

Pamela Denoon Lecture

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by Wendy McCarthy AO

*Past Victories: Present Challenges
Has Feminism failed Australian women*

Distinguished guests all

I begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people and paying my respects to elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge both the organisers and women who have presented the Pamela Denoon lecture over 25 years.

It is a singular achievement and how proud she would be.

I realise I follow in big footsteps and am honoured to be the 26 th presenter and have the opportunity to reflect on past victories and present challenges

In response to the question has feminism failed Australian women?

The answer is no and we could leave now but please don't because I would like to share my ideas with you.

Tonight I want to celebrate the achievements of feminism and tell some stories which remind us of our past and help us think about our future

I am reminded of the opening lines of The Go Between

The past is a foreign country ...they do things differently there.

And we did.

We fought to have our voices heard and imagined a different Australia.
Our early agenda listed the dreams which we believed would enable this change

An Australia

where all girls had the opportunity to complete secondary education;

where women who had missed out on education had a second chance;

where there was a rate for the job or equal pay

where there was universal access to safe contraception and abortion;

where child care was accessible and affordable;

where a mantra of political action for women was 'A woman's place is in the House and in the Senate.'

Where divorce laws which trapped women in abusive marriages would be changed

As we were

Australia prior to feminism was a very different place

I grew up in that Australia of the 1950s, when words like 'career' and 'leadership' were not part of a polite girl's vocabulary. A leader was a male hero directing from the front, military-style, the antithesis of a well-raised girl, who learned to wait to be asked to dance and not be bold or pushy.

And risk taking was something reserved and encouraged for boys

This remains a powerful cultural imprint for women today.

Teaching was considered a suitable occupation before marriage but to be a secondary school teacher you had to get to University and for most girls the only way to attend university was by winning a secondary-teacher's scholarship, which provided four years of university education and a five-year bond.

The bond could be waived after three years, with no penalty, if a female teacher married. Male teachers could not waive their bond when they got married. This confirmed the cultural expectations that work, let alone a career, was not the norm for women. Marriage had a higher status as a full-time career than teaching.

The age of first birth was 21.

I obediently did the right thing and married after three years and waived my bond. Like many young Australians we immediately left for London, and we spent the next three years working and travelling in Europe and America.

That experience changed me forever.

I realised that the Australian model of women was not universal but a cultural invention of our own. I met and observed women whose life trajectories and expectations were vastly different and they seemed better role models.

In late 1967 newly pregnant I presented myself to the New South Wales Department of Education as a teacher with six years' experience who wanted to be reemployed.

Foolishly I shared my exciting news with the clerk at the NSW department of education. The tone of the interview immediately changed and he explained slowly, perhaps in recognition of my newly diminished brain capacity, it was neither wise nor possible for me to make more

than a casual career commitment and that he could offer casual roles and my overseas experience would not be recognised.

After all, I was to be a mother. And because of my lost seniority and time out I would be paid the same as a new graduate. These were closed systems.

I left the interview after agreeing to be a casual, feeling foolishly grateful for the job and I wondered how a child-centred business could discriminate against motherhood but not fatherhood.

It was my first confrontation with the intractable thinking and policy contradictions of the state. The commitment to the education of girls like myself from country high schools who demonstrated academic merit was made and expressed by the scholarship. It recognised the need for skilled and dedicated teachers, but allowed women to return to their profession only as casuals, which meant they would not become principals.

Meanwhile I was having a baby and I quickly discovered choices about birthing were limited. It seemed a long way from the birthing experiences I'd observed in London – where women had the choice to birth at home with midwives and support from a Flying Squad. And their families could be a part of the experience.

I decided to find an obstetrician who would support me and fortunately I found one. We agreed that as I was having the baby, I should and could be an equal and active participant in the pregnancy and birth and we would stare down the hospital so my husband could be there.

He suggested I join the Childbirth Education Association (CEA) where I would meet like-minded people.

This was my first lobby group. A key objective was to ensure that husbands could be present at the births of their babies. Most hospitals refused to allow this. How quaint it seems now when birth in hospital is seen as aberrant without the extended family involved. It was through the Childbirth Education Association that I became a part of the Abortion Law Reform Association and joined a cohort of women who were passionate about abortion as a woman's right. It placed my own abortion in a different light as I had never disclosed it. That came later

As it happened

It was my connection to ALRA that led me and others to Julia Freebury's place in 1972 to meet Beatrice Faust who wanted to establish a NSW branch of the of the Women's Electoral Lobby.

Who could have imagined where it would go?

Her proposition that we copy the New York magazine questionnaire and poll candidates standing for election in 1972 sounded interesting. However when it came to volunteers only three of us put up our hands Caroline Graham, June Williams and myself. Fearful of being hierarchical we called our selves co-convenors and offered to organise the first public meeting to test the idea and see if we could organise enough volunteers to do the questionnaire.

That first survey produced answers that still resonate. There were predictable responses indicated a shocking lack of understanding of women's lives but limited awareness of their aspirations to be responsible citizens and leaders.

My favourite response to our poll remains that of the Member for Bennelong, Sir John Cramer, who in answer to the question, 'What is a woman's most valuable attribute?' said, 'A woman's most prized possession is her virginity.'

It remains a call for action for those of us who have no such residual value.

WEL

The rise of the Women's Electoral Lobby forced political parties to add women's affairs to the political agenda and this resulted in a decade of consciousness raising and a political climate of change being exciting and possible.

WEL created a methodology for change and the energies and skills of hundreds of women were channelled into that.

It was based on research, public pressure, media relationships telephone trees (it was a pre internet world) high level well crafted submissions and applications to pretty well everything, demonstrations and marches.

WEL was the GET UP of its time

We lived and breathed it as we were on a roll

I recall one Sunday night Edna Ryan calling me to suggest I applied for a job on the Ports Authority.

I demurred in the girl way, don't know, can't do someone else would be better. She cut in you will do it as we cannot have them saying no women applied.

Watching Q and A on Monday I heard that magic line again in response to the lack of women in the current cabinet

Women do not put themselves forward

I put in the application which not surprisingly was unsuccessful but importantly I was reminded that it was not about me. It was about us working together.

And we were seeing change happening-

The Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke governments all contributed to albeit through a different political lens.

The achievements were breathtaking-the luxury cosmetics tax was removed from oral contraceptives, family planning clinics and services were established and primarily managed by community-based groups of women through the Family Planning Association. Sex became sexuality and a more respectable part of our social discourse. Teenage pregnancies were reduced, termination of pregnancy was placed on the Medical Benefits Schedule, if not off the Crimes Act of most states, and police forces for the most part stopped harassing patients at termination clinics.

We won equal pay in court and thought that was the end of the matter.

It is the advance of educational opportunity which is the crowning achievement of the early feminists. Women and girls have fallen in love with education and their successful statistics bounce off the pages of schools, universities and TAFE colleges.

The Fraser government set up a working party on woman which led to the creation of the National women's Advisory Council which I was appointed to. It sent a large delegation to the mid decade conference in Copenhagen and went about its work in a very systematic way.

The Hawke government introduced Anti Discrimination legislation, created the Affirmative Action agency and led the way on the appointment to women on boards by appointing a significant number to government and statutory boards -----and no we did not ruin them. Indeed I would argue that the ABC to which I was appointed as Deputy Chair led the way in transforming public authorities .You will be surprised to know that in 1983 no woman read the news and when I queried this I was advised their voices were not authoritative.

That changed..

By the end of the eighties many people thought we had achieved all that was needed for women to be leading responsible citizens. It seemed that grass roots activism had worked and the future looked good.

Governments were doing their job supported by many excellent female

bureaucrats and some businesses like Esso were taking the matters seriously. Unconscious bias was a hot topic, yes truly.

As it is today

Of course the balance sheet is positive in terms of the change agenda of the women's movement, but the cultural change that maintains it has not happened – women are still falling short. So forgive me for being fatigued by well-known men and women discovering the issue of gender and unconscious bias. I do not want to become a grumpy old woman, but I am having some challenging moments.

We have celebrated our first woman prime minister, foreign minister, governor-general, governors, premiers and heads of key interest groups but is that it? Discussions about targets and quotas, women executives, women on boards, work–life balance and affordability of child care feel like reruns of old conversations. Rather like shopping for clothes and all you see are things you have worn before.

As one male leader recently said to me when I posed a question re women in his company “Oh Wendy we did that in the 80's. Surely we don't have to keep on about it”

Well we do --or the victories and achievements will not be sustainable.

Persistence matters –just watch the far Right

Change for women has not occurred in the way those of us who campaigned so hard imagined it would. The early assumptions that the glittering prizes would be ours if we followed conventional male pathways have not proved correct. Leadership cultures have been slow to respond to the aspirations and styles of female leadership or even to trying it.

Women still struggle with leadership issues and career paths, for there are few role models to choose from. The systemic barriers have been removed, but many cultural barriers remain. The daughters of the revolution have inherited new dilemmas and many see themselves as we did: in a documentary without a script. I ponder this as I see smart, savvy young women opting for the mummy track despite maternity leave and unable to comprehend the reality and consequences of women's increased longevity.

I wonder why they opt for full-time wifedom when the odds for enduring marriages are not good, especially in unequal relationships with one income. I am surprised at the 'new' decision to change your name and take the name of the man you married in your thirties after you have established your own 'brand'.

Hanna Rosin's book "The End of Men and the rise of women" offers some insights.

Rosin's research in the US on the "moderately educated middle" class meaning high school graduates finds the rise of women is associated with the slow erosion of marriage and a growing cynicism about love. As the women slowly improve their lot, they raise the bar for what they want out of marriage and the men of their class are failing to meet their standards. The men may cling to traditional ideas about themselves as providers, but they are further than ever from being able to embody those ideals.

By contrast among the educated class women's new economic power has produced a renaissance of marriage and are more fluid about who plays what role, who earns more money and who sings the lullabies. They have gone beyond equality and invented whole new models of marriage.

But in both groups more women are becoming the main breadwinners.

The old architecture of manliness has gone but without an obvious replacement.

How did the F-word become so scary, despite gender being back on centre stage and women holding important public positions? I often hear the chorus 'I am not a feminist, but' – followed by a litany of concerns that sound like gender issues but are not identified that way. That feminism still makes sense comes as a shock to those who for the first thirty years of their lives have been one of the boys, or at least not hampered by being female. It is the shock of noticing that your voice is not heard, or discovering you are paid less than your male peers.

Women now experience the most powerful social and institutional discrimination during their twenties and early thirties, after they have left the educational system and begun pursuing their dreams – and ambitions. This obstacle occurs at precisely the age when women are likely to marry and have children. At this point they must decide whether to try to hold on to their ambitions, downsize them or abandon them altogether. Often a young woman must make this decision when she is learning to be a parent, with its attendant pleasures, fears, insecurities and exhaustion.

My own experience is that we do not identify our ambitions until later in our professional lives, when children have been raised, sexual identity has settled, and the capacity to manage relationships and do the things described as feminine are no longer in doubt. It is often then that the mastery and resilience required for mature leadership is within our reach but it may be too late for many who have missed out on the work experience and networks which offer those roles.

For many this may be too late.

Glass ceilings have been shattered, sticky floors have been smoothed, male champions have emerged but those annoying statistics tell us there is a long road ahead for the women of Australia to hold up half the sky.

A contemporary WEL agenda would ask how it happened that

- there is one woman in Cabinet.
- domestic violence and rape are accepted as almost intractable in some communities
- despite our court victories on equal pay a gap remains in the order of 17%.
- pregnancy discrimination is prevalent affecting more than 1 in 5 women
- women hold 17.6% of board positions in ASX 200 and only 7 are CEO's
- the work force participation of women at 65% puts us at a low level internationally and reduces our national productivity
- affordable and accessible child care still elude us and current proposals to change that focus on the needs of some women
- measuring our progress is seen as an impost on corporations and of little value in a world that otherwise insists that what gets measured gets done.
- an inane argument around quotas and targets tries to look like something else-- Far easier to simplify the argument and settle for 50-50 for everything and please stop being grateful for those tiny numbers

Voice

Thinking about the future in the time we have left I want to suggest how we might reframe some of these issues in order retain our hard won victories.

WEL's great achievement was enabling women's voices to be heard and listened to and here are some thoughts on the power of voice discussed by Mary Beard Professor of Classics at Cambridge in her recent lecture *The Public Voice of Women*,

She spoke of the tradition of gendered speaking.

“ What interests me is the relationship between that classic Homeric moment of silencing a woman and some of the ways women's voices are not publicly heard in our own contemporary culture, and in our own politics from the front bench to the shop floor. It's a well-known deafness that's nicely parodied in the old *Punch* cartoon: 'That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.'

(I love Miss Triggs she has been part of my working life for years so I was delighted to see her star billing in this discussion) see slide

She continues

There is a culturally awkward relationship between the voice of women and the public sphere of speech-making, debate and comment: politics in its widest sense, from office committees to the floor of the House. I'm hoping that the long view will help us get beyond the simple diagnosis of 'misogyny' that we tend a bit lazily to fall back on. To be sure, 'misogyny' is one way of describing of what's going on..... But if we want to understand – and do something about – the fact that women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard, we have to recognise that it is a bit more complicated and that there's a long back-story.

These attitudes, assumptions and prejudices are hard-wired into us: not into our brains (there is no neurological reason for us to hear low-pitched voices as more authoritative than high-pitched ones); but into our culture, our language and millennia of our history.

And when we are thinking about the under-representation of women in national politics, their relative muteness in the public sphere, we have to think beyond what the prime minister and his chums got up to in the Bullingdon Club, beyond the bad behaviour and blokeish culture of Westminster, beyond even family-friendly hours and childcare provision (important as those are).

We have to focus on the even more fundamental issues of how we have learned to hear the contributions of women or – going back to the cartoon for a moment – on what I'd like to call the 'Miss Triggs question'. Not just, how does she get a word in edgeways? But how can we make ourselves more aware about the processes and prejudices that make us not listen to her.

Reproductive rights and our right to choose

We have made many advances in the area of reproductive rights. We must never again lose any of those for while at one level we are talking about a health issue, at another level we are discussing something much more fundamental.

Feminists must indicate very clearly what the links are between abortion rights and personal liberty. We must see and demonstrate to other people the connection about taking away women's reproductive rights and having our own and their own freedoms cut. We've had only a small time with these rights; only a small time when we haven't had to help friends, mothers, aunts with the results of backyard abortions. It would be a terrible thing if we were to go back to that; if our own daughters had to face those sorts of dilemmas. If as feminists we retreat from a focused defence of abortion rights, we will lose one of the most dramatic and popularly supported victories that we have had.

It really is up to us.

If we define ourselves as an embattled minority we may become one. We are the majority and we must continue to articulate the sentiments and arguments coherently.

If you think I always talk about these matters you are right and every few years I read *The Handmaids Tale* which was published in Canada in 1985 to baffled and sometimes anxious reviews and has not been out of print since.

Author Margaret Atwood wrote in 2012 'Some books haunt the reader .Others haunt the writer. *The Handmaids Tale* has done both"

It has become a sort of tag for those writing about shifts towards policies aimed at controlling women and especially women's bodies and reproductive functions. I made a rule for myself that I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time or for which the technology did not already exist. The group hangings, the clothing specific to castes and classes, the forced childbearing... ..the children stolen by regimes and placed with high ranking officials, the forbidding of literacy, the denial of property rights all had precedents in Western society and within the Christian tradition.

When asked if the Handmaids Tale is about to come true, I remind myself that there are two futures in the book and if the first one comes the second one may do so also.”

Education is the trusted way out of the ghetto of poverty and prejudice and according to the World Bank the best contraceptive.

Hear what School principal Dr Briony Scott spoke of her school speech day.

“I don’t know about you but I’m not here to raise a generation of young women, who by listening to the words around them, draw the conclusion they are second rate simply because they’re female and therefore not quite good enough.

Young women learn from the comparative language used that expectations of their success are somehow less than their male peers, or that they are not expected to perform quite as well.

They learn from a multitude of cues, invariably adult and cultural, about how to relate to and with men, how to behave, and what is expected of them.

We don’t educate our young women, and provide them with every opportunity, to have them earn 82% of what their brother or their boyfriend will earn for the same role – a percentage gap that is growing, not diminishing.

We don’t educate young women, so they can moderate the behaviour of boys in the classroom, and help raise their standards.

We don’t use girls to help ‘socialise’ the behaviour of boys. This view is unfair on the girls, and offensive to the boys, who are quite capable, with good teaching, of fully engaging in their own learning.

We don’t raise our girls to play sport ‘like a girl’.

We raise them to play sport, confined only by the rules of good sportsmanship.

These are not women who are being raised to defer, simply on the basis of gender.

They are not women who are being raised to be second best when they have the capacity to do better.

They are not women who are expected to be silent, or to not think, or to act a certain way, because there is a boss who blusters, or a bully who intimidates.

To be honest, I don't know what these young women will do, if given the chance!

What they do is up to them

Last week I read Billy Bragg's essay A map for masculinity.

He describes how when invited to speak at the inaugural Being a Man festival in London he struggled to get a grip on what it means to be a man today. Most of the things that men once relied on to express their masculinity can now be done as well by women.

He writes that the elephant in the room is feminism. Women have already begun their journey across the landscape of gender and persevering against great odds have made considerable progress over the past century.

The question we must ask ourselves is "are we going to drive on like a stubborn dad who pretends he knows where he's going when everyone in the car knows he's really lost?

Or are we going to pull over and ask a woman for direction?

It seems a good question to ask. Thank you