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WOMEN'S LIBERATION WAS A MOVEMENT, NOT AN ORGANISATION

Susan Magarey

Abstract This article argues that understanding any relationship between the Women's Liberation Movement and the state depends upon a recognition of the variety and change through time encompassed by each. It considers, first, some of the key concerns of the Women's Liberation Movement in the years of its initial eruption, then three instances when individual participants in the Women's Liberation Movement engaged with government, and concludes, finally, that the driving force in each instance was ultimately the utopian dream of a level of transformation unimaginable in conjunction with any government that we know.

Introduction

This article began life as a paper prepared for a conference titled 'Australian Women's Non-Government Organisations and Government: An Evolving Relationship?' Other contributions were concerned with women working in sections of governments and in peak non-government organisations (NGOs) specifically concerned with women, many of which receive or received funding from government. The topic I was invited to discuss was the Women's Liberation Movement in relation to governments.

My first task, therefore, was to distinguish Women's Liberation from the other bodies represented and discussed in this collection. Accordingly, my argument begins with my title: Women's Liberation was a movement, not an organisation. Far larger, more anarchistic, occasional and inchoate than any organisation, the Women's Liberation Movement *formed* organisations, to be sure: refuges, working women's centres, rape crisis centres, Women's Studies units in institutions of tertiary education, for instance, just as it conducted specific campaigns: against sexist advertising, for the decriminalisation of abortion, for equal pay, again just for instance. But it did not, itself, become an organisation. This difference necessarily produces a history of relations with government different from any general story about government and NGOs.

Nevertheless, government—the state—has been a ubiquitous presence in relation to Australian feminism. This is not to argue, as does Marilyn Lake, that 'Australian feminists have always looked to the state to effect a redistribution of resources between men and women and to provide the security and protection in which women and girls might live in independence and freedom' (1999, 253). Nor am I endeavouring here to contribute to theories about the gendering of the state, such as are discussed by Suzanne Franzway, Dianne Court, and R.W. Connell (1989). Rather, my argument is, first, that to understand the relationship between the Women's Liberation Movement and the state, it is necessary to recognise both the entities—movement and state—as encompassing great variety and change through time. A narrative allowing for a more nuanced and varied set of

relationships between feminists and government, as in Marian Sawer's entry on 'Political Institutions' in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Feminism* (1998, 239–247), might describe changes from outright rejection in the early 1970s to a 'fandango' with the state in the mid-1970s (Dowse 1983), to 'the Femocrat' of the 1980s, to the National Women's Alliances of the early twenty-first century. Such changes do not represent a feminist 'fading', as discussed in another contribution to this collection, as often as they might demonstrate pragmatic compromise. One of the three stories central to this article shows an ability to meld unquestioningly two apparently contradictory concepts together; another represents a conversion; the third depicts a clearly recognised distinction between movement and state, with a graphically imagined desire to make each serve the other. Nevertheless, all three also demonstrate the overwhelming desire unleashed in Women's Liberation for an order of transformation unimaginable in conjunction with any kind of government that we know. Such a narrative presents only one set of variations within feminism, however, and there were and are others (e.g. Brown 2005, 98–115; Magarey 2010, 93–105; Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 2013, 7–102) in which the state does not even figure.

Similarly, an examination of some of the understandings of the state among feminists shows not only variety but also historical change in the economic and political character of the state in Australia, change that brought fresh analyses and thence engagements between feminists and governments. An understanding of the state inherited from the Marxist and the anarchist left of the 1960s saw the state as an agent of class oppression, with nothing to offer women or gender politics. Social democratic understandings depicted a more porous state committed to the social security, indeed the social welfare, of its citizens, a commitment that does offer protections and benefits to women, though not as extensively as to men (Baldock and Cass). An understanding of the challenges offered to even a conservative social democratic state by neo-conservative economies during the globalisation of capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, with deregulation of markets and finance and redirection of resources from the public to the private sector, prompted serious anxieties about the willingness or the ability of governments to ameliorate economic exploitation or deprivation and the gendered effects of those failures and refusals (Edwards and Magarey 1995; Magarey 2010, 99–105). The Australian Labor Government's unique success in weathering the 2008 Global Financial Crisis has gendered consequences, of course, but they are beyond the reach of this article, which is focused primarily on the 1970s, the time when many of the ideas of late twentieth-century sexual politics were first articulated.

Much of the research in this article consists of interviews with participants from the early years of the Women's Liberation Movement. These interviews were conducted during the 1990s as part of a project funded by the Australian Research Council on the history of the Women's Liberation Movement; that is, 20 years on from the events and ideas in which these women were involved. In an earlier article, I have written about some of these interviews and about memory being, in Raphael Samuel's words, 'stamped with the ruling passions of its time' (Samuel 1994, x). That same piece notes, about oral interviews, that as Hank Nelson and Tim Bowden found when they interviewed men who had survived being prisoners of war in the horrific camps of the Pacific during Second World War, 'the performance element in oral remembering made for a more intensely emotional experience, and one which "revealed more", partly because the speaking voice is less private than the written' (quoted in Hamilton 1994, 22). The interviews that appear

in this article manifest strongly a desire that the utopian vision—the passionate belief that Women’s Liberation really would change the world—should not be forgotten, not distorted by subsequent analysis and never restricted to what a government might deem possible.

Key Concerns of the Women’s Liberation Movement

Let me begin by quoting from some interviews with participants in the early years of the Women’s Liberation Movement. I say ‘participants’ because Women’s Liberation did not have memberships or subscribers. As feminist historian Ann Curthoys said, ‘You didn’t actually “join,” you just went along’ (Curthoys 1988, 2). These are the voices of women who also feature in Marilyn Lake’s tenth chapter (1999, 231–237) and in Jean Taylor’s *Brazen Hussies* (Taylor 2009). Here is Sue Jackson in Melbourne:

I don’t know if you’ve seen photographs of it, from that time, and everyone from Margaret Whitlam on through, all the women of that time, there’s that look on the face. That wide-eyed sort of bright and hopeful look and it was that feeling, you know. There was a feeling of incredible anger, of course, when you’re understanding all the various ways ... in which women are oppressed. But at the same time, this sense of joy and power coming from this working together and working it out and the scales being taken from the eyes. (Interview with Ruth Ford about the history of the Women’s Liberation Movement, 3 November, Jackson 1997: unless otherwise noted, oral interviews quoted are in the possession of Susan Magarey; Magarey 2005, 2–3)

Margaret Whitlam was herself an active feminist and, from the moment of his election at the end of 1972, wife of the Australian Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the first Labor prime minister in 23 years (Hocking 2012, 1–3). Sydney broadcasters Julie Rigg and Julie Copeland remembered ‘that new tone we could hear in women’s voices: a boldness and enthusiasm for the possibilities of change’ (1985, 1). ‘Everyone was sort of like on fire’, said Eileen Capochi, another Melbourne woman, ‘it was so exciting. And at the same time very scary ... It was like being caught in a torrent, a river, and being carried along by the current’ (Interview with Ruth Ford about the history of the Women’s Liberation Movement, 1 October, Capochi 1997; Magarey 2005, 2–3). ‘It was a revolution, you know’. This was Jean Taylor, also in Melbourne. A revolution, and ‘We were the front-line troops’ (Interview with Ruth Ford about the history of the Women’s Liberation Movement, 12 December, Taylor 1997; Magarey 2005, 2–3). ‘Oh, we were going to change the world’, said Eva Cox, in Sydney, ‘it was an incredibly exciting time because you thought everything was possible’ (Interviewed by Ann Mari Jordens. Sound recording on four digital audio tapes, National Library of Australia, Cox 2002).

It was, literally, ‘everything’ that was up for question, reassessment, discussion and for trying out. Here is Laurie Bebbington (Interview with Ruth Ford about the history of the Women’s Liberation Movement, 7 December, 1997):

I find it quite irritating now that young women will ... categorise the Women’s Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement back then, as a movement of middle-class women, you know, none of whom were Kooris or ... from a different

ethnic background ... It was just not true. There [were] women across class, across race barriers, across ethnic origins ... across ages—and that was one of the things that was really exciting. There [were] women in Women's Liberation who were still at secondary school. Sixteen-year-old women. And there were women who were fifty or sixty. And who came from really quite different backgrounds. And I think that ... one of the things that was really vibrant about it, [was] that it didn't much matter what sort of woman you were ... Because it was issues ... no matter where you came from there were relevant issues about why you were where you were.

Some of these issues were very preliminary, though that did not make them any the less intense or any less intensely contested. The question of men coming to Women's Liberation meetings, for instance, was, at least initially, a matter of concern especially to women accustomed to meetings of the various parties and groupuscules of the left; it was a matter of even greater concern to their men. Martha Ansara had been one of the initiators of Women's Liberation in Sydney. 'It seemed to me', she recalled:

that because women's voices had been so overwhelmed by the voices of men, and because, in fact, our agendas conflicted, you would not have men at the meetings. It didn't make any sense. Well, you know, this just got debated and debated, and the communist women ... couldn't see any reason why the comrades couldn't all be equal together. So we said 'Okay. We'll hold an open meeting'. That open meeting ... was enough to do the trick. The men came in and they hogged all the conversation, and they were opinionated. They used all those tactics and sort of overwhelming people, and that was it. They were out. (Interview with Tristan Slade about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 29 September, Ansara 1997)

This was but one of a series of decisions reached in the process of differentiating Women's Liberation meetings and activities from those of men, and men's organisations, whose structured forms facilitated their dominion over women and, for some, over each other. The distinguishing feature of Women's Liberation—distinguishing these new and anarchistic gatherings of women from traditional women's organisations, and also from the more reformist or special interest women's organisations that grew out of Women's Liberation—was Women's Liberation's commitment to the total transformation of the whole society, indeed of all societies. 'We saw ourselves', I wrote myself, 'as feminist revolutionaries'.

Our struggle against the power of men over women, of masculinity over femininity, was also simultaneously a struggle against any element in society having power over another—employer over worker, white over black, native-born over immigrant, teacher over student. (Magarey 1986, 196)

Women's liberation would liberate everyone, even children [*No author, interviews with Genevieve Macdougall (aged 8) and Katchen Cheney (aged 9 and a half) MeJane, 3 July 1971, 8–9*] (though I personally found that a little worrying).

The precise nature of that transformation—that socio-political revolution—was the subject of continuing, sometimes anxious, often inconclusive, discussion. Ideas changed with different experiences, with developments external to Women's Liberation, with the

rapidly growing reading that participants in Women's Liberation were absorbing from Britain, from the USA, from France and ultimately from each other. But they generally grouped around one or other of two broad emphases in a left-wing representation of the organisation of human society.

One emphasis focused on structure and its components. This emphasis developed an analysis of what would come to be labelled 'patriarchy' in the second half of the 1970s. Before that, it was best summed up by North American Robin Morgan when she wrote: 'capitalism, imperialism and racism are *symptoms* of male supremacy—sexism' (1970, xxxix). Structural analysis focused attention on the nuclear family as being simultaneously both the epitome of the hierarchical and exploitative relationships in sexist society, and its foundational structure. Proponents of this theory emphasised three of the four 'key structures' that English Juliet Mitchell identified as making up 'woman's condition', that is: production, reproduction and socialisation (the other is sexuality; 1971, Chapter five). They stressed the first three of North American Shulamith Firestone's four 'Revolutionary Demands': '(1) The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women'; '(2) The political autonomy, based on economic independence, of both women and children'; '(3) The complete integration of women and children into society'. (The fourth is: 'The sexual freedom of all women and children'; 1971, 192–195). Participants in Women's Liberation committed to bringing about structural change included a number of brave souls who experimented with living in domestic groups that were not nuclear families (which could cause difficulties over finding appropriately sized housing; Segal 2007, 76–78).

The other broad emphasis in understanding how societies worked focused on what could be called culture: how people thought and related. It was characterised by a re-definition of the 'political'. Australian Eileen Haley explained it like this:

Most people think of themselves as having a 'private life' in which politics does not operate. Politics is something that goes on 'out there'. Feminism shows this distinction as non-existent. It exposes the 'private life' areas as a political arena. It also shows how the dominant political system invades that private life continually in very deeply felt ways. The 'politics' which inhabits both areas welding them into a single system is that of male supremacy. (1973, 330)

This cultural emphasis focused on the pervasiveness of women's oppression, made ever more detailed in consciousness-raising groups. It concentrated on the political nature of individual efforts to make changes to personal relationships, in particular changes that could be related to the concept of sisterhood and changes that followed a Reichian notion of the autonomous, freely relating, sexually expressive human being. Some agreed with Juliet Mitchell that sex—'the opium of the people'—did not matter much; others followed Germaine Greer ([1970] 1993) and Shulamith Firestone, maintaining that sex—the basic form of all energy—mattered a lot. The cultural emphasis stressed the revolutionary implications of a movement which 'is not a movement one 'joins' ... It exists in your mind'—a kind of imagined community, perhaps (Anderson 1983). In a discussion in Canberra of the total transformation—the revolution—that Women's Liberation would bring, Julia Ryan decided that there was a contradiction between the prospect of women 'seizing power' and the necessity of 'retaining the qualities which make women more

human than men'. Biff Ward resolved that by saying 'We aren't on about gaining power. We are not in favour of anyone having power. This is the really revolutionary thing' (Ryan 1974, 86–87). Subsequently, Sara Dowse observed that 'Revolutionary groups must behave as if the revolution has occurred—otherwise there is no model', though she also noted that 'this often exposes them to a double strain' (Ryan 1974, 96).

There were other matters for discussion, too: the relationship between common experience based on gender and that based on class; the economic deprivation of all women relative to the men in the same class; how to understand the power differentials between Jacqui Onassis and her gardener; would wages for housework be a good idea?—just, for example. There were campaigns to organise: around access to abortion, to provide basic information about biology for women, for public provision of childcare, for equal pay, for paid maternity leave, for family planning centres and for the banning of pornography. There were organisations to form: the Women's Electoral Lobby and Labor Women. There were institutions to establish: women's refuges or shelters; women's health centres; feminist bookshops and women's information centres. All were supposed to manifest Women's Liberation's commitment to non-competitive and non-hierarchical self-management processes. None were expected to have anything much to do with governments. As founder of the Women's Electoral Lobby, Beatrice Faust in Melbourne, observed: 'Women's Liberation believed it was radical and had nothing to do with elections' (Interview with Ruth Ford about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, date missing, Faust n.d.). But Women's Liberation also believed that as Mavis Robertson in Sydney proclaimed, the Women's Liberation Movement was 'a movement not an organisation' (Robertson, cited in *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* 1973). Mavis Robertson had been a member of the Communist Party of Australia, so she was particularly well qualified to make the distinction.

Three Moments When Women's Liberation Gave Attention to the State

Nevertheless, there were moments when the Women's Liberation Movement did pay attention to the state, even became involved with the state. Some of the engagements between feminism and the state are well known. Marian Sawer and Gail Radford's excellent work *Making Women Count* (2008) details the origins of the Women's Electoral Lobby and its campaigns to influence the outcomes of elections. Sawer also describes the processes of appointing Elizabeth Reid to be women's adviser to Prime Minister Whitlam (Sawer 1990, 9–18). There are publications describing the emergence of the 'femocrat' and the femocrat network in government bureaucracies during the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Sawer 1990; Sawer and Radford 2008; Watson 1990). Instead of repeating such material, I would like to illustrate the engagement between participants in Women's Liberation and the state with three less well-known stories.

The first comes from South Australia where, in 1996, we interviewed Carol Treloar. She was a graduate of Sydney University, proud of the fact that—she had been told—Vice-Chancellor Dame Leonie Kramer had called her 'That Libertarian Marxist'. In 1996, she defined herself as a socialist feminist but 16 years later, in 2012, preferred to be considered simply as a feminist, who still believes in social justice and the importance of influencing policy change by governments and institutions (Interview with Deborah Worsley-Pine about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1 August, Treloar 1996; Treloar Email to Magarey, 28 May 2012). In 1975, she visited Adelaide, liked what she saw and

applied for a job with Premier Don Dunstan. She did not get that job but, soon afterwards, she was invited to apply for a post as press secretary for Peter Duncan, a newly elected member of the South Australian parliament, soon to be appointed attorney-general in the Dunstan cabinet.

Peter Duncan was a young firebrand, only 30 years old in 1975, with a background in student politics, Young Labor and opposition to the war in Vietnam while he was taking his law degree at Adelaide University during the 1960s. A radical reformist, he campaigned for rights for homosexuals, rights for women and against capital punishment and uranium mining. Twice he introduced legislation to decriminalise homosexual acts between men, finally succeeding in having his bill passed in 1975. His was the bill to abolish capital punishment, passed in 1976. He was a prime mover in the formation of the Labor Against Uranium Group. He did not introduce the pioneering *Sex Discrimination Act*, passed in 1975 but, as attorney-general, he became the minister responsible for the Commission for Equal Opportunity, which that legislation established. In response to a general public outcry over a British case of rape, he invited the Criminal Law and Penal Methods Reform Committee, headed by the Honourable Justice Roma Mitchell, to carry out an inquiry into the law relating to rape (Holmes 1977). It was at this moment that Carol Treloar came to work for him.

The Mitchell Committee's report was disappointing for, while it did take the radical step of considering the question of rape in marriage, it decided that a husband may only be charged with rape of his wife if husband and wife are living apart (Magarey and Round 2007, 234–238, 245). Not good enough, thought many—lawyers, academics, community groups, women's groups and a number of members of the Liberal Movement in the Legislative Council—including Carol Treloar, working with WEL member Deborah McCulloch, who was women's adviser to Premier Dunstan. Peter Duncan persuaded Dunstan's government to take on a reform that would 'criminalise any rape within marriage in South Australia'. We were, remembered Carol Treloar proudly, 'the first Common Law jurisdiction anywhere in the world to do so'. This legislation attracted intense interest and controversy across Australia, indeed across the Common Law world. It was, Carol recalled, 'an incredibly exciting time to be involved in a Labor government' (Interview with Deborah Worsley-Pine about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1 August, Treloar 1996).

Subsequently, in 1984, Carol was appointed women's adviser to a different Labor minister, Premier John Bannon. This was the period that saw the zenith of the femocrat across Australia; women's advisers were appointed in all major government departments in each of the states as well as in the Commonwealth. The achievements of the Women's Adviser's Office during the Bannon years in South Australia are impressive. Carol and her colleagues appointed a Domestic Violence Council, which produced a massive report, and at least some of the measures that it advocated were implemented. They changed the law relating to rape, expanding the definition of rape beyond penile penetration to cover a range of offences using other objects for genital penetration, and requiring the accused to give sworn evidence. They tackled a hitherto unrecognised injustice over women's superannuation, which was, as Carol said, 'a huge gap in the economic well-being of women'. Following an initiative begun at the national level by Anne Summers at the head of the Office for the Status of Women in the Commonwealth Government, South Australia successfully introduced its own comprehensive women's budget assessment. This required all government agencies in South Australia to assess their projected expenditure for its

impact on women; an immense undertaking, performed each year as a partnership between the Women's Adviser's Office and Treasury. It aimed, Carol wrote, 'to create a structural policy instrument for better understanding the differential impact of mainstream policy/expenditure on segments of the community, leading to improved targeting of this expenditure, and more effective programs' (Treloar Email to Magarey, May 2012). Treasury produced detailed publications issued each year as full state budget papers. It was, recalled Carol, a moment when the Women's Liberation Movement 'was absolutely at the forefront of pushing for social change for reform by governments'. Treloar saw her work as a form of feminist activism. 'I certainly believed that I held the job in trust for the Women's Movement generally', she told us. This was not a job for a career bureaucrat—'women in suits', she called them—giving some passing attention to women's issues (Interview with Deborah Worsley-Pine about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1 August, Treloar 1996). She was always, first and foremost, a participant in the Women's Liberation Movement. Was this, as I suggested earlier, an instance of being able to meld two contradictory concepts together? Or was it a moment when Women's Liberation could be seen as making use of the state, rather than accommodating itself to the state? Whichever, it is still testimony to the desire to depict the Women's Liberation Movement as the primary force in these achievements.

The second story comes from Sydney and our interview with Lyndall Ryan, a tutor in history at the Australian National University who went on, after a stint in the federal bureaucracy, to posts in Women's Studies at Griffith and then Flinders Universities, finally to the chair of Australian studies at the Ourimbah campus of the University of Newcastle. Lyndall had grown up in a highly political household: initially communist, then Australian Labor Party, her mother Edna Ryan was one of the founders of the Women's Electoral Lobby in New South Wales whose successful submission to the Arbitration Commission for an adult minimum wage finally, in 1974, helped 'put paid to the concept of the (male) family wage' (Lake 1999, 240). This story has a number of parallels with other encounters between Women's Liberation and the state. Recall, if you will, the response of the Women's Liberation collective that produced the paper, *MeJane*, to the decision of Prime Minister Whitlam's first government to appoint someone to be a women's adviser to him. On 26 March 1973, the Women's Liberation collective wrote to 'Messrs [Gough] Whitlam, [his adviser, Peter] Wilenski ... and many other male "selectors"', demanding—*demanding*—access to information about the appointment of a women's adviser to the prime minister. They required to be told 'Why the selection was made? How the selection was made? Were any women involved in the selection? What women's organisations did they represent, if any? What qualifications were involved for application? How were the original applicants screened?' They requested answers to these questions, they continued:

because we have been inundated with letters from our readers wanting this information. All these letters assumed that we, as a movement paper, would know. From our own point of view, as a group of committed movement women, we wish to advise you that no woman chosen by men to advise upon us will be acceptable to us. We believe that it is not your right to choose for us our spokeswoman, any more than it is any woman's right to act as the single spokeswoman for the rest of us. (*MeJane* Collective, 26 March 1973)

There was more, but that is enough to be a reminder.

Lyndall Ryan was a founding participant in Women's Liberation in Sydney, aged 27 in 1970 (Interview with Ann Genovese about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 25 September, Ryan 1997). 'I was in a very confused state about what politics meant', she remembered, 'and the fact of making this personal connection with politics, that one's personal individual feelings were part of a broader political world. That was the first time that connection had been made. And that was very, very exciting'. It was, she said, 'like lifting a veil, and seeing the world with a new pair of eyes', a frightening experience as well as exciting. For Lyndall, Women's Liberation was, without question, 'opposed to the state. Always opposed to the state'. Lyndall decided to apply for the position of women's adviser to the prime minister, when it was advertised, not because she had changed her mind about being opposed to the state, but rather as 'almost a form of defiance'. It was, she said, 'in a sense thumbing our noses at the state. It was a kind of subversive tactic'.

That did not prevent accusations of 'selling out to the state', though, even though she was not appointed to advise Whitlam. So Lyndall was not entirely astonished, in the course of another campaign, by the response that she encountered when she and a collective working with her had applied to the Hospitals and Health Services Commission for a grant to set up what would become the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre. Lyndall had received a cheque for \$33,000, an immense sum. She hid it in a drawer, but the news spread, and 'Sue Bellamy and a few others' called a meeting at the Women's Centre one Sunday afternoon, 'insisting that this money be immediately dispersed to Women's Liberation'. It came from the state, this money, so Lyndall was 'tainted'. 'I was tainted, yes', she said, 'I now had to distribute it'. One could wonder just how such distribution was supposed to take place. Fortunately, Lyndall and her collective talked the meeting out of this argument: 'It wasn't money for Women's Liberation. It was money to establish a women's community health centre'. But this experience swept away Lyndall's rejection of the state altogether: 'I think it was from that point onwards that I realised that my future lay in wanting to bring about change through the state', she said, 'using the resources of the state to bring about change in the lives of women' (Interview with Ann Genovese about the history of the Women's Liberation Movement, 25 September, Ryan 1997).

The third story that I wish to present here is a story written by American-born Sara Dowse. Sara was an early participant in the Women's Liberation Movement in Canberra. She was also an early femocrat (Interview with Biff Ward and Sue Bellamy, 28 December 1977 and 1 January 1978, for Radio 2XX. Sound recording on three CDs, Dowse [1977] 1978). She was selected in July 1974 to head the Women's Affairs Section in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, a bureaucratic unit that was elevated first to the status of a branch, then to an office, Sara's position rising with it until she was an Assistant Secretary, a member of the Senior Executive Service. She retained this post until December 1977, a time period straddling the last of Gough Whitlam's governments and the first of the conservative Liberal National Party Coalition governments of Malcolm Fraser. She resigned on 20 December 1977, when the Office of Women's Affairs was moved to the Department of Home Affairs, a move that meant among other things that Women's Affairs lost the access to all cabinet submissions that they had enjoyed in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, an access that had ensured they knew what was going on throughout the government and could, when they deemed it necessary, intervene. There is much more to be written about Sara's work in the Australian Government, but that will need another publication. Subsequently, Sara taught with me,

in the Women's Studies Programme at the Australian National University for a time in the late 1970s, but then went on to do what she had always wanted to do most—to be a writer.

In February 1978, Dowse read to a conference of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Canberra a parable called 'The Witch Who Came in From the Cold'. This story is readily available because conservative Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine read it to the Senate in March 1978, so it is printed in *Hansard* (1978). Harradine was troubled, he said that advice given to government in the area of women's affairs came from—his words—'people who do not have the home experience, the motherhood experience, that is necessary to give a balanced view to the Government on women's affairs'. Such advisers would not advocate support for families, he claimed. He had Sara very wrong, at least in not knowing that she was the mother of no fewer than five children—one of whom was still, at that time, an infant—and step-mother of a sixth.

Sara's parable concerns a kingdom called 'Craminalot' in a year when the king, assisted by a lady-in-waiting who impressed him with 'her wisdom and sensitivity and knowledge of tribal customs and lore', was especially benevolent to girl babies and their mothers.

And just outside the palace walls there grew a tree of magic, and in that year that tree of magic, which was tended well by all the women in the kingdom, grew many leaves and branches, and the branches brought forth a profusion of purple flowers. The king's lady-in-waiting brought in several wise women to serve with her, but most of the wisest women stayed outside the palace to tend the magic tree.

Over time, though, there was strife, and evil rumours turned the king against the lady-in-waiting, who fled away.

One night, the chief of the handmaidens took a small twig from the tree of magic, outside the palace walls, and for months thereafter was able to weave spells that protected parts of the palace and the law. But it was dangerous, and fears and anxieties spread among the handmaidens, and among the women beyond the palace. Over time, other women took twigs from the tree but no-one was taking care of the tree, so the great tree began to languish and to drop its leaves, and the twigs taken from it lost their power. And then the black knight ordered that the handmaidens be sent to a chamber in a far corner of the palace, away from the throne room and the other courtiers.

But the word spread throughout the kingdom that the handmaids were captive in the palace. So too did the word that only the women could save them and save themselves. So they came, from all parts of the kingdom and dug trenches around the tree of magic, and brought water, and cow's dung, and all the old branches they had pulled from its trunk. And they danced round the tree and sang the old ritual incantations, and prayed for strong limbs and green foliage, for they knew that without their tree of magic, they would all surely perish. (Summary derived from speech by Brian Harradine, *Hansard* 1978, 313–314).

Harradine was asked by one bewildered senator to provide a gloss on this story, but for anyone even remotely acquainted with events in the federal governments and bureaucracy during the 1970s, the parable was clear. Its message to the Women's Electoral Lobby's National Conference was a rousing plea for efforts to sustain the strength and growth and energy and commitment of the Women's Movement—the magic tree—independently of the state, outside the walls of the castle, to give strength to the handmaidens, the femocrats, working inside.

'A Dream of Transformation Unimaginable in Conjunction with Government'

The Women's Liberation Movement formed nodes within government bureaucracies as well as organisations like the Women's Electoral Lobby and institutions like women's refuges. Some of its campaigns succeeded, some failed. Its early distinction between Women's Liberation as 'revolutionary' and the Women's Electoral Lobby as 'reformist' lost traction as members of groups associated with both came together, on occasion, to cooperate in a particular cause. Die-hard revolutionaries took comfort from a notion associated with European André Gorz, a notion of reforms that were revolutionary because once in place they could not be reversed. It is possible, I still consider, to regard women's refuges as revolutionary reforms. Others found it easier to engage in campaigns for government action once they understood government as porous, changeable, accessible to popular demand. Unlike social movements that formed religious sects or trades unions or political parties, however, the Women's Liberation Movement did not, itself, become an institution or an organisation. Rather, it was and still is an amorphous, shifting collectivity of groups and individuals who dream of a socio-political order in which women fulfil their potential, overcome injustice and express their creativity, energy, enterprise and humour unfettered by patriarchal oppressions. It was and still is, in the words of North American Wendy Brown, 'a radical protest' against the status quo. It is a dream of 'a revolutionary erotics':

When poetry becomes political, when politics become erotic, when thinking is de-commodified and comes to feel as essential to life as food and shelter, not only do ordinary fields of activity become libidinally charged, but this desublimated condition itself betokens (however illusorily) an emancipated world to come. (Brown 2005, 108)

That dream brings participants in Women's Liberation together at times in often-surprising coalitions to campaign for particular causes, to celebrate particular achievements or to lobby for government legislation outlawing discrimination on the grounds of sex or even to engage in analyses such as are being presented in this collection of articles.

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