

WOMEN'S ELECTORAL LOBBY NSW INC.

ANNUAL REPORT 2007/2008

For the nation and WEL NSW, the year produced a major philosophical shift with the potential for policy reform. A new Federal Government heralded a new era of cooperation with States and a revamped federalism.

WEL celebrated with all women a centenary of the first national Women's Day organized in the US in February, 1908. It was internationalized soon after by Clara Zetkin, a German feminist Marxist at the International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen and the date proclaimed as 8th March.

In collaboration with the Older Women's Network and the broad support of the women's movement and individual women, International Women's Day was marked by banners in Sydney streets. Anne Barber and Beth Eldridge with the organizing committee created a festive revival of the occasion. WEL has committed to a future role supporting an annual IWD march and ensuring there are agreed protest themes that can be the basis for action to pressure governments.

We devoted the latter part of 2007 to contributions for the preparation of policies for WEL Australia for the 24th November Federal Election. This process, which commenced with a thorough discussion about options for a multi issues forum in NSW to be organized with other women's groups, ended with the compilation of a policy document: ***The Issues at Stake***, the printing of stickers, **Women Count, Women Vote**, work on the WEL Australia website and the election form guide with a policy review and scorecard which was posted on the **Crikey** website.

Executive members attended a number of conferences and meetings in the time leading up to the election distributing the policy document and other election material. We endorsed the **WomenSpeak** Secretariat national priorities: Violence Against Women, Child Care, Women's leadership and Women's Health while noting that workplace inequality and issues facing older women also needed to be high on the agenda for government's attention.

WEL NSW members attended the national meeting of women's organizations held in Sydney under the auspices of **WomenSpeak** on 26th October, 2007 and highlighted ways in which national cooperation among the member women's organizations could ensure the most effective lobbying and the best coverage for women's issues during the election campaign.

A Federal Election policy summary was prepared with an industrial relations pamphlet advocating the abolition of the WorkChoices law. These were collaborative efforts with members in other states.

All party leaders were sent copies of WELA's document ***2007 Federal Election: The Issues at Stake*** and this was distributed to women's groups and other relevant organizations.

Post election activity, after the euphoria, was devoted to the usual letters of congratulations to the Prime Minister and members of the Ministry with Parliamentary Secretaries. The immediate task was to respond to the invitation for pre-budget submissions. WELA's recommended spending priorities for 2008 were prepared and sent with a general recommendation that some inquiries be established to ensure that decision-making is based on contemporary evidence. The Federal Government has certainly heeded this advice launching a number of inquiries into major policy areas to which WELA has responded led by the indefatigable Eva Cox.

Submissions have been prepared to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Paid Maternity Leave, to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiring into the effectiveness of the Sex Discrimination Act, 1984, to the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children as part of the process for the development of a National Plan and one will go to the House of Representatives Employment and Workplace Relations Committee reporting on potential disadvantages in relation to women's participation in the workforce. For all of these compositions, we are dependent on the national WEL network and experts in other states for comments as well as contributions.

At the state level, representatives of Executive attended a promising meeting on 4th December, 2007 with the NSW Office for Women to discuss how its structure could be strengthened so that its policy development and review role could be enhanced. Recently, the office has been restructured to enable it to play this role more effectively. It is now the Office of Women's Policy.

Performance indicators were also a key item of discussion with the Office at that meeting and WEL NSW tabled a range of suggestions on ways in which reporting on the State Plan implementation would be assisted by gender sensitive indicators and the collection of gender disaggregated data. The State Plan was viewed as being the main vehicle for developing and justifying gender sensitive indicators and departments needed to be accountable for developing these and reporting against them, not the Office for Women.

WEL also attended all peak women's organization meetings with Minister, the Hon Verity Firth. These have improved over time in depth and quality of presentations and discussions. They are an excellent forum for exploring key policy areas as well as exchanging information on initiatives and activities.

The **20/20 Summit** was launched by the Rudd Government with great publicity and a miserable representation of women on the Steering Committee chaired by Glyn Davis. This elicited an outcry and barrage of criticism. It reminded us yet again how fragile women's participation is on the big picture platforms and how clouded the vision of our politicians. WEL wrote to its convenor criticizing this oversight and Eva Cox was interviewed by media for our views. We made two submissions to the Summit, individual WEL members made others and two Executive members nominated as delegates.

The work program this year for WEL NSW understandably has been focused nationally. As well as the national submissions, one was prepared for the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services. Our ability to meet the deadlines and produce creditable arguments with policy insights and sound recommendations is greatly assisted by the depth of experience of members of executive, in particular, Helen L'Orange and Eva Cox. The fact that we have a policy foundation of material prepared for the elections makes the task of submission writing a little easier and ensures consistency with our platform.

We made an appearance at the hearings of the Productivity Commission in NSW speaking to our submission emphasizing points of difference as well as similarity with the positions of other women's groups. We stressed that there was not unanimity within the organization on what approach would yield the best benefits for the most number of women.

WEL NSW met with Minister Firth and Minister Plibersek and various Ministerial staff during the course of the year. Our relationship with the Offices of the Ministers is based on trust, respect and our independence is never compromised.

Our media spokesperson, Eva Cox has participated in a number of media stories and appeared on **Difference of Opinion** speaking strongly for the role of the public sector and a system of taxation that reflected its importance in maintaining a healthy democracy.

We wrote to State and Federal Ministers on various issues and we supported policy recommendations made by the **WomenSpeak** network run by a secretariat based in the YWCA.

We produced a monthly newsletter and the office was staffed at least one day a week by Lorraine Slade with the support of Anne Barber. Both these women commit their time to keeping the organization efficient and responsive to members. There would be no WEL office without their work.

We held a general members meeting on 3rd August, 2008 which was attended by a small group of very committed and enthusiastic women. But WEL NSW, like many community based independent organizations, faces common problems: how to attract new members and engage them in the work of the organization; how best to harness technology using the website to interact with a new generation of members; how to retain relevance and refresh perspectives on old issues and apply a gender critique to emerging issues like climate change.

Our key public event was the EDNA Awards evening. This offered all members and supporters the opportunity to acknowledge the feminist difference made by women in their various fields of endeavour. In 2008, it honoured a range of women who gave moving, and sometimes hilarious accounts of their life and work. This is an important occasion for feminist celebration and now has a place in the calendar of all feminists and women committed to advancing women's participation, protecting their rights and entitlements and improving their standing as citizens.

The Executive has worked tirelessly to maintain WEL NSW's activism and respected profile in a year shaped by a fresh Federal Government.

Our thanks go to Lorraine Slade for the production of the newsletter. She is always generous with her time and patient with the eccentricities of our collective management. Anne Barber, as Treasurer, performs numerous functions and lubricates discussion with ideas and initiatives we should be taking. With more women and the support of the membership, much more could be done.

I thank the other members of the Executive for their contributions this year and their patience when other commitments intrude on my obligations and responsibility to WEL NSW.

Jozefa Sobski
Convenor
August, 2008