

Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia

By Marian Sawer, with Gail Radford, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008, xvi + 317pp, ISBN 978 086840 943 6 (pbk)

Helen Pringle*

The Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) was formed in 1972 with the aim of persuading candidates in the election to espouse policies for the improvement of women's place in Australia. It was, as Carmen Lawrence notes in the Foreword to *Making Women Count*, an ambitious attempt to define women as a constituency and to mark their votes as crucial in politics. Marian Sawer charts the formation and rise of WEL through to the present in an interesting and very colourful history. The project was based on a large membership survey, and also involved the building up of an archive of related materials and a very useful website.

Sawer points out that WEL was distinctive not only because, like other pressure groups, it set out to shape the political agenda, but because as an organization it also wanted to play a part in transforming the lives of its members. The book is particularly strong on what Sawer calls the emotional life of social movements, the charting of which involves complex 'memory work'. In this context Sawer writes about the role of songs and stories, the importance of colours, and raucous 'festivals' like the Ernies awards. The book is peppered with delightful stories, such as that of Merle Thornton retrieving cane toads in the middle of a meeting for her son to sell for university experiments. The photographs are also well-chosen and evocative.

Sawer also conveys a very good sense in the book of the diverse membership of WEL in terms of class, ethnicity, rural or urban origin, and party allegiance. WEL's ability to meld these diverse interests seems quite remarkable, although it is perhaps the case that the very can-do focus of the organization allowed it to weather the more virulent divisions that arose in less practical movements such as Women's Liberation which Sawer places in opposition to WEL. The high importance given to friendship as a benefit of WEL membership in membership surveys also suggests the value of informal connections in the longevity of political and social organizations.

The Women's Electoral Lobby is today often placed on the more conservative side of the women's movement. However Sawer's history reminds readers that even where WEL was in some ways conservative on the issues it tackled and the solutions it proposed, its most strikingly radical feature was its experiments in organization. WEL's commitment to radically democratic forms of organization and its allergy to leaders are strangely refreshing today, where the jargon of

* Politics & International Relations, University of New South Wales

'leadership' is so prevalent, even in women's organizations. Oddly the movement to a more hierarchical structure in the organization seems to have been a calculated decision, rather than an illustration of Michels' law.

Sawer does not of course neglect that WEL was a very hard-nosed political actor, which explicitly sought to influence *parliamentary* politics first and foremost in seeking to get government to do things. Economic policy and workplace questions were primary areas of concern for WEL, and the areas where it seemed to have most success at influencing the political agenda. WEL had an explicit policy on abortion, but as an organization, seems to have largely stayed out of some of the 'cultural' issues that became so divisive in gender politics in the 1980s and 1990s, such as prostitution and pornography. WEL was opposed to the abolition of death duties — although Sawer explains very clearly the rationale for the position it took.

The successes of WEL can be measured in the wide acceptance of its policies. Sawer points out that all political parties now have women's policies, and fund women's services. Women's policy units are an accepted feature of government. Sawer charts the ways in which WEL influenced government, but the book leaves an open question as to the place of the organization now that so much of its substantive program has been accomplished. It would be interesting to read a second edition of this fascinating study. ▲