traditions and philosophies of organised labour have also been uninviting to women. This has followed partly from the roots of the labour movement in the collective action of working men, through trade unions and their political wing, in



defence of their employment rights, and for protection from the threat of cheaper, unprotected workers. The historic male exclusivity of the trade union tradition underlines the definition of women in just such terms. The notorious attacks in 1888 by male unionists against Louisa Lawson's newspaper *The Dawn*, staffed by women compositors excluded from both the union and the trade, is an example of this tradition.⁵ In the desperate context of the 1930s Great Depression, historian Marilyn Lake quotes a male labour opinion of women workers as "invaders, usurpers and thieves" and "the destroyers of men's manhood".⁶ The parallel traditional conviction, that working men should be able to protect their womenfolk from the need to join the paid workforce, has also produced difficulties for women. Indeed, the fear of cheap female labour and the idealisation of the working-class home have combined to shape both the sex segregation of the workforce, with its associated discriminatory wage structure, and the male exclusivity of organised labour.

Given this embedded cultural discouragement, it is not surprising that women have not fared well in terms of progression into either the executive or parliamentary branches of the ALP, particularly when such deterrents are added to those usually proffered to explain the general difficulties of women in political life. These include the challenge of the time involved in political activism for women with family responsibilities, financial barriers for women without independent income, and the alienating conditions and public image of political life. More unique local disincentives, for example the strength of the Catholic Right Wing and the particular methods and ethos seen at work in the Sussex Street headquarters of the NSW ALP, have also been cited as reasons why NSW Labor women have been even less successful in attaining parliamentary positions than their sisters elsewhere in Australia.

Nevertheless, this is by no means all there is to be said, or concluded, about the participation of women in the NSW ALP. As labour historian Kate Deverall has demonstrated in her work on the late nineteenth-century Golding sisters, despite "the manifest difficulties" faced by women, especially feminists, in ALP politics, there have been significant achievements and successes that merit attention.⁷ Deverall sets the context for such an examination by calling for a consideration of the politics of negotiation and pragmatism, as practised by partisan women,

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sometimes behind the scenes and often publicly unacknowledged. Indeed, the history of women within the NSW ALP, whether or not they have explicitly identified themselves as “feminist”, is a rich texture of successes and failures, frustrations and firsts. It is a story of constant and strategic engagement which deserves consideration as a remarkable part of the legacy of women’s achievement in the 150 years of responsible government in New South Wales.

Outsiders within: the position of women in the NSW ALP

In tracing the legacy of women within the NSW ALP, two concepts have proved useful. The first of these is the identification of Labor women as both insiders and outsiders in relationship to both the formal and informal structures of the ALP. The second relates to their location, not only in relationship to a political party within a parliamentary system, but also to the broader labour movement.


A well-established body of feminist analysis has defined politically active women in terms of their positions as insiders, outsiders or both. In particular, feminist work published in the 1980s and 1990s about feminists working in Australian bureaucracies on policy relating to women (the so-called “femocrats”) has analysed their position in these terms. Such women were located inside the bureaucratic system, working in a policy relationship with the government (often a Labor government) of the day. But despite this apparently privileged position, femocrats were often treated as outsiders within the state apparatus, surrounded by a hostile bureaucracy, a cynical media and suspicious politicians.⁸ They were also subject to criticism from parts of the feminist movement. Anne Summers has described this position, from personal experience, as being regarded by the women’s movement as “mandarins” who were too loyal to the bureaucratic system, and by the policy mainstream as “missionaries”, too close to feminist objectives to be trusted.⁹ In this way, the femocrats have been recognised as being simultaneously insiders and outsiders, or “outsiders within”.

A similar analysis can be applied to the position of Labor women, particularly feminists. Labor women are Party insiders by virtue of



being members of the ALP; in this regard they are tied into the Party's discipline, rules and unique culture of loyalty. Some have made it inside the Party machine as activists and office-holders or inside parliament as political staffers and parliamentarians. However, this insider status has been, and remains, complicated by gender, as is demonstrated by the absence of women among the élite of factional power-brokers. Since its establishment as the political wing of the union movement, the ALP has "prided itself on embodying the mateship ethos, the Australian version of fraternity".¹⁰ Such an ethos, while beneficial to the male class struggle, poses a problem for women. Political scientist Elaine Thompson argues:

Women in Australia were excluded from elected positions largely as a result of the institutions that had brought power to working-class men: the trade union movement and the Labor Party. Union egalitarianism was for males ... Australian radical democracy ... was largely for men.¹¹



This is not mere theoretical conjecture. Labor women have keenly felt their outsider within status. In 1977 feminist and one-time Labor candidate Anne Conlon described the ALP as "tribal territory" where a ruling clique of men occasionally allow "certain outsiders the pleasure of being admitted".¹² This is particularly true for Labor feminists, whose connection to both the Party and the broader feminist movement places them in a position of potentially conflicting allegiances. Marian Sawer and Marian Simms argue that "women in Australian political parties have often found that the price of acceptance is to agree to the sidelining ... of issues concerning ... women". For non-feminist women this has not been an issue but for those with strong feminist identification it has been "a source of frustration".¹³

On the other hand, despite these frustrations, this outsider within status is not always a handicap. To begin with, being both Labor and feminist has provided Labor women with a unique and powerful capacity to effect change to both the structures and policies of the Labor Party for the benefit of women. In this way, at key moments in history, Labor women have been able to capitalise on their arguments supporting, for example, child endowment, child care and affirmative

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action measures. At the same time, a further advantage of the outsider within position becomes clear if this position is conceptualised, as suggested by Kate Deverall, as “liminal”, that is, as on or across a boundary or threshold.¹⁴ This applies, as Deverall argues, not only to the political position of Labor feminists, but also to their economic and social position as women, working women and political citizens. The power of such a position lies in the potential of recognition not only of the challenge, but also of the multi-faceted and consequently flexible opportunity it offers.

The arena for the operation of such opportunities has been, significantly, not just the parliamentary Labor Party, but the wider labour movement. Just as Labor men have created and explored a broad context of related organisational strategies through friendly societies, the co-operative movement, trade unions and a range of political positions on the Left and the Right, so women have linked and explored those locations in terms of their own lives and needs. The remarkable Golding sisters provide such an example in the early years of the NSW ALP at the beginning of the twentieth century. The sisters responded to the realities of life for working-class women on the minefields on which they grew up, while exploring their own lives and identities as, in turn, married, working and professional women, within the increased educational and employment opportunities for women on the last decades of the nineteenth century. Kate and Annie were both teachers, until Kate married, and Belle Golding, as one of the first factory inspectors in New South Wales, was a pioneer in the social work profession. The sisters joined the union movement as workers, worked for the women’s vote as women citizens and joined the ALP to make their vote effective, in terms of both their personal and broader social objectives. A similarly multi-faceted connection with the labour movement can be observed in the careers of most of the ALP women identified in this chapter. It was that broad context of labour movement locations and strategies that enabled them to build the continuity of women’s political engagement which they wove around the changing opportunities and challenges they found within the NSW Branch.

Four periods of change and activity can be identified in telling the story of that political continuity. The first is the period of activity by Labor-oriented women from the achievement of women’s right to vote

and stand for election at the Federal level, although effectively only for non-Indigenous women, in 1902; to the women's vote in NSW in 1902 and the right to stand for Parliament in NSW in 1918; through the changes and struggles of two world wars and the Great Depression, until the end of the 1940s. During those years, Labor women explored their new opportunities to secure women's representation in party structures and parliamentary forums while pursuing policy struggles for the rights and protection of women workers, for educational and professional opportunities, for the sexual protection of women, for property and inheritance rights for married women and, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, for both equal pay and government support for women as wives and mothers. Those were also the decades when Australian feminists, including Labor women, began to work politically on behalf of Indigenous women. The second period covers the 1950s and 1960s, the years when women were encouraged out of their war-time role as workers and back into the private sphere of home and family. These are the years conventionally and controversially portrayed as the "trough" between the so-called "two waves" of Australian feminist activity, and of political passivity and "housekeeping" by Labor women. Both interpretations are challenged here. The next period, the 1970s and 1980s, saw many women in the NSW ALP involved in the newly re-invigorated phase of Australian feminism which began in 1969. This period, a time of electoral success for the ALP at both Federal and State levels, was a dynamic and productive time for Labor women in terms of policy, activism and advancement. Finally, the status of NSW ALP women in the 1990s and until the present, what has been described as a post-feminist period, is considered, as a basis for drawing some conclusions about the future of women in the Branch.

From the suffrage campaign to the end of World War II

Former Queensland senator Margaret Reynolds argues that "ALP women were influencing Labor policy as pioneers within the party structure and as the occasional determined candidate, early in the 20th century".¹⁵ Indeed, it can be added that women were making a contribution to the labour movement in New South Wales, as wives,

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workers and unionists, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, while the great strikes of the 1890s were fought and the Labor Party was built. But before these women could become fully effective within ALP politics, female suffrage and the right for women to sit as members of parliament had to be won. Women of all class backgrounds and political persuasions, in all of the colonies, soon to be states, of Australia, worked together for the right to be fully functioning political citizens. That campaign took place in parallel with the building of a political expression of the Australian labour movement.

The story of the rich and uncomfortable liaison in the NSW women's suffrage movement between elite upper middle-class women like Rose Scott, intellectual activists like Maybanke Wolstenholme and Eliza Ashton, temperance campaigners like Lady Mary Windeyer, and Labor-oriented women, including the individualist Louisa Lawson, has been told in Chapter 2. The notorious split in the Womanhood Suffrage League between the Scott faction and the Sydney inner-city branches, including the Golding/Dwyer sisters, is also told there, and demonstrates the strong presence of Labor women in the suffrage campaign. An especially painful aspect of the campaign for those women was the resistance of Labor men to proposals for a women's vote until the plural voting system giving landowners a vote for each electorate in which they owned property came to an end in 1893.¹⁶ They were also torn by the expedient compromise which saw, at last, a women's vote passed by the conservative (appointed) NSW Legislative Council on 14 August 1902, but without provision for the right of women to stand for Parliament.¹⁷

The women who had worked to achieve the right to vote made a variety of decisions about how they would take advantage of their new political status. In many cases, across Australia, suffragists saw no place for themselves in the established political parties. In some cases this was a pragmatic decision to pursue their policy objectives by bargaining with their votes across the political spectrum. For others, including Scott, the non-party stance expressed a philosophical conviction that women could create a new kind of politics transcending the conflict of party interests.¹⁸ Others made a realistic decision that the only effective way ahead was within the party system. This happened across the political spectrum. Mrs Hilma Molyneux Parkes, for example, a

leading member of the Womanhood Suffrage League, founded and was the first President of the Women's Liberal League.¹⁹

Long-term Labor women like the Golding/Dwyer sisters certainly did not wait until they could stand for preselection before they claimed their place as active members of the Party. In 1903, taking advantage of women's greater political rights at the federal level, Nellie Martel, one of the Golding/Dwyer sisters' long-term allies, and Mary Ann Moore stood, unsuccessfully, as NSW candidates for the Senate.²⁰ In 1904 the Labor Women's Organising Committee (LWOC) was established by 300 women who elected Kate Dwyer as their first President.²¹

One of the objectives of the LWOC was to answer the need for "a central organization of women to organise the women's vote for Labor". Labor women were determined to secure the new women's vote for the ALP, especially after the 1903 Federal election revealed some "hostility and/or indifference" among women voters towards Labor.²² Labor women were tireless and highly successful election-time campaigners; indeed several women organisers were employed by the NSW Branch to work in the 1904 and 1909 elections to co-ordinate campaign activities.²³ The activities of the LWOC also helped boost the women's vote for Premier Jack Lang and for the 1916 anti-conscription campaign. Their success and capacity to marshal, as Premier Joe Cahill put it, "a great and loyal army of women [capable of] continuous daytime campaigning", was widely acclaimed within the Branch.²⁴

However, the LWOC was always intended to be more than just a vehicle to mobilise the women's vote at election times. It was also designed as a dedicated space within the Branch for women to agitate for their own representation and to progress their policy issues. Labor women were not content merely to campaign in support of Labor candidates who were men. Via the LWOC, NSW ALP women fought hard for gender equality within the echelons of the Branch in order to further this agenda, pushing for internal reform of Party structures in women's interests, including the increased representation of women at State Conference.²⁵ In doing so, they began to experience the linked strength and frustration of being outsiders within the party to which they brought their loyalty and knowledge of the key issues for NSW women, but which still met their presence with ambivalence.

During this period Kate Dwyer enjoyed the acclaim and endured



PRESIDENT & OFFICERS OF THE POLITICAL LABOR LEAGUE
Executive of N.S.W., 1914-15.

The Hon. R.D. Meagher, M.L.A. President.

Vice President: J.D. Fitzgerald

General Secretary: Senator J. Grant

Vice President: Mrs. Kate Dwyer

Members: E. Durack M.L.A., C. Fox, Mrs. M. Seery, H. J. LeStrange, T. Rae, T.H. Throuer M.L.A., A.C. Warton, E. Grayndler, W. Mabony, T.D. Mutch, E. Rieig M.H.R., Hon. D.R. Hall M.L.A., Hon. W.H. Holman M.L.A., J.E. Watson, Hon. E.H. Farrar M.L.C., Senator F. Gardiner, W.O. Brien, H. Lamona, J.J. Grant, S. Toombs M.L.A., W.L. Duncan, P.E. Evans, M^{rs}. J. Seery, V.C. Johnstone, J. Talbot, M^{rs}. J. Grant, D. Guibey, J.J. Morrish M.L.A., J.J. Cusack M.L.A., A. Vernon, Con. Hogan.

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the isolation of being the woman who rose highest in the machine. In 1914 she was elected Vice-President of the NSW Branch and was the first woman to chair State Conference. In 1921 Dwyer was the only woman delegate to ALP National Conference, her achievement tarnished by the failure of her fellow delegates to support her resolution that future conferences ensure one woman representative from every State.²⁶ Dwyer was often first but she was rarely alone. In 1914 she was accompanied on the State Executive by Eva Seery, Mrs J Seery (possibly Eva's sister-in-law) and Mrs J Grant. Dwyer was supported by her sisters Annie and Belle as well as by other party activists like Bertha McNamara and Gertrude Melville. These women worked with the broader LWOC alongside unknown Labor women whose work made the successes of this period possible.

But political recognition from their Party for the women activists came slowly. It was not until the 1913 State Conference that a motion supporting full political rights for women, including the right to stand for election to Parliament, was finally passed, after failing at the preceding four conferences. Labor women had to wait until 1917 to see two of their number, Eva Seery and Henrietta Greville, preselected as candidates – for unwinnable Federal seats.²⁷ Only in 1918 did NSW women achieve the right to stand for election to the State Parliament.²⁸ Kate Dwyer was preselected as a candidate for the multi-member electorate of Balmain in 1925 and stood, with her sister Annie Golding as her campaign manager, but did not succeed.²⁹

As this difficult progress was achieved within Party structures, Labor women continued their multi-faceted labour movement strategies on behalf of the women of NSW. Women like the Goldings and Louisa Lawson had been unionists before they could vote. Annie Golding continued her activism within the teachers' union and worked with Dwyer

*President and officers of
Political Labor League
Executive of NSW, 1914–15.
Includes: Kate Dwyer, Vice-
President, Mrs Eva Seery,
Mrs J Grant, Mrs J Seery.
Mitchell Library, State
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to encourage the State Labor Council to organise unions for women in laundries, cardboard box factories and the boot industry.³⁰ Dwyer, with a colleague, Mrs Flanagan, set up the Women Workers Union to organise women working as home workers in the clothing trade.³¹ Meanwhile, the LWOC sent motions to State Conference on equal pay, sweated and child labour, the conditions of domestic servants and the working hours of nurses, as well as on the right of women to stand for parliament and local government, to enter the legal profession and to retain property in marriage and through inheritance. Council members were also involved in the relief effort around the Great Strike of 1917.³²

Concurrently, Labor women across Australia accompanied their pressure for equal pay for working women with measures to address the right to economic independence, and recognise their contribution to society as wives and mothers, whether within a marriage, widowed or deserted.³³ This last category included, if also disguised, women obliged to flee from violent husbands (see Chapter 3). These proposals, linked as motherhood and childhood benefits, were resisted by male labour-movement members devoted to protection of the family wage principles enshrined in the *Harvester Case* and subsequent income-fixing judgments. The women's campaign finally succeeded in the more limited form of the widow's pension and child endowment, enacted for the first time in Australia by the Lang NSW Government in 1926 and 1927.³⁴ The child endowment initiative had its origins in a motion moved by Gertrude Melville at her local branch in Randwick in 1918, which was subsequently supported strongly by women delegates at State Conference that year.³⁵ Child endowment was eventually won as a result of pressure put on Premier Lang by women like Melville and Dwyer, who were determined to receive some policy gains for their efforts in marshalling the women's vote.

Ironically, and as if to underline the outsiders within status of NSW Labor women, Jack Lang was also responsible for adoption in 1927 of new Branch rules that had a negative impact on women's representation at both Conference and on the State Executive. Labor women were apparent victims of their own success at increasing their influence within Party circles. Deverall argues that by the 1920s "many Labor men had become increasingly uncomfortable with women's hands on the levers of the Party machine". While the LWOC survived and Labor

women activists continued to work hard, it appears that their male colleagues believed they were now “confined to their proper place”, as ancillary rather than central players in the main political game.³⁶

Nevertheless, the 1930s and 1940s, the second half of the period covered by this section, saw the first ALP women enter the NSW Parliament. In 1931 Catherine Green and Ellen Webster were appointed to the Legislative Council. In 1939 Mary Quirk became the first Labor woman elected to the Legislative Assembly. At the same time, and in a pattern that continues to this day, Labor women fared better in local government than in State or Federal politics. In 1938, Lillian Fowler was elected Mayor of Newtown, becoming the first woman mayor in Australia.³⁷ Fowler had been active in community organisations and local government before her election as the first woman alderman in New South Wales in 1929. She held positions on the Central Executive of the NSW ALP and was President of the LWOC from 1923 until 1926. Her pioneering role in local government and her association with Premier Jack Lang were rewarded when she was elected the Member for Newtown from 1944 until 1950.³⁸

But the frustrated attempts of Labor women candidates outnumbered their successes, again endorsing the importance of the broad context women found within the labour movement and the variety of strategies they followed as they continued, in the 1930s and 1940s, their work for both working and family-based women. These were years of severe demands on Australian women, as they struggled for the survival of themselves and their families through the Great Depression, and faced the challenges and workplace opportunities of World War II. They were also the years when Australian feminists, including Labor women, began to respond to the severe problems faced by indigenous women, identifying with them specifically as mothers (see Chapter 3).

During the Great Depression, the LWOC was particularly concerned with the welfare of unemployed women, while also providing relief efforts for striking male workers.³⁹ The other leading issues for Labor women during the Depression were the defence of women’s work opportunities, and their wages and conditions in the service industries, which often provided their only opportunity to contribute to families with unemployed male breadwinners. The crucial organisational base for the equal pay campaign at this time was the Council of Action



for Equal Pay (CAEP), founded in 1937 at an equal pay conference called by the NSW Clerks Union. Fifty-three organisations supported its establishment, including several unions and a number of national women's organisations.⁴⁰ A foremost founder of the CAEP was Muriel Heagney, a lifelong worker for working women's rights and equal pay in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales.⁴¹ Based in Sydney until it was disbanded in 1948, the CAEP functioned as a single pressure group, the first organised movement for equal pay in Australia.⁴² It provided an arena for the work of Labor women like Jessie Street and Eileen Powell, which continued in struggles over equitable pay for women working in crucial war jobs during World War II.⁴³

The quiet years? The 1950s and 1960s

The years that have been designated "quiet" and even "passive" in accounts of Labor women's activism are the same years identified as the trough between the two waves of Australian feminism. Both interpretations attract scepticism when the steadily persistent commitment and achievements of feminists and Labor women, often the same people, in these years are considered. A period in which Australian women worked consistently for equal pay and reproductive rights, as international campaigners for world peace in an era of Cold War, and against the Vietnam War, laid the groundwork which achieved the sole parents' pension, and supported Indigenous women working for the 1967 Federal Referendum for constitutional recognition of Commonwealth Government responsibility for Aboriginal people, cannot be described as passive, nor as a trough, in either feminist or Labor women's activity. Yet evidence of the difficulties activist women faced in these decades is strong, and resolution of these conflicting perceptions requires careful recognition of the means and contexts through which those challenges were met.

Women working in the arena of the NSW ALP during the 1950s and 1960s have been described as "cups-of-tea-makers and envelope-lickers"⁴⁴, happy to do the "political housework", content to perform low-status chores such as door-knocking, letter-boxing and fundraising.⁴⁵

In her honours thesis on the history of NSW ALP women, Pam Allan argues that delegates at NSW Labor Women's Conferences during this period "avoided controversy in their debates and took virtually no initiatives on Party policy".⁴⁶ Such descriptions suggest that the efforts of NSW Labor men for the containment of Labor women as outsiders who had ventured within was never so determined, or possibly successful, as it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

The reduced role of women in the Party during this period was in part a consequence of the broader social conditions of the time. The effects of women's increased workforce participation during World War II had done little to boost their status in Australia's workers' party. During the post-war years, women were instead pushed back into the private sphere, where they were to fulfil their roles as the wives and mothers of nation-building men. As Reynolds comments, "despite the active involvement of many women within the branch structure of the Labor Party there was little official recognition of women's contribution and the status of women within the party remained low".⁴⁷

The fifties was also a decade that saw the Split in the ALP between the Catholic-backed Movement and Industrial Groups and the anti-Groupers supportive of Federal Labor leader Dr HV Evatt. This intense conflict spilt over into women's politics. Indeed, the 1956 NSW Labor Women's Conference was described as "the wildest and most bitter public showdown in the Labor Party since the open conflict between the Industrial Group and anti-Grouper factions broke out".⁴⁸ Factional conflict paralysed the LWOC during this period, making any efforts in the area of policy development, organising or party reform almost impossible. At that time, Melville despaired that the LWOC had "got right away from the purpose for which it was formed" and had "never been of so little use to the Labor Party".⁴⁹ In 1959 the NSW Branch rejected attempts by the LWOC to restructure by creating regional women's groups and integrating them into the machine. Unable to reform itself, rife with factional conflict, the 1960s was a decade in which the LWOC "subsided into almost total inertia".⁵⁰

Despite these troubles, by the time the LWOC reached its Golden Jubilee Year in 1954, NSW Labor women had accrued some experience running as candidates, if unsuccessfully, in both Federal and State elections.⁵¹ Moreover, in the period between 1945 and 1970, NSW



candidates were the majority of the small number of Australian Labor women who succeeded in entering their State Parliaments, women like Gertrude Melville, Edna Roper, Anne Press, Amelia Rygate, Kathleen Anderson and Evelyn Barron. The Labor women who entered the NSW Parliament during this time did so in middle age, having already raised their children, further evidence of Labor's general ambivalence about women functioning as both mothers and workers.⁵² It is also significant that they entered the Legislative Council, rather than the Legislative Assembly. Members of the Legislative Council (MLCs) were at this time indirectly elected and appointed to their seats, and their duties as parliamentarians were part time. Until the Wran years, when in 1978 the Legislative Council was opened to election by the voters of New South Wales, MLCs were not part of the Labor Parliamentary Caucus; consequently the status of MLCs was always less than that of their peers in the Assembly. Edna Roper's is a notable exception to the careers of Labor women appointed to the Council. Roper first entered Parliament in 1958, having been senior vice-president of the LWOC and a member of the Central Executive. In 1973 she became Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Council, and in 1976 Deputy Leader of the Government until her retirement from Parliament in 1978, the first Labor woman to hold such positions.⁵³

The presence of these women in Parliament weighs against the representation of this period as one of feminine conformism. So too do the occasions when the LWOC was prepared to attack the State Government for its policies, for example, at the 1964 Conference when a motion was moved condemning the Government for prosecuting small shopkeepers for after-hours trading.⁵⁴ The LWOC also continued its role as an informer and educator of Labor women about issues of gender equality in this period. This role is reflected in *ALP Women*, a quarterly magazine for "women interested in politics" produced in the mid-1960s.⁵⁵ Perhaps the most telling demonstration that NSW Labor women in this period maintained their political passion is provided by the notoriously bitter divisions at the 1956 Women's Conference, which was considered so disruptive that it was declared null and void by the Central Executive.⁵⁶

On a more positive note, the vigorous activism of NSW Labor women in this period is also demonstrated by the success which was



probably their greatest achievement. In 1958, New South Wales became the first State to legislate for equal pay for work of equal value. As Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon state, the Cahill Labor Government was “forced to pay attention to the vigorous and convincing campaign” of the Teachers Federation of NSW, which was demanding equal pay for its women members.⁵⁷ The State Government amended the *Industrial Arbitration Act* in 1958 to incorporate equal pay principles.

This significant success also suggests the most promising way of resolving the apparent contradictions in a period in which NSW Labor women have been described as passive and obedient, and yet can be seen to have striven energetically for objectives consistent with the history of their political participation; and in which they sometimes appear confused and divided, yet reached a significant victory in the equal pay campaign which had driven them for the past half century. More research is needed about the political activism of NSW Labor women in the 1950s and 1960s before this dilemma can be fully answered. But we would suggest that the answer lies, once again, in the strategic diversity with which Labor women pursued their political objectives within the broad space of the wider labour movement. If their activities were constrained within the confines of the Party and its divisions in these decades, Labor women concurrently and consistently explored the opportunities offered them by the union movement, by other aspects of organised labour and through their own labour-oriented women’s organisations. Edna Ryan provides one example of the multifaceted activist lives of many Labor women at this time. While maintaining her membership of the Waverley ALP Branch and of the Central Committee of the LWOC, and standing twice as an unsuccessful ALP candidate, was also active in the Worker’s Educational Association (WEA), Ryan was a member of the Municipal Employees Union, served for nine years as an ALP alderman on Fairfield Council, and began her lifelong work for equal pay.⁵⁸ Other examples are provided by Barbara Curthoys, who was one of many Labor women to build a primary activist base in the Union of Australian Women, founded in 1950; and Jessie Street, who continued her work with the Union of Australian Women and a number of international organisations, through which she worked for world peace, and the rights of women and Aboriginal people.⁵⁹



By the end of the 1960s, change was coming. In 1969 the NSW Branch's official journal "registered its pleasure, and surprise, at the significant number of young women present at the women's conference".⁶⁰ A new cohort of Labor women, many of them unafraid to identify as feminists, were "loudly questioning the marginalisation of women and demanding urgent reform to change the position of women in Australian society".⁶¹ They were also demanding a "more stimulating public image" for the LWOC and more equitable treatment of women in the Branch. The times were changing, and the women whose political skills had matured during the hard preceding decades were ready to welcome and to inspire a new generation of NSW Labor women.

A new feminist generation: the 1970s and 1980s

The character of women's involvement in the ALP – indeed the very character of the Party itself – began to change in the 1970s, first of all at the Federal level. The election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 seemed to herald a sea change in Australian politics. The new expression of feminism, known at first as "women's liberation", which began in Sydney in 1969, and the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), formed explicitly to represent women's issues in the 1972 Federal election, both represented a reinvigoration of feminist sentiment, radical and reformist, among Australian women. Women's aspirations and attitudes were shifting in response to exponential changes in their educational and employment opportunities, and the reproductive choices offered by the contraceptive pill. For many women stirred by these changes, the chosen location for their political activism was the Australian Labor Party.

As Margaret Reynolds observes, "feminism, and the initial recognition of women's policy in the Whitlam government, clearly launched substantial numbers of women into political careers". The dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 also became a catalyst for women joining Labor's ranks, Reynolds argues, "in order to further strengthen women's policy and increase women's role in decision-making".⁶² Women also looked to State Labor branches in a deliberate and strategic way as

they moved the policy effort to State level after the Dismissal. Later in the decade a national committee of inquiry into the status of women in the ALP recommended changes to Party rules and culture to maximise women's involvement. Senator Susan Ryan's attempts, after Labor's loss in the 1980 Federal election, to convince the male leadership that the gender gap could be closed to the ALP's electoral advantage, were proving successful. All told, the cause of gender equality within the ALP was attracting powerful leaders, new recruits and media interest, as well as crucial support from some Labor men.⁶³

The year of Whitlam's election was also the year that this newly invigorated feminist energy arrived in the NSW ALP. At the 1972 Labor Women's Conference, Joan Evatt, who would be elected the first woman President of Young Labor in 1973, presented a paper criticising the past role of the LWOC. She called on her fellow delegates to "get up, go out and get to". In Evatt's view, the LWOC's role was not to applaud Labor men but to remind "the powerful policy making bodies that women still exist".⁶⁴ Her paper caused a sensation and marked the beginning of a new phase in LWOC history. Progressive policy motions



Edna Ryan, feminist, member of WEL, lifelong campaigner for the rights of working women and for equal pay, on the occasion of her 80th birthday. The Sydney Morning Herald, 15 December 1984, p. 9.

Peter Morris/Fairfaxphotos.com




on child care and abortion were passed by the LWOC during this period.⁶⁵ At the 1973 Labor Women's Conference a pamphlet entitled "The Challenge for Labor Women" was circulated. It condemned the past organisational structure of the LWOC for having failed to play "a significant leadership role in the changed climate of the women's movement".⁶⁶ These 1973 delegates were attempting nothing less than a transformation of the LWOC from a women's auxiliary to an activist organisation with unashamedly feminist and reformist goals.

In terms of Labor women's representation in State Parliament, important inroads were made during the 1970s, with five women appointed to the Legislative Council between 1973 and 1978, a good result when compared with the Party federally and with other states such as Queensland and South Australia. In terms of women's presence within the Party's executive wing, another milestone was reached – in 1978 Dorothy Isaksen was appointed as the NSW Branch's first woman State Organiser. Isaksen went on from this position to become an MLC from 1978 until 1988 and then from 1990 until 1999.⁶⁷

Issues relating to women and paid work were particularly emphasised in this decade, as more and more women, including married women, entered the paid workforce. Two Labor women who made an invaluable contribution in this area were Edna Ryan, whose diverse career has already been introduced, and Anne Conlon.⁶⁸ Like Ryan, Conlon was active in both WEL and the ALP, and both wrote and campaigned extensively on industrial equality for women. In 1974 Ryan prepared and presented the WEL submission to the minimum wage case before the Industrial Commission in Melbourne, which achieved the historic decision that women workers should be awarded the same minimum wage as men. Subsequently, Ryan and Conlon together expanded Ryan's research for the case into the book *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work*.⁶⁹ Since Conlon's untimely death in 1979, an annual lecture, sponsored by the Women's Advisory Council and subsequently the Premier's Council for Women, has been held in her honour.

The hard work of NSW ALP women in the 1970s laid the foundation for their achievements in the 1980s, a decade which saw major legislative reform in the area of women's issues introduced by Labor governments at both Federal and State levels. These included sex discrimination laws and affirmative action initiatives, the



establishment of Caucus women's committees and the expansion of the women's policy machinery initiated by the Whitlam Commonwealth Government federally and significantly developed at the State level by the Wran Labor Government in New South Wales. In terms of social policy, Labor women formulated and secured Federal and State government support for the provision of child care, improved women's housing and health services.⁷⁰ They also worked successfully with, and through, women's organisations to achieve important sexual assault and domestic violence law reforms.⁷¹

The crucial women's policy issue of the right of women to legal access to abortion, however, was a more complex issue. NSW ALP women played key roles on both sides of the abortion debate during the early 1980s. Labor activist Sue Tracey recalls that abortion was the most divisive issue among Labor women in this period, with Catholic women dominating the pro-life forces. At a November 1981 meeting of the National Status of Women Policy Committee, established in 1981 to examine the work of all other National Policy Committees for their impact on women, it was decided to recommend to the 1982 National Conference that the resolution on abortion law reform in the platform be deleted, essentially withdrawing the conscience vote on abortion and wedding the Party to a pro-choice position.⁷² At National Conference the following July, the abortion question was debated, with NSW delegate Sandra Nori speaking in favour of the abolition of the conscience vote and fellow NSW delegate Trish Kavanagh the only woman to speak in favour of its retention.⁷³ The amendment to abolish the conscience vote was lost. Despite attempts by Labor feminists during this period to move the Party's position, the conscience vote on abortion remains, a compromise between the predominantly Catholic pro-life and the pro-choice forces within the party. Even powerful Labor leaders have been wary of tampering with this arrangement. As feminist academic Karen Coleman states, soon after (non-Catholic) Neville Wran was elected Premier a delegation of Catholic clergy met with him, anxious that he might legislate freer abortion laws. Wran pointed out that "if this was their fear, they simply did not understand the nature of the ALP – a reference to the strength of the Catholics in the NSW Parliamentary Party".⁷⁴ The continuance of this political détente has meant that women in New South Wales have to rely on



ALP meeting. Geoff Pryor, Canberra Times, 26 January 1982.
nla.pic-an 23015252. National Library of Australia

judicial rulings such as that in the *Levine Case* for relatively safe and legal access to abortion.

Meanwhile, within the Party structures, NSW Labor women continued to experience a mixture of success and resistance. In 1980 Pam Allan, then Senior Vice-President of the LWOC, wrote to ALP National Secretary David Combe to push for the establishment of an effective national organisation of Labor women. Subsequently, NSW Labor women, in concert with other State women's organisations, organised the first National Labor Women's Conference, held in Sydney in January 1981.⁷⁵

Differences over factionalism and feminism became evident in the 1980s, with some Labor women starting to define themselves in resistance to the strength of the feminist presence in the NSW ALP, which had grown during the 1970s. The dominance of the Left and



the increasing influence of feminism within the LWOC meant that the organisation was “on a collision course with the State Executive of the party”.⁷⁶ This contributed to the NSW Branch Executive’s decision in 1986 to disband the LWOC⁷⁷, which had survived several previous clashes with head office. Another point of tension between NSW Labor women and the State Executive in this decade was over the continuing difficulty of women in gaining preselection to winnable seats.

Despite the conflicts and disappointments, this was a decade of significant parliamentary as well as policy achievement, which meant that NSW Labor was keeping up with, although not leading, the other States in electing women to State parliaments.⁷⁸ Janice Crosio, Pam Allen and Sandra Nori won seats in the NSW Legislative Assembly, the first ALP women to sit in the Lower House since Mary Quirk and Lillian Fowler in the 1940s. Three further seats were won in the Legislative Council, including that by Franca Arena, in 1981, making her the first woman from a non-English-speaking background elected as a Labor member to a State parliament. In 1983, Jeannette McHugh entered the Federal House of Representatives, becoming the first NSW ALP woman to sit in the Federal Parliament. In 1984 Janice Crosio became the State’s first ever woman minister, and is to date the only NSW ALP woman to serve at every level of government – as a local councillor and as a Member of both State and Federal parliament.⁷⁹

The 1990s until now

The mixed story of struggle and achievement, of challenge and strategic ingenuity which has characterised the experience of NSW ALP women since the inception of the Party, has continued since the early 1990s. On the policy front, women’s concerns have received uneven emphasis. Labor returned to government in New South Wales in 1995 under Bob Carr, after a period of Liberal-National Coalition government from 1988. An early initiative of the Carr Government was the transformation of the Coalition’s Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women into the Department of Women, the first such structure in Australia. Carr also appointed the Premier’s Council for Women to continue the tradition of experienced and expert advice to the Government on women’s needs and issues. Nine years later,



however, in 2003, the women's policy machinery was downgraded, with its budget cut by a third and the Department reduced to an Office for Women in the Premier's Department.

Nevertheless, the steady progress of NSW ALP women into parliamentary seats and office continued. Between 1990 and 2006, seventeen more NSW ALP women won seats in the Legislative Assembly, and ten in the Legislative Council. In addition, two former MLCs, Deidre Grusovin and Carmel Tebbutt, won Lower House seats. Seven of the MLAs were appointed to ministries, and some to a succession of ministries; four won positions as parliamentary secretaries. While the majority of the portfolios held by the ALP women have been in the social policy areas of especial relevance to women, it is noteworthy that Carmel Tebbutt currently holds the major Education portfolio. MLC Dorothy Isaksen has served as Government Whip, and Meredith Burgmann, former political science academic and long-term labour and human rights activist in a number of settings, has held office as President of the Legislative Council since 1995.⁸⁰

Another important recent achievement with regard to Labor's parliamentary representation was the election of Linda Burney to the Legislative Assembly. As she said in her inaugural speech, a "little



Linda Burney, MLA, ALP, 2003–present. The first Aboriginal person to be elected to the NSW Parliament greets supporters before delivering her maiden speech. The Sydney Morning Herald, 7 May 2003, p. 4. Tamara Dean/Fairfaxphotos.com



bit of history” was created on 22 March 2003 when she was elected to the safe Labor seat of Canterbury as “the first Indigenous person into this place and a woman – and not the last of either”.⁸¹ Burney’s breakthrough owes something to the work of other Indigenous women active in the Branch, such as the late Pat Dixon. Dixon was involved in local government as a councillor and policy advisor in the Armidale region for over eighteen years, and was the first Aboriginal woman elected to local government in Australia. She was Deputy Mayor of the City of Armidale. She stood twice as the ALP federal candidate for the safe National seat of New England. At the time of her death in 2001, Dixon had been elected Vice-President of the Local Government Association of NSW.⁸²

These considerable parliamentary achievements in New South Wales have been balanced by some familiar disappointments. No Labor woman, apart from Tebbutt, has yet held office in one of the “high status” ministries, as Treasurer, Attorney-General, Minister for Transport or Police or any of the key economic portfolios. It is also significant that, while women have considerably improved their presence in the parliamentary wing of the Party, they are almost completely absent from the executive wing, in the Sussex Street machine and in Labor’s more informal factional structure. Another disappointing observation can be made about the falling proportion of women in the parliamentary wing of the NSW ALP compared to their representation elsewhere in Australia.⁸³

The response of NSW Labor women to these recent circumstances has been as persistent and ingenious as in earlier years. The tradition has continued of varied and flexible strategies through which women continue to claim their place in political Labor while reaching beyond the organised Party to their location in the broader labour and women’s movements. For example, while it is reported that affirmative action for women’s preselection continues to be controversial within the NSW ALP, a positive strategic response, driven by Labor women, was the establishment in 1998 of the Women’s Forum. Elected each year by State Conference, the Forum’s primary focus is on increasing the membership and involvement of women in the Branch through training and communications strategies. It is also responsible for monitoring affirmative action issues, enhancing the levels of representation in



public office by ALP women, increasing the participation of women in public life and liaising with ALP policy committees. The Forum has also established an annual scholarship program, which awards \$2000 for the education of a Labor woman on the basis of financial need and academic merit.

NSW Labor women have also been active in EMILY's List, a pro-choice Labor women's organisation outside the control of the Party, which was established nationally in 1996, with representatives from New South Wales on its National Executive. EMILY's List provides training and funds for endorsed Labor women candidates in both State and Federal elections.

Finally, in an initiative which demonstrates that a sense of humour can be a valuable political tool, Meredith Burgmann, President of the Legislative Council, established the Ernie Awards in 1993. The Ernies, awarded for the best (or worst) sexist political comments of the year, have been presented every year since at a raucous dinner in State Parliament House attended by women of many feminist and political complexions. Dr Burgmann believes that the Ernies gathering "goes some way to improving the feminist movement's opinion of the Labor Party".⁸⁴ It certainly provides a politically restorative space where Labor women and others, as members of the Sydney women's movement, can share laughter and feminist commitment.

Conclusions

The history of NSW Labor women reveals some enduring themes. One of these is the loyalty and consistency of the presence of women within the state Branch, where they have always been active. Since the late nineteenth century, when the Party was beginning, and even before NSW women had the right to either vote or stand for parliamentary election, a persistent contingent of politically active women have identified Labor as their most appropriate political location. While clearly distinguishing the ALP as the party most conducive to their social and political objectives, they have also found in Labor a home for their political convictions, and the promise of a congenial political community. In pursuing their objectives, NSW Labor women have consistently focused on policy to improve the lives of women, both in

the workplace and the family, have worked energetically for the Party as grassroots campaigners and have sought effective representation within the various levels of the Branch. Seeking equitable recognition both for their contribution and their policy aims, NSW Labor women have striven for, and increasingly achieved, a role in Party structures, preselection to winnable seats, a place in the Parliament and the opportunity to serve as ministers. Whether assessed in terms of policy achievements or progress within the Party or parliamentary offices, NSW Labor women have transformed their position within the Party, and contributed significantly to crucial improvements in the lives and opportunities of NSW women at large.

But this progress has been hard won. We have reviewed and concur with the frequently discussed reasons for this difficulty. Such explanations range from alienation by a defensive male industrial culture identifying women either as a threat to their wage levels or as more appropriately minding the working-class home; include the distaste of many women for the tough, often brutal, competitive Party culture; recognition of the pressures on women as carers, as mothers and wives, which have often hampered them in throwing themselves wholeheartedly into political life; and stretch to the challenge of local and historical aspects of NSW Labor, for example, domination by the traditional Catholic Right, extreme factionalism, and the rigid or inscrutable hierarchies of the party machine.

Our interest here, having acknowledged these hazards, is in recognising and understanding the ways in which Labor women in New South Wales have nevertheless progressed so far and achieved so much. We began by introducing the concept of the liminal or “outsiders within” status of women within the NSW ALP. We suggested that such an identity, while encapsulating the central difficulty faced by Labor women, has also had the potential, through the liminality and consequent flexibility of the position they hold, to offer Labor women a means of strength. We believe that our examination of the history of NSW Labor women has demonstrated the operation of this potential in two ways. The first lies in the strength of conviction which the personal experience of Labor women, as workers who are also carers, has brought to both the determination of their policy objectives and the increased breadth of Labor directions. The second follows from the



support many Labor women have also found in the women's movement in its various guises in this period, and in women's organisations. The significance of this support, both personal and organisational, has been particularly marked in the early twentieth century and during the 1970s and 1980s, when the voice of Australian feminism was particularly vigorous. But it has been equally significant in the harder decades between, when the women's enterprise has nevertheless continued, inside as well as beyond the ALP.

We also suggested at the outset that the other concept we believed would be useful in understanding the experiences of NSW ALP women in this period was their location in relationship to the broader labour movement. Labor women, like Labor men, have never confined their political activities simply to the parliamentary Party. The broader Labor movement, whether through the industrial wing of the union movement, in which women have participated both as workers in their own right and as campaigning wives; through other labour-oriented organisations, for example the Fabian Society or the Communist Party of Australia; or through the organisations women have built to meet their own needs, for example the Union of Australian Women, the Unemployed Girls Movement, the Council of Action for Equal Pay and the Ernies, has provided a spacious arena for the activism of Labor women. It is when their efforts are placed in this broader context that the true achievement of NSW Labor women can be both appreciated and understood, not just for their passionate and persistent commitment, but also for the pragmatic brilliance of their ever-flexible strategic skill.