

Response to Social Analysis papers from an Australian historical perspective

This paper is an historical response from an Australian perspective to the statistics Elizabeth quotes in her paper concerning the proportion of seats held by women in the following parliaments: Canada 20.8%, Australia 24.7%, the United Kingdom 19.7%, the United States 16.3%, United Nations 9.4%.¹

It is clear from these figures that the proportion of women represented in parliament is very low in the countries where the majority of Sisters of Mercy minister.

The Australian Pioneers

Although there is evidence of men across the centuries who supported women in various ways, on the whole, they have resented women assuming power beyond the family. This was the experience of a significant group of women in Australia, many of whom were Catholics, who had worked for the vote. Anxious to promote their social welfare agenda they chose to align themselves with the Labor Party whose policies they considered resonated with theirs. The Labor men, however, foiled their attempts to become equal members and it was with difficulty the women established what was called the NSW Labor Women's Organising Committee in 1904.

On the occasion of their Silver Jubilee this Committee produced a brochure in which they recalled: 'Recognition of our worth in the political world was slow within our own (Labor) movement and we were five years working before the Annual Conference (which controls our forces) granted us a Constitution.' By 1909 the Committee had been recognized as a constitutional portion of the ALP and granted representation at the annual Conference.²

The women rejoiced in their achievements: 'What a reward we have reaped – and how hopeless the task looked when we set out! Without money, and with the whole of the press against us – what a handicap! The overcoming of these handicaps has realised for us full citizen's rights in all walks of life, the organization of women in every industry, the Early Closing Act, the Minimum Wage Act, the 44 hour working week, shop and factory legislation, the appointment of inspectors to guard awards, old-age and invalid pensions, the Maternity Allowance Act, widows' pensions and family endowment. Still there is much left undone.'³

The first President, Kate Dwyer, (married, a dedicated Catholic and lifelong member of the NSW Catholic Women's League), exhorted the women of 1929 in her Silver Jubilee message: 'As women are the home-makers they should be given every encouragement and scope to become nation builders, for the interests of home and nation are so interwoven one cannot be separated from the other ... Women of the Labor Movement,

¹ Elizabeth M.Davis, 'Social Analysis: A Canadian Perspective – How Can We Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of Our Realities?' Mercy International Research Conference, 2007.

² NSW Labor Women's Organising Committee, Silver Jubilee Brochure, 1929, 9.

³ Silver Jubilee Brochure, 9.

remember that whilst progressing you must look to securing your rightful place among the councilors and legislators of your country. You have ability, capacity and grit.’⁴

Women Into Politics Inc

Despite all the valiant efforts of these pioneer women, their successors in Australia a century later are gravely concerned and took the initiative in 1998 to organize the group Women Into Politics (WIP) Inc. They explained:

Women have had the vote for nearly 100 years. As yet this has not been translated into political power, nor has equal representation been achieved ... Women have little influence on public policy or public decision making on the great matters of the day – on economic management, employment, war and peace, the environment, social welfare measures, foreign affairs or foreign aid. Women continue to rely on the good will of men in high office for their well-being.⁵

A challenging reality

A disappointing set-back in the ongoing struggle to promote the political influence of women in Australia was the resignation from parliament in 2007 of three very capable, successful women for family reasons, all had young children.⁶

Relevant historical background

As we look through the historical lens in connection with these developments our attention is drawn to Betty Friedan and her 1963 publication *The Feminine Mystique*. Many women throughout the western world resonated with the central thesis of this seminal publication: ‘...our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.’⁷

Regretfully, though Betty’s Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* is well known, little attention has been given to her publication *The Second Phase* in which she assessed with great honesty and insight developments in the women’s movement from 1960 – 1980.

In this latter publication Friedan explained that she had gradually become aware that something was ‘off’, ‘out of focus’, ‘going wrong’ in the terms by which the rising generation were trying to live the equality for which she and her associates had fought. She explained that those who had established the women’s movement had already had

⁴ Silver Jubilee Brochure, 10.

⁵ <http://www.womenintopolitics.org.au/object.html>

⁶ Federal Parliament: Natasha Stott-Despoja (Democrat), Jackie Kelly (Liberal); NSW Parliament: Carmel Tebutt (Labor). The latter two are Catholics with a strong Mercy component in their education.

⁷ Ibid, 68.

their families but young women starting out on promising but demanding careers found that they barely had time to develop a relationship let alone care for a family.⁸

Friedan stated: 'I believe it's over, that first stage of the women's movement. And yet the larger revolution, evolution, liberation that the women's movement set off, has barely begun.'⁹ She held that:

... the second stage cannot be seen in terms of women alone, our separate personhood or equality with men. The second stage involves coming to terms with the family – new terms with love and with work. The second stage may not even be a women's movement. Men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage. ... The second stage will restructure institutions and transform the nature of power itself...¹⁰

She recognized the fear of women which many men have and which damages their mutual relationship.¹¹ Friedan also declared:

I believe that 'masculine' leadership with its emphasis upon competition and a clear win-lose is not appropriate to the second stage of human liberation. Rather I advocate a leadership style generally perceived as 'feminine' but open to use by either men or women. It is based on synthesizing, intuitive, qualitative thinking and a contextual, relational power style. I advocate its use because its concern is with presenting the whole picture rather than concentrating on a given task; growth and the quality of life, rather than fixed quantities and the status quo; the sharing of internal resources and the establishment of interdependent adaptive relationships of support.¹²

What Now?

As we ponder the problem of increasing the influence of women in parliament, it is suggested that we give attention to the natural life-cycle of women highlighted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton over a century ago. This great old USA suffrage worker, asserted

⁸ B.Friedan, *The Second Stage*, London, Michael Joseph Ltd, 1982, 21, 22, 26 -29.

⁹ Ibid., 30 -33.

¹⁰ Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 34. Friedan also explained that the emergence of sexual politics in the women's movement in the 1970s was a product of the experience of the younger liberated women of the 1960s, which was in many ways destructive. She held that these women were reacting against the early male leaders of the radical student and countercultural movements of the sixties, who were more blatantly male chauvinist pigs than their conservative fathers – 'Man' became 'the enemy'. Friedan also lamented Kate Millet's attitude to motherhood and family life in her influential publication *Sexual Politics* in which 'man' is portrayed as 'the oppressor' driven by 'metaphysical cannibalism'; he is a 'natural predator' and pregnancy is 'the temporary deformation of the body for the sake of the species' and the foetus is a 'parasite' and 'uninvited guest', 54 -56.

¹¹ Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 167.

¹² Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 250.

at the end of her long life: 'I consider the hey-day of woman's life is the shady side of fifty, when the vital forces heretofore expended in other ways, are garnered in the brain, when their thoughts and sentiments flow out into broader channels ...' ¹³ Indeed, for most women major responsibilities in the wider community can best be undertaken in middle-age. With solid initial and appropriate ongoing education, which accommodates family demands, and with husbands genuinely involved in the family, these middle-aged women will bring to their political service invaluable lived family experience as advocated by Kate Dwyer in 1929.

In Australia there are encouraging movements in connection with men to facilitate this development e.g. Morris Iemma, the present Premier of NSW, who has young children, earlier in 2007, announced to his cabinet that he wanted to organize certain meetings around his family commitments. This was an historically significant incident. ¹⁴

Where do the Sisters of Mercy stand in relation to this? Clearly Catherine McAuley was concerned for the welfare of society and saw women as playing a crucial role in this. She saw the education of women as fundamental to the welfare of the family, the building block of society. ¹⁵

In Australia women religious generally and the Sisters of Mercy in particular, through their educational endeavours, have made a notable contribution to leadership in the wider field. It was observed in the 1980s that almost all the women who has risen to high leadership positions in the public service in NSW and at the Commonwealth level in Australia were 'convent educated'. ¹⁶ Presently in Australia in the forthcoming federal election the Prime Minister is being challenged in his electorate by Maxine McKew, a 54 year old highly successful political journalist and TV presenter, an ex-student of the Sister of Mercy's All Hallows College in Brisbane. It is relevant to note that though married she has had no children. The sample polling gives her a high change of success. ¹⁷

¹³ E.Cady Stanton , *Eighty Years and More of Reminiscences, 1815 – 1897* first published London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1898; reprinted New York, Schocken Books, 1971,447. The Australian, Annie Golding, stated in her 1904 paper 'The Evolution of Women and Their Possibilities' : 'America led the way in the higher education of women Later ideals of rights and privileges were pioneered by Lucretia Mott, Susan B.Anthony and Mrs Cady Stanton.' *Proceedings of the Australasian Catholic Congress*, Melbourne, 1904, 563.

¹⁴ Added to these 'signs of hope' are the Men's Shed movement, the establishment of the Fatherhood Foundation (see [www,karios.com.au](http://www.karios.com.au)) and developments in men's spirituality see David Tacey, *Remaking Men – the revolution in masculinity*, Melbourne, Viking, 1997 and books by Richard Rohr.

¹⁵ A. Fahey, 'Female Asceticism in the Catholic Church: A Case-Study of Nuns in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century', PhD thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1982.

¹⁶ Carmel Niland (President of the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW), *SHMA*, Vol 2, No 1, 1984, 4. The Mercy 'convent schools' were noted among those mentioned.

¹⁷ Maureen McQuirk rsm (North Sydney) knows this political candidate well and reports that she attributes a lot of her success to her education at All Hallows and cites a particular sister who was especially influential.

Thinking about fostering and providing for the political service of women in their middle-age leads to the raising of a number of issues and challenges such as:

- * The development of the mentality among the wider community generally and women in particular that such an evolution is natural, organic and to be encouraged.
- * The development of a theology that will inspire and sustain a spirituality of service at the leadership level especially in politics.
- * The involvement of both men and women educators in this process.
- * The working for family friendly parliamentary structures.

Some current resources of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia to be used to promote the above:

- * The Mercy Secondary School Association which functions both nationally and internationally
- * Influence in primary schools through promotion of the Mercy charism in former Mercy schools as invited by the principal and encouraged by the Diocesan Education Offices e.g. involvement in staff education days.
- * Influence in Management Boards of secondary schools, and involvement in staff formation.
- * Influence at a tertiary level through involvement in teacher and nursing education.

While this paper is necessarily limited in scope and has dealt directly with only one aspect of Elizabeth's paper, it is considered that the issue being addressed is basic to the addressing of many other problems raised in the social analysis papers.