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THE PRIME MINISTER'S WOMEN

Sara Dowse

Abstract This is a biographical account of the early years of the Women's Affairs Branch, later the Office of the Status of Women, within the Canberra bureaucracy. It invokes personal experience in order to set the record straight, to address historical absences and to bring past strategies to bear on present policy.

It has been said often enough that women's history is characterised by its own peculiar lacunae; those absences from the record that are themselves indicative of our relative powerlessness. Although in recent years effort has gone into redressing this, and we have a much clearer picture of our past, it remains the case that power is the author of history. The short five-year period from 1973 to 1977 when I found myself working for the Australian federal government was the most exciting, most creative of my life. Many of our achievements are with us in more sophisticated form today; some have been diluted, and others lost entirely. With the coming to office of Australia's first female prime minister, under the aegis of a female governor-general and women cabinet ministers so numerous they scarcely raise an eyebrow, it may be hard to get excited about the appointment of a women's adviser to a male prime minister's staff or the establishment of a small bureaucratic unit in his department. But at that stage in our history, and in the history of Australian women's relationship with our government, we were pioneers, and as such were subject to both the freedom and the challenges with which pioneers of all sorts are faced. What follows is only a glimpse of that experience, and what it was like for me. I believe it has been worth recording for its own sake, and also because many of the issues that confronted us then are with us still today, for all our undoubted progress. Most of all, this is my attempt to fill in one of those lacunae that dog women's history.

Introduction—Women in the Prime Ministerial Portfolio

In the spring of 1973, five months after the election of the first federal Labor Government in 23 years, Gough Whitlam, the new prime minister, appointed a special adviser on women's affairs to his office staff. This, the first such appointment in any western democracy, was a sign of the times. Feminism's second wave had reached Australia's shores in the late 1960s, where it broke on fertile ground. Australia then was very much a man's world; to an outsider like me, born in the United States and arriving in Australia in the late 1950s, the rigid segregation of the sexes at work and at play, the institutionalised differential in pay rates and the emphatic cultural expression of male superiority seemed balder and deeper than anything I had known in my native country. It was not surprising, then, that Australian women embraced the resurrected feminism. What was peculiarly Australian was its coinciding with the election of a reformist government after such a long stretch of conservative rule.

Yet Australia's political climate post-war, indeed throughout the period since its emergence as a nation, was markedly different from what it has been for the last 30 years. The earlier paradigm was predicated on the belief that Australia was a harsh land whose distinctive history and distance from metropolitan markets necessitated substantial government assistance. Thus, Australian society was characterised by the expectation that many kinds of individual endeavour would find natural support from the state (Hancock 1930). This was the general view of conservative and progressive parties alike, until it was challenged in the 1980s, and it was the climate in which Elizabeth Reid, Whitlam's special adviser, was appointed, and women's relationship with government was firmly bureaucratised.

I was appointed to head the small departmental section which was to provide Reid with desperately needed bureaucratic support. It took over a year after Reid's appointment for that section that to be fully operational, in July 1974. As well as what it portended for women's interaction with government, the establishment of a women's affairs section in Prime Minister's was indicative of significant changes taking place in that department.¹ Since its own creation, prime minister's had functioned chiefly as a clearing house for cabinet submissions and ministerial correspondence, but under the Labor Government it was becoming less of a 'post office' and was beginning to flex its muscle as a powerful policy-directing department, a rival to the treasury as the central coordinating agency in government. As if to mirror this in microcosm, the women's affairs section was initially charged with dealing with a backlog of correspondence, but as part of this exercise and in support of Reid's objectives, we were to take an ever-increasing role in the development of women's policy.

I came to work in West Block after a brief spell in Whitlam's office before the necessary security clearance came through. In response to the novelty of a Labor government, whose members in general were still regarded as suspect, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had waived such clearances for ministerial officers and focused on the departments where, unlike today, the real power was. As a Class 11 officer, at the top of what was then known as the third division, I was one of only three female officers so ranked in the public service, and, paradoxically, higher in rank than Reid. This made ASIO nervous: a Class 11 officer in Prime Minister's had access to the full range of government documents, from classified to top secret, and I, an 'outside' appointment, had walked off the street, so to speak.² Yet the fact was that, for all the opportunity, there was absolutely no time to ferret through secret documents, even if I had been so inclined. A nation was on the brink of change, no more so than for its women, and there were far more important demands on my attention.

In the many interviews after her appointment, Reid had told the media that she hoped to hear from the women of Australia. The women of Australia took her at her word. Apart from Whitlam himself, she received more mail than any minister; by 1974 there were 500 pieces of correspondence to be answered. The usual practice in Prime Minister's was to forward letters to the relevant departments and wait for their set of words, but none of the departments were furnishing satisfactory replies. Few had any policy focus on the issues women were raising, and those they did have were often deficient or even negative. So the simple exercise of dealing with this impasse plunged us into policy formulation straight away.

'The personal is political' was the catchcry of the women's movement. With only three permanent officers in the section apart from myself, applying this tenet was going to

be difficult, but it set the tone and parameters of our operation, and as we grew in number our reach was extended. We sought and secured the right to comment on all cabinet submissions for their impact on women, and this formed a major part of our work. We helped set up the International Women's Year Secretariat. We had an interest for a time in Whitlam's projected rehabilitation and compensation commission until he was forced to abandon it owing to the fierce opposition from the insurance industry. We secured the funding for women's health centres, and sat on the interdepartmental committee serving the cabinet subcommittee on regional employment, where we fought to find jobs for women under the scheme. We worked on policies of contract compliance, an early, unsuccessful attempt at establishing affirmative action that would come into its own under the Hawke government. We produced a working paper on the dual-income family, another concept articulated well ahead of its time. For all the range of our interests, circumstance and our straitened resources meant that we had to prioritise, and so we directed most of our energies to what we judged were three key issues: child care, women's refuges and the ongoing government machinery for women.

Just before the Whitlam government was dismissed, and after Reid had resigned, the section became the Women's Affairs Branch, and I its acting assistant secretary, a member of the Senior Executive Service as it is known today. Again, although our brief was wide, we continued to concentrate on child care, refuges and government machinery and found surprising support from Fraser and his minister assisting, Ian Macphee. At the beginning of 1977 the branch was upgraded again and became the Office of Women's Affairs. It looked like a promotion, and it was for me, but what it actually signified was the removal of the office at the year's end to a new, low-ranking department of home affairs.

These are the bare bones of the unit's history, more details of which have been published elsewhere (Dowse 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984; Sawyer 1990; Watson 1990; Eisenstein 1996). It should not surprise anyone, though, that, like much of women's history, the early presence of a women's brief in the Australian prime minister's portfolio and the pioneering work we did in it have faded with time. The office, renamed the Office of the Status of Women, was returned to the department in 1983 and remained there until 2004, when Howard sent it to his Family and Community Services portfolio where, renamed again, it stayed during the Rudd and Gillard years. In the 2013 election campaign, Tony Abbott promised to return it to his department; it remains to be seen what will be done with it there. As for its history, what follows represents a different, more personal slant on it; some meat on the bones, one might say. It is also an attempt to retrieve some of what has faded, and to offer my observations for policy-making today.

Blanked Out of History

In 2011, to mark its centenary, the prime minister's department published its official history. What is noteworthy about *From Postbox to Powerhouse* from my point of view is the striking omission of any serious examination of the department's role in nurturing and expanding the Women's Affairs function (Stevens, Weller, and Scott 2011). Given the amount of work we undertook and its undoubted significance, it is dismaying that only a few paragraphs are devoted to women's policy, the machinery we developed for implementing it and the fate of the office I headed. Neither I nor Lyndall Ryan, who joined the section not long after it was established, was interviewed, despite our being two of the earliest femocrats. One could even suspect that the very idea of femocracy

being hatched within the walls of West Block has been a source of departmental discomfort rather than the honour it is. It has been years since I was active in policy-making or devoted myself to analysing it, yet the publication of this rather turgid official history brought so much of it back, and its dismissiveness towards us led me to recall that I was no less the outsider than I am today.

1972 was a tidal year for me. Towards the end of it I began to work for the Australian Government, as a journalist grade C in the Australian Information Service (AIS). Because of this I had had to take out Australian citizenship and as a result was to lose my American one; that is how it was those days. To make matters worse, the tone in the US Consulate's letter was one of supercilious astonishment, as if no one in full control of their faculties could contemplate ceasing to be an American. There was one last chance to repent: to avow that becoming an Australian was the result of a kidnapping or my being drugged or in an otherwise incapacitated state. I refused and was asked to hand over my passport. I did not realise how this would affect me but it did profoundly. When I left America my parents were under a cloud, having been blacklisted in the McCarthy years; my relationship with my birth country was ambivalent because of it, and may indeed have been the unconscious cause of my readiness to emigrate.

But something occurred just before this that did much to reconcile me to the finality of my loss. On 2 December, the Whitlam Labor Government was elected. For me it was especially significant: by quirk of circumstance (I had migrated before I could vote in the United States), that Saturday's election had been the first in which I had cast my ballot, my first act of citizenship, there or anywhere. And in just a few months later, Reid, whom I admired greatly for the talks she had given at our women's liberation meetings, was appointed to Whitlam's staff. Her rivals for the position were to become some of the country's most accomplished women in their fields (Susan Ryan, Anne Summers, Eva Cox and Lyndall Ryan among them) but at the time the publicity surrounding the creation of such a position and Reid's appointment to it was a farce. It would take years before the Australian media could handle women in responsible positions or issues concerning women with any kind of maturity, and if the treatment of Julia Gillard is anything to go by, the idea of women in authority still has not quite sunk in.

Ironically, and with great perspicacity for the time, what Reid aimed for was a complete overhaul in attitudes towards women's place in society. She did not see herself as a reformer, but believed that changing the law, though important, was merely a stage in that long, more important revolution in attitudes; a conviction she shared with many members of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), though she was not one at the time.³ In her early days in the job, she sought advice from a small circle of women public servants, several of whom had been appointed to senior positions never before occupied by women. Apart from Reid and myself, most of them had been seasoned in the service. We met about once a month and began to develop the strange mix of hard pragmatic thinking and socialist-feminist analysis that was to characterise Australian feminist involvement in government for a number of years to come.

A few months after Reid's appointment, the phone rang in the living room of my Canberra house. The caller introduced himself as Clyde Cameron, the federal Minister for Labour and Immigration. At first I thought the call was a joke, and would have hung up, but the caller persisted. Eventually I twigged that, on Reid's recommendation, I was being offered a job. It was a temporary one, but the pay was double what I was getting at AIS, and the work, by my lights, infinitely more worthwhile. Cameron had a vacancy on his staff

that union rules did not allow him to fill until after a three-month cooling-off period, but he could use it to second me in the meantime to draft some speeches he needed. He had just returned from the Labor Party conference where women delegates had finally succeeded in getting three platform amendments adopted, committing the government to introducing equal-pay, part-time work and child care in its own jurisdictions, and promoting them wherever possible in the community. All these were squarely within the minister's bailiwick, and the speeches he wanted would delineate the principles underpinning these policies and indicate ways in which the government would implement them.

It was pretty tough going, that dry run on Cameron's staff. Peg Lee, his secretary, took the time to teach me in those pre-computer days the all-important art of dictation, provided me with other valuable skills and, importantly, a measure of confidence. The most significant speech I drafted gave a history of Australia's basic wage, how it had institutionalised unequal wage rates between the sexes, and how dismantling it in its traditional form was essential to giving women pay equity. Once Cameron delivered the speech, the government was committed to supporting the extension to women of what was then the adult minimum wage. The following March, WEL joined the government in arguing the case before the Arbitration Commission. WEL's Edna Ryan had done the work that Cameron's department would not, sifting through all the federal awards to demonstrate that, since the Commission's granting of equal pay for equal work late in 1972, extending the minimum wage to women would not cost employers anything like what they claimed. With Ryan's evidence before them, the Commission agreed and so, in 1974, nearly seven decades of institutionalised wage discrimination in Australia came to an end.

The Season in West Block

By this time I was back in AIS, waiting to hear if my appointment to prime minister's had been approved. Before I could begin working in West Block, I had to get that necessary security clearance. Worried that it was taking so long, I waited at AIS and dared to make one call to Prime Minister's a week. At last, the head of the personnel division rang to say that he wanted to see me. He ordered a car for me, and I met him that afternoon in West Block. Keith Pearson was in his fifties then, with a shiny bald pate and a narrow face shaped somewhat like a Bourbon's. His eyes, though, were warm and dark, and he seemed to be enjoying himself.

He gestured for me to take a chair but did not take one himself. Instead, half-perched on the edge of his desk, his arms folded neatly over his chest, he asked if I had guessed what the problem was. 'Well, I'm going to tell you, just to put you out of your misery,' he said.

You see, Ms Dowse, into this building comes every important document pertaining to the government—every ministerial letter, every cable, every cabinet submission, every budget paper. There are papers that come to us that no one in the prime minister's office will lay eyes on, unless it is specifically requested. And because of this every officer here from senior adviser up is obliged to have a top secret classification. And we've had trouble getting one for you.

I said nothing, other than that I understood.

He continued in this quasi-facetious fashion. 'It's owing, of course, to the unfortunate fact that you were born overseas. There's a lot more work involved, ASIO has to get in touch with other intelligence agencies. It's a formality, but it has to be gone through and if you hadn't gone and got yourself born in America,' he joked, 'we would have had you here in a minute. We are aware how anxious Elizabeth Reid is to have you begin, and between your phone calls and hers I thought it would be best to let one of you know. Don't worry, we'll have you here as soon word comes through.'

I thanked him for taking the trouble, but did not share his confidence. My mother's communist background was on the record for anyone to see: someone had given my parents' names to the House Un-American Activities Committee, my stepfather had been writing radio scripts about the Federal Bureau of Investigation when he lost his job. When the front desk rang to say that my car was waiting, Pearson was obliged to escort me to the foyer—no one from outside the department could wander through building unattended—but, with his hand on the knob of his office door, he said: 'You realise, don't you, that all of what I've said is confidential. And if it should get back to me that I did tell you, I will deny it, of course.'

Later Pearson would become my boss when he was transferred from personnel and put back into a policy area where he belonged, and I would become more acquainted with his intellect and humanity. Yet after that first encounter I could not begin imagine him figuring in my future. I was convinced that ASIO would never grant me that precious top security clearance. The blacklisting of my parents was bad enough, but I was a radical too and a radical left position could make one susceptible to the wildest anxieties about the omniscience of intelligence. But phone-tapping then was nothing like it is today; it was cumbersome and costly and reserved for a handful of activists. Still, we learned of the existence of thousands of files on people, opened on the flimsiest of pretexts, and ASIO operatives were a fixed feature at demonstrations and meetings, most of them easily identified. Yet somehow, to my amazement, my clearance came through. How could they have spent so much time on me and come up with nothing?

There was, however, one last brush with them. Now a senior adviser, lodged in my carpeted cloister in West Block, next to the cooing pigeons and privy to all those government papers, I had to be given an intelligence brief. This came from the department's resident ASIO officer, who in his demeanour at least conveyed an alarming earnestness, though this seemed so surreal it could have been a clever act. I had learned from my friend and referee, Beryl Henderson, that ASIO had paid her a visit and questioned her thoroughly on my domestic aptitude: how often I swept my kitchen floor and whether or not I was a conscientious mother. There were other concerns. I was to contact the officer at once if approached by anyone from an East European consulate or embassy, if I was asked to dinner, or a drink, even as much as a glass of tea. He warned that these operatives were extremely ruthless and cunning and a naive housewife, as ASIO clearly perceived me, would be so much edible meat. He discoursed at length on the diligence with which the KGB, the Soviet intelligence agency, trained its operatives, and how deep was its penetration. In the remote wilds of Siberia were these villages, he said, one replicating an American prairie community, another a hamlet in rural England, even an *Australian country town*, complete in every detail, down to the last Violet Crumble bar. KGB agents made a speciality of preying on women, and they also had luscious women to gobble up unsuspecting men. Not once in all this did the officer ease up on this. His eyes shone with candour. Or maybe it was all just to scare me. Maybe he enjoyed the fantasy. Maybe it was all a joke to him too.

As the briefing spun to its close, he reached into the top drawer of his filing cabinet and pulled out a pamphlet—the *coup de grace*. Entitled *They Trade in Treachery*, it was one step above the most lurid comics of my childhood only because its simplistic, Manichean message was not actually delivered in cartoon. But the cover was a stellar representative of the genre. On a black background, a woman with the exaggerated bust and lips of comic book females (and cranked up a notch for spies) lay sprawled in a suggestive pose at odds with her mannish grey suit. What appeared to have felled her was not the boyish charm of any counterintelligence agent, but a large yellow bolt of lightning traversing the cover from the top right-hand corner to bottom left. This, I understood, turning it over in my hand as I stumbled out my gratitude, was to be a souvenir of the interview, and I would be allowed to take it with me, to have recourse to it from time to time, as a doubting Catholic might take to her rosary. Again, I was warned to speak of the briefing to no one. Was there to be no end of these conversations, I wondered, to be erased by either silence or denial?

1975 and after

To most people the bureaucracy conjures up images of boredom and buck-passing and paper-shuffling, but it as it turned out it was my good fortune to be in a new area, at a sufficiently high level in a powerful department, at this propitious time. The work, moreover, was highly creative. We were laying the foundations for a myriad of changes that one day would be taken so much for granted that women today can scarcely credit how different it had been 30, 10 years before. The circumstances were not easy, every day was a challenge, but I was working as people should, loving what they do and finding meaning in it. Then came 1975, International Women's Year, and the year that ripped Australia, and us, apart.

In June of that year, Elizabeth Reid was the star of the United Nations Conference for International Women's Year, the prime mover in drafting its world plan of action and getting it adopted. Her speech to the plenary session introduced the word 'sexism' to the official UN lexicon, thus incorporating it in languages around the world. It was a stunning achievement, and many women left Mexico City in the laughably mistaken belief that Australia was some kind of feminist paradise. In only a matter of weeks this illusion would be dispelled dramatically.

Throughout the year the Australia media had gorged on one scandal after another, and while Reid and I and the other members of the Australian delegation were attending the Mexico conference, the government's standing, bad enough when we left, dropped even further. Inflation was up to 17 per cent to 18 per cent; unemployment had just missed reaching 5.⁴ In the June Bass by-election, the Australian Labor Party candidate was defeated in a massive swing against the government. Now the party was running scared, and on social issues took an acute turn to the right. Instead of giving Reid the welcome she deserved after her performance in Mexico, both the press and the party excoriated her. The UN conference was represented as a high-priced junket funded by the taxpayer for sex-mad feminists bent on destroying the family. Asked to cancel the national Women and Politics conference scheduled for September, Reid refused, and that second conference, though brilliantly successful for the thousands of women across the political spectrum who attended, became, as the government feared, yet more fodder for the hostile media. Not long after, the opposition used its Senate majority in an unprecedented move to block supply.

Was Reid scapegoated for this? One thing is certain. The publicity surrounding her, and International Women's Year, became less and less tolerable. Whitlam, it was rumoured, decided he could no longer afford to have her on his staff, and asked John Menadue, the head of our department, to find her a job with us. Elizabeth resisted, for she knew it was an attempt to muzzle her. She told me in confidence what was happening and said that although she had no intention of becoming a public servant, she was bargaining with Menadue in order to raise the section's status to a branch.

Then, late one morning when I had been absent from West Block, I heard on my return that Menadue wanted to see me. I rushed downstairs to his office, and it was there that he told me that Reid had resigned, and the reason was that he had had to inform her that my staff would not work with her if she was brought to the department as planned. I was horrified, and nonplussed. My only source of that plan was Reid herself, so how could he have assumed we would not work with her, since we had never officially been asked? Back upstairs, I heard from Lyndall Ryan what had happened, that Menadue had come into the large draughty room where our small staff worked and, when he gave them the news that Reid was coming to the department, two of them—hard-working, intelligent women, concerned for their public service careers—asked to be transferred out of the section.

Menadue has written of this incident, and his memory of it differs in significant respects from mine. In his version, on informing me of Reid's imminent arrival in the department, he asked me to discuss it with the staff. Then, after about a half an hour's absence, I returned to tell him that we would not work with her. This is how the incident appears in his memoir, and, though I have written to him questioning this, all he has done is offer to delete the relevant paragraph in any subsequent reprint. It is his word against mine and I had learned, as I've said, how that game is played. All I can do is put my version on the record. It matters to me, and it mattered very much to me then.

I also knew that my task now was to drum up a protest, to signal to the government the extent of Reid's support among Australian women and what a bad move it was to get rid of her. It went beyond what I felt I owed her. We needed to demonstrate that she was not the liability the party supposed and that the government's policies for women were a plus for them electorally. The weekend after she resigned, Canberra was host to the annual women's liberation conference, this year on the theme of women and anarchy, chosen to signify as much as anything a further retreat from parliamentary politics. To the degree that I was now caught up in them, it was only natural that such a retreat would dismay me. In the face of it, I urged a letter campaign to the prime minister and also, particularly, to Menadue, to protest against Reid's forced resignation and somehow was able to convince hundreds of feminist anarchists that their letters could make an impact. The result was that hundreds of letters did come into the department, and this may explain the difference between my recollection and that of Menadue, a man I have always admired.

Soon after Reid's departure our section evolved into a branch, and I became an executive officer, acting in the position Reid would have occupied, until it could be permanently filled. In West Block and throughout the public service, dedicated officers made plans to work for nothing if the government's money ran out. On the afternoon of 11 November, Menadue came back from lunch and, happening to see Ryan in the corridor, told her that John Kerr, the former judge and intelligence officer whom Whitlam had picked for his governor-general, had turned around and sacked him, replacing him with Malcolm Fraser, the opposition leader and architect of the blocking of supply. Menadue

then called a branch heads meeting to inform us officially of the news. 'Lady (that was me) and gentlemen, I have to tell you that we have a new prime minister.' Coughs, exclamations and glances whizzed about the room. No one had anticipated it. No one, not even among those who had been most critical of the government, had realised that this is how the crisis would be resolved. Needless to say, the Yank that remained in me could never accept that an elected government could be so removed.

The department came to a standstill, as no decisions could be made by the caretaker prime minister or his cabinet. My desk was clear of paper, and each day I turned up to work to read Anne Summer's recently published *Damned Whores and God's Police*. I was full of admiration, and not a little envy. Why was I not writing books, instead of sitting at that desk? If the government were returned, I could consider leaving, confident that Ryan or someone equally efficient and dedicated could take my place. But if it were not? The position would be advertised and a conservative woman would be certain to be appointed. In that case, I would have to stay. Being second-in-command in such a scenario could be far more useful than being the woman out in front. Ryan agreed. Above all, we could not abandon the child care programme, the reform we had worked on the hardest and felt to be the most fundamental for women.

By 10 at night on 13 December enough votes were in to confirm a landslide coalition victory. I knew then my days as acting branch head were numbered. The position had to be filled, and the bureaucratic wheels began their ponderous turning. Neither Fraser nor Menadue wished for a repeat of the brouhaha that had surrounded Reid's appointment. This was a public service position, to be filled with propriety and discretion, what with the media prone to howling over any woman getting paid more than stenographer in a government job. The front runner was Kathy West, the outspoken conservative political scientist, and her appointment seemed a lay-down misère. Here was a highly educated, articulate spokesperson for the best of Liberal Party values, once a political candidate herself. We studied her articles and speeches, preparing ourselves for her arrival. Meanwhile, prompted by the urging of my staff and contrary to any expectation or desire, I had put in a bid for the job myself, merely to put on record the fine work I believed we had done, a sort of bureaucratic last gasp. Never once did I imagine that this was anything more than a gesture.

Then came the unexpected. After attending the interview, Kathy West immediately decided, as Reid had done before her, that she would be too circumscribed as a public servant, and withdrew her application. The news rippled towards us in an ominous wave. The two other applicants were deeply conservative, politically and socially. I went home that afternoon chastened but undaunted; we had weathered much so far, we could weather this, but it was going to be terribly hard.

It was my habit, as the typical public servant I now was, to turn on the radio to the 6 o'clock ABC news and listen straight afterwards to PM. So it was, as I stood at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes for dinner, that I heard for the first time that I had been selected, that I was Fraser's 'supergirl'. The shock was incredible. Whitlam's dismissal had rent the country in two; it was deeply, bitterly divided. How could I explain this to anyone in the movement? Or in the Labor Party? Be that as it may, how could I hope to pull it off? At that very moment, Milton Cockburn, who had been Clyde Cameron's private secretary, was being interviewed, telling listeners of the ruin of my parents' careers in the Hollywood blacklist. Undoubtedly, this disclosure would make things even tougher, if such a prospect could be envisaged, but I could have wept with gratitude.

It soon became clear that the department was making a stand of its own. I had experience and had shown myself to be a principled and resourceful bureaucrat. I knew the portfolio better than anyone other than Reid herself. I was told the following morning that when Menadue had presented the department's choice to Fraser, his only comment was, 'She's a socialist, isn't she?' In obedience to the Westminster principle, he gave no sign of disapproval. I was moved by Menadue's stand and Fraser's reaction as well. In this light, any further gesture of defiance on my part would seem narrowly and inappropriately political, and could jeopardise everything we had done. It appeared that I was going to have to cop it. That much of an Australian I had become.

Epilogue

For Women's Affairs (as we were still called, with its lingering hint of prurience) things were not as horrific as we had expected. Contrary to his public persona, Fraser proved more sympathetic to women's aspirations than we had ever thought. We had tagged him as an old-fashioned Tory, more a Lord Shaftesbury than a Whig and, guided by his election statements, we drafted our advice accordingly, and our instincts proved sound. Those were the days when public servants were encouraged to give their political masters a range of options, including those they were likely to oppose, and we discovered that Fraser was open to this kind of canvassing, more so than even Whitlam had been—a turn of events impossible to convey to our constituency at the time. On our three major issues—child care, refuges and the government machinery—we obtained spectacular victories owing to his backing. The Women's Affairs Branch sat at the hub of a number of women's units in key government departments, so an interdepartment co-ordinating group was formed, as was a committee comprising federal and state women's advisers. The groundwork was undertaken for establishing a women's advisory body, to become the National Women's Advisory Committee. We were able to frame a policy with the Social Security minister whereby child care was given the priority lost in the last days of the Whitlam Government, when the bulk of the allocation was turned over to sessional pre-schools instead of the day care needed by working mothers. Although Fraser had initially turned over the funding of refuges to the states, a crisis concerning two Queensland ones was resolved by the Commonwealth resuming direct funding and having the allocation doubled in what was an otherwise cost-cutting budget.

The problems we did have were bureaucratic rather than political. In 1976 John Menadue left the department to become Australia's ambassador to Japan. His replacement was Alan Carmody, an experienced public servant who had little sympathy for feminism and was jealous of our relationship with the minister assisting, as it gave us direct access to the prime minister while bypassing him. The Branch was soon promoted to an Office of Women's Affairs and I, again, was lifted to a higher rung on the bureaucratic ladder, all of which signified little more than Carmody's plans for our eventual departure from prime minister's, which occurred after the coalition's landslide return to government in December of that year. I took the opportunity to resign, and made it my business thereafter to see that the office was returned to prime minister's, where it had the clout it needed to effect significant reform. This was achieved in March 1983, when Bob Hawke became Prime Minister and the office, soon to be renamed Office of the Status of Women, was given division status in his department, with Susan Ryan his minister assisting and Anne Summers appointed the office's head.

The Hawke Government's signature achievement for women was the enactment of the *Sex Discrimination and Affirmative Action Acts* (of 1984 and 1986, respectively). A number of our earlier reforms were consolidated and formalised, such as the women's budget statement, or given more departmental support, like the women's desks that were revitalised in various government ministries. Child care was expanded significantly under Keating, but that very expansion carried the seeds of the programme's erosion as, in order to meet the demand, the commercial child centres were encouraged to participate on a scale never permitted before. Unfortunately, by the time Howard came to office, the community child care centres that had been at the programme's core had been overrun by commercial ones, and child care fees had gone through the roof; a situation that, despite improvements under Rudd and Gillard, persists today.

To a degree, all federal governments from Whitlam's onwards, with the exception perhaps of Howard's, responded to the presence of the newly resurrected feminism because of its perceived effect on the holy grail of the women's vote. Sometimes this was a misperception, if one that feminist groups and femocrats alike were happy to collude in. By 2013, however, feminism was no longer confined to activist groups but was strong enough in the community for a conservative opposition leader to promise an expensive parental leave scheme privileging high-earning women and threatening to unravel the private sector schemes that do exist, in order to improve his standing among women. Yet the need now is not for a lavish parental leave scheme but a programme of accessible, affordable and quality child care, which only goes to show that the more things change for women, the more they can stay the same. All these many years on, we still need affordable child care, a reduction in the horrific violence against us and a recognition of our right to full-fledged participation in society. Three decades of confused social signals coupled with an entrenched market ideology have produced outcomes none of us could have anticipated back in the 1970s, when government's role in bettering conditions for its citizens was unquestioned. For all the backsliding since, it is salutary to be reminded just what we did achieve then, and what needs to be built upon again.

NOTES

1. The official name is the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet but I use the less cumbersome short form throughout, and to avoid the equally awkward acronym PM& C. As well, for most of my time there, the department was housed in West Block and I use that building's name synonymously.
2. No wonder ASIO were alarmed. It is remarkable how radical many of the recruits to government were, and no more so than in our area. The years leading up to the Whitlam Government's election were characterised by wide social unrest on a number of fronts and street demonstrations were the common form of protest. Few of us had the qualifications required for comparable positions today and, as feminists, we differed considerably from the more established women's organisations that governments were accustomed to engaging with. See, for example, Quartly and Smart's paper in this series.
3. See Merrindahl Andrews paper in this series for a discussion of this. I can confirm that WEL's interaction with the government over the period discussed was absolutely vital for our work in the department.

4. Full employment in the post-war period was defined by an unemployment rate of between 1 per cent and 2 per cent. The rate in June 1975 was 4.7 per cent, considerably lower than what it has been in recent years, but then it was considered alarming.

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Sara Dowse was appointed head of the newly-created Women's Affairs Section in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1974. When she resigned in 1977, the Section had become the Office of Women's Affairs and she was on her way towards fulfilling her life's dream to become a writer. Her first novel, *West Block*, published six years later, was based on her experiences in the department. She has been working on a novel set in Russia and Palestine for a number of years.