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INTRODUCTION

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S NON- GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS AND GOVERNMENT

An Evolving Relationship?

Judith Smart and **Marian Quartly**

The articles making up this themed section of *Australian Feminist Studies* were first given as papers in November 2011 to a two-day workshop at the Australian National University (ANU). Titled *Australian Women's Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and Government: An Evolving Relationship?*, the workshop was led by Professors Marian Sawer and Pat Grimshaw, and hosted by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the School of Politics and International Relations at ANU. The workshop was originally conceived as an outcome of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant investigating the history of the National Council of Women of Australia. Judith Smart and Marian Quartly, the chief investigators, intended the workshop to bring together historians, social scientists, senior government officials past and present and representatives of the peak bodies currently recognised by government as representing women. The aim was to review past and present relationships between national women's organisations and governments, and to contribute to a productive framework for future dialogue on policy issues between Women's NGOs and government. Over the two days of the workshop, these aims were achieved to a degree that delighted the organisers. The stories from the previous century told by historians and femocrats informed and enriched the conversations between present-day bureaucrats and the representatives of the six women's 'alliances'.

Full papers were presented only on the first day of the workshop, and the collection published here is only a fraction of these; several presenters currently employed within the women's movement found that their burden of work made it impossible to formalise their papers for publication. We regret that we cannot reproduce all these papers, and even more that we cannot give a full account of the lively discussions of the second day of the workshop. A brief snapshot must suffice. Presenters from the six National Women's Alliances welcomed the opportunity to discuss the problems and opportunities they have experienced in their relationship to government. The three 'issue-based' coalitions (the Economic Security for Women Alliance, the Equality Rights Alliance, and the Australian Women against Violence Alliance) reported problems with engagement both amongst the groups they represented and on the part of government agencies; speakers believed that the Alliance framework should be used by government to amplify women's voices rather than to funnel and quieten them. They also reported instances of being frozen out of the policy process. On the other hand, the recurrent funding given in 2011 to cover the salary costs of alliance administrators was a welcome change to the previous system of intermittent project funding. The three sector-based coalitions (the National Rural

Women's Coalition and Network, the Australian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Alliance and the National Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Women's Alliance) spoke of the need for leadership and capacity-building programmes amongst their memberships, for full-time funding for administrators, and for more collaboration with other alliances.¹

The final session of the workshop was a panel discussion—with much audience participation—on the future of the relationship between government and women's NGOs. Current relations were seen as largely positive, though NGOs regretted the tightly structured work plans and high level of reporting required by government. Funding was seen as inadequate, especially for the newest alliances, and it was agreed there was a need to calculate the economic value of the voluntary work on which all the alliances depended. Strategies were also discussed for strengthening the alliances and the women's movement as a whole; these included expanding capacity building in the alliances, sharing good practice, renewing relationships with academics and researchers and developing strategic partnerships with party and parliamentary committees. Speakers regretted the loss of opportunities for the alliances to set their own agendas with government, as used to happen through the Australian Women's Organisation Conference held before Ministerial Round Tables in the 1990s. The workshop proposed a return to independently organised NGO meetings before regular meetings with government.

The articles gathered here provide an overview of the long history of the Australian women's movement's relations with government, from the beginnings of the last century to the present. Three of the articles, arranged here in roughly chronological order, cover the broad sweep of Australian women's organisations, from mainstream to radical feminist. The fourth is a reflective piece by one of the leading femocrats of the 1970s, Sara Dowse. The fifth considers the last two decades of interaction between governments and women's organisations from both theoretical and policy perspectives. All of the articles reflect in different ways on the question: 'What did women want of government, and how did they try to achieve that?' More implicitly, they pose or sometimes skirt the question: 'What worked, and why?' All in different ways demonstrate the proposition put by Marian Sawer and Gwen Gray in the last of the articles published here, 'that most of the achievements of the movement have been on the terms set by the governments involved'.

The contents of these articles in more detail are as follows.

In 'The Australian National Council of Women: Its Relations with Government to 1975,' Marian Quartly and Judith Smart focus on a movement that had its origins, internationally and nationally, in a desire to reflect the interests of women engaged in organised public work of all kinds through a system of delegates from affiliated societies. The article argues that this 'umbrella structure of the National Councils put representation at the heart of what they claimed and promised: to speak nationally and internationally for the women of Australia.' It then examines the actual basis of this claim and assesses how politically effective some of the Council's interventions were before 1975. In both respects, Quartly and Smart express some reservations, for the Council's claim to reflect the views of Australian women was always contested, and its achievements in legislative terms were limited and slow. Nevertheless, the article demonstrates that the representative claim had more validity than that of any other organisation and that governments mostly accepted it—though not exclusively—when seeking the views of women on a range of issues. It also shows that the Council's long-fought campaigns over key issues such as marriage law and equal pay did eventually bring legal victories that were at least partly attributable to

the consistent and determined representations of the mainstream feminist movement epitomised by the Australian National Council of Women.

Merrindahl Andrew's contribution, 'Historical Moments: The View from WEL', examines the relations with government of a second-wave organisation that was formed in 1972 for the explicit purpose of exercising feminist influence on electoral politics and public policy. The article argues that the Women's Electoral Lobby emerged out of the Women's Liberation Movement but that its essentially pragmatic objectives and ways of working, and its close relations with government, created tensions within the second-wave feminist movement that were not fully resolved by WEL's claims to be working for the 'pre-conditions of revolution'. Criticisms of this approach are now seen by some as confirmed by the decline of the femocrat in conjunction with the recent 'erosion of Australian women's policy machinery and feminist-inspired programmes.' In describing WEL's use of tactics in forming relations with governments, Andrew acknowledges the organisation's continuity with 'a tradition of women's advocacy and social justice advocacy' (through surveys, written submissions, consultation) but also points to some distinctive aspects of its engagement: notably publicly shaming politicians and other public figures for misogynist statements, unprecedentedly detailed written interventions in policy-making processes, and the invention of the widely adopted 'hub and spoke' model of a central women's policy unit co-ordinating the work of multiple women's units in government line departments through a self-consciously feminist process of networking. In detailing the achievements, she also argues the case for WEL's consistency with the aims of second-wave feminism and the fallacy of seeing goal-oriented change as separate from the transformational and emotional imperatives of the movement.

In titling her article 'Women's Liberation was a movement, not an organisation,' Susan Magarey reminds us that because one did not 'join' Women's Liberation and there was no formal structure, decisions about liaising with other bodies, including state instrumentalities, could not be made on behalf of the movement as a whole. She also pays heed to the self-consciously revolutionary ambivalence (at times outright antagonism) towards the state that was a defining characteristic of second-wave feminism. Yet, as she notes in the second part of this essay, 'there were moments when the Women's Liberation Movement did pay attention to the state,' both through WEL's activities and through self-identified liberationists who became femocrats such as Carol Treloar, Lyndall Ryan and Sara Dowse, some of whose experiences and insights are discussed here. Although such engagements were always subject to criticism and the movement as a whole resisted co-option, Women's Liberation fostered institutions such as refuges that depended for their survival on governments, and many in the movement came to see the state as 'porous, changeable, accessible to popular demand.'

Sara Dowse herself contributes a paper to this collection, in the form of 'A Memoir' that recalls the very different values underlying the new feminist imperatives to action, the excitement that accompanied the election of the Whitlam government in 1972, 'the strange amalgam of hard political thinking and socialist-feminist analysis that was to characterise Australian feminist involvement in government for a number of years to come', and the sense of making the world anew with the state as benefactor and facilitator not policeman. Above all, this is an engaging account of being admitted to the world of West Block after being checked out by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), followed by immersion in highly creative policy work, then being caught up in the devious ploys to force Elizabeth Reid's resignation (Dowse gives her

version here to correct the record) and, finally, to her great surprise, being selected to head the Women's Affairs Branch under the Fraser government in 1975. This is a valuable historical document about the early development of women's policy machinery in Australian government through the eyes of one of the key figures in its evolution.

The final article in this collection, 'The Women's Movement and Government: Feminist Fading?' by Marian Sawer and Gwendolyn Gray, examines the reasons for 'a loss of interest by governments in courting the women's movement'. The authors argue that this stems only in part from 'co-option and displacement of goals' and resulting deradicalisation through 'institutionalisation and entanglement in the state'. Also important are generational change, the need for feminists to form strategic institutional alliances to be effective, trends by increasingly neoliberal governments towards asserting greater control over funded advocacy bodies, and the decline in media and public interest in women's movement activities and demands. Nevertheless, 'feminist fading' has not been universal, they argue, and, in the women's health movement in particular, 'women working in women's services have not become depoliticised' or deradicalised, and feminist principles have been sustained, albeit channelled in a way largely controlled by governments.

In conclusion, a cynic might observe that little has changed: women propose and governments dispose. A more generous judgement recognises that the outcomes of the workshop—both these reflective papers and the practical policy discussions—are evidence of the continuing strength and the increasing complexity of the Australian women's movement.

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NOTE

1. Since the workshop, the six alliances have been reduced to five; their contact details are as follows:

Rural Women

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Elizabeth Phillips (Administrator)
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Economic Security 4 Women

Sharon Page

Email: coordinator@security4women.org.au

Website: www.security4women.org.au/

National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA)

Michelle Deshong and Dorinda Cox

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Australian Women against Violence Alliance

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