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**‘Fire Cast on the earth – kindling’:  
Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century**

**RESPONSE to SOCIAL ANALYSIS PAPERS**

**from**

**AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **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%.<sup>1</sup>

While all of these figures are small, among the countries cited Australia has the greatest percentage of women in parliament at the national level. This is not unexpected since, while NZ was the first country in which women won the right to vote (1893), it was in South Australia in 1894 that women first won the right not only to vote but to be voted for and this ultimately led, after the federation of the Australian states, to Australian women being granted the right to vote and be voted for at the national level.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Australian Pioneers**

Across the centuries there is evidence of men who supported women in various ways especially with regard to obtaining an education and who valued women as spiritual counselors. On the whole, however, men 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, the first of its type in Australia and, one could safely say, the world.

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. Indeed on the occasion of the celebration of their Silver Jubilee J.H.Scullin, the Prime Minister of Australia at the time, acknowledged that it was the women who had been largely responsible for the first national success of the Labor Party. The women recalled: 'Many days were spent in walking from door to door – a task which oftentimes meant covering a whole electorate in order to place the policy of Labor in the homes of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> A. Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia – A Gift or a Struggle?* Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 59 et seq.

women of the city. In the country our noble band of women went forth with little or no provision made for their comfort.’<sup>3</sup>

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 still much left undone. That is for the future workers to undertake. The task is noble and self-elevating. The CAUSE is ever worthwhile. Carry on the work handed down by the pioneer women!’<sup>4</sup>

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, 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.’<sup>5</sup>

Annie Golding also a dedicated Catholic and a leading pioneer in the campaign to attain the vote for women in Australia declared: ‘...it is fitting that a few remarks should be made by me – one of the pioneers who aided in that strenuous struggle to bring women on to the political horizon. There is no apology needed for them being there. The world sent out a ‘S.O.S’ – and they responded. The only regret is that they are still on the outer rim of political life . Some should be in both the State and Commonwealth Parliaments, as legislation controls every phase pf human existence from the cradle to the grave. Under its administration come marriage, health, food, housing, education and hours of labor, also recreation and leisure.’

Among other things she added: ‘Remember in the past our colossal emporians were partly built upon unpaid child labor, and lessons should be learned from that bad old past. Pioneer women of the Labor Movement throughout Great Britain and the Commonwealth, undeterred by the bogeys of convention and tradition, bravely blazed the track, and infused a soul into Labor by their onward march, and raised a standard for other women to follow.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> NSW Labor Women’s Organising Committee, Silver Jubilee Brochure, 1929, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Silver Jubilee Brochure, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Silver Jubilee Brochure, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Silver Jubilee Brochure, 10.

## 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 do not have control over public matters which govern their social and economic well-being. 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.<sup>7</sup>

WIP lamented: ‘Until those in power are persuaded to reform our political institutions, and until women are approximately half of our parliaments and decision makers, Australian women will continue to be lobbyists, not main players.’<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that WIP, in the healthy tradition of its pioneer forebears, cooperates across political parties and religious affiliations pointing out: ‘One of the strengths of the (our) organization is that it is accepted as non-partisan by women in and out of the political parties, and we are able to have the benefits of a range of ideas.’<sup>9</sup>

WIP concluded their Report on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

The growing discussion of how to both retain or regain civil society and accommodate powerful financial markets, how to do the research that will show that social capital is worthwhile, that social gain can benefit business, will no doubt continue and develop, if only because women recognize the necessity for balance in the world of affairs. We will all have to develop new ways of operating to gain for women what is our right, and perhaps to re-invent old strategies. We still do live in a community, not an economy!<sup>10</sup>

Alas, in its most recent Report (2006-2007), WIP regretted:

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.womenintopolitics.org.au/object.html>

<sup>8</sup> WIP website, Objectives and Rationale, 2. ..

<sup>9</sup> Edith Stein, a strong feminist, was most insightful in her analysis of the nature of man the male. She noted from experience in her own country that women parliamentarians from opposing parties could work together more effectively than the men on projects for the common good. See E. Stein, *Woman – The Collected Works of Edith Stein* Vol.II, translated by Freda Mary Oben, Washington, ICS Publications, 1987. For statement of strong feminist commitment see E.Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family – An Autobiography*, edited by Dr L.Gelber and Romaeus Leuven OCD, translated by Josephien Koeppel OCD, Washington, ICS Publications, 1986

<sup>10</sup> WIP Annual Report, 1998 -1999, 3

The increase in numbers has slowed ... this has been a cause of frustration to women's hopes that the influence of women would become more equal.... The number of women on the boards of the top 100 corporations remains abysmally low. Meanwhile the 2006 – 2007 year has seen ongoing decline in standards, as Australian politics grows unashamedly more ruthless, less reliant on merit or on rational argument, research and consultation, and more related to self-interest, caprice and public relations 'spin', as it is now called, than to intelligent policy development. Some columnists have written openly critical pieces about abuses of parliamentary process that appeared in the major newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

### **A challenging reality**

A significant development in the saga of promoting the political influence of women in Australia was the resignation from parliament of three very capable, successful women for family reasons, all had young children.<sup>12</sup>

It is pertinent at this stage to draw attention to the fact that there is much in the news in recent years concerning the problems associated with infertility and the problems which arise from women having their babies at a later age as well as the trauma involved with IVF fertility treatments.

### **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.'<sup>13</sup> At that time Betty Friedan held that women should not have to choose between marriage and a career it was merely a matter of setting up a new life plan in terms of one's whole life as a woman.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that, 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.

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<sup>11</sup> WIP, Annual Report 2006 – 2007.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 297.

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 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. Friedan observed that she ‘sensed the exhilaration of “superwomen” giving away to a tiredness, a certain brittle disappointment.’ She also deplored the fact that many married women were often forced by economic circumstances to work and were not free to have a child.<sup>15</sup>

Friedan admitted that she and her conferees had been naive; they had not realized the complexity of the task ahead of them. She also lamented that too many women politicians submitted to the male political machinery. But what else could they do when they did not have the numbers? She observed: ‘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.’<sup>16</sup>

Friedan held that the central thesis of *The Feminine Mystique* still held i.e. that women had to have scope for developing their talents and serving humanity beyond the home, but she considered:

... 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 has to transcend the battle for equal power in institutions. The second stage will restructure institutions and transform the nature of power itself...<sup>17</sup>

Betty Friedan summed up the situation: ‘How do we transcend the polarisation between women and women and between women and men to achieve the new wholeness that is the promise of feminism and get on with solving the concrete, practical everyday problems of living, working and loving as equal persons? This is the personal and political business of the second stage.’<sup>18</sup> She recognized the fear of women which many

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<sup>15</sup> B.Friedan, *The Second Stage*, London, Michael Joseph Ltd, 1982, 21, 22, 26 -29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 30 -33.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 47.

men have and which damages the relationship between men and women. To illustrate her point she quoted the comment of a West Point man looking for more in life. He had confessed: 'Men are jealous and afraid of women, maybe envious of their power. It may sound corny but there is power in women's ability to create life, closeness to life, that men don't have, always chasing power, in the company, in the army ...'<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

In her honest critiquing of the 1960s women's movement Betty Friedan was not alone.<sup>21</sup> In recent times a worthy successor of Betty Friedan has emerged - Naomie Wolf, who published the insightful *The Beauty Myth* in 1990.<sup>22</sup> This young woman, after experiencing the stresses of the life of a successful, politically engaged, married woman, discovered for herself the wisdom of Betty Friedan sharing it in her 2005 publication *The Treehouse*. In this she concluded: 'Not that there is no value in politics; but I was finding out in my own daily struggles – to be a good wife and mother, to be a decent teacher – that if politics was not based on the heart's wisdom, it was arid.'<sup>23</sup>

## What Now?

This brings us back to the three young women in Australian politics who recently retired for family reasons and leaves us facing the problem of the dearth of women in politics in the English speaking western world where the Sisters of Mercy have ministered and continue mainly to minister.

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<sup>19</sup> Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 167.

<sup>20</sup> Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 250.

<sup>21</sup> There is a surprising amount in Germaine Greer's 1970 publication, *The Female Eunuch* which resonates with many aspects of Betty Friedan's 1980 *Second Stage*. Alas, the somewhat outlandish behaviour and statements of Germaine Greer have distracted and detracted from that which is intrinsically valuable in her work.

<sup>22</sup> N.Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, first published, London, Chatto & Windus, 1990; London, Vintage publication, 1991. In this she exposed the exploitation of women by the marketing industry. She acknowledged that though there has always been a degree of 'beauty myth' in the lives of women it 'grows ever more influential and pervasive because of what is now conscious market manipulation'. She went on to name the multi million dollar diet, cosmetic, cosmetic surgery, and pornography industries which have 'arisen from the capital made out of unconscious anxieties, and are in turn able, through their influences on mass culture, to use, stimulate, and reinforce the hallucination in a rising economic spiral', 17.

<sup>23</sup> N.Wolf, *The Treehouse*, London, Virago Press, 2006, 251.

In Australia it leaves us still challenged by the words of the pioneer suffrage worker, Annie Golding in 1904: ‘ ... the world has suffered through want of the dual influence. Only the masculine was cultivated. In all lands property, military glory, and lust for power were the highest ideals. The humanizing influences – sentiment, family love, and other domestic virtues – were relegated to an inferior place.’<sup>24</sup>

It was the great old USA suffrage worker, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who asserted 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 ...’<sup>25</sup>

As we ponder the problem of increasing the influence of women in parliament, it is suggested that we give attention to this reality in the life-cycle of women highlighted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton over a century ago. Most women want to marry and have the love and companionship a man and family and they are most likely to be able to do this if they marry in their early 20s. They also have the need and the responsibility to serve the community beyond the family. 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, which the Australian Catholic married suffrage worker Kate Dwyer extolled in 1929, as mentioned previously.

There is a heartening ray of hope in Australia in connection with men to facilitate this development: 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. Predictably, it caused a stir among some older men politicians who questioned Iemma’s commitment to his job. Also many men in Australia are attending the birth of their children, and it is noted that the Tressillian Movement in Australia is now including fathers in the sessions concerning problem babies where previously that had given these only to mothers. There is, too, a growing movement in Australia to encourage and support fathers initiated by Warwick Marsh, the founder of the Fatherhood Foundation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> A.Golding, ‘The Evolution of Woman and Her Capabilities’, *Proceedings of the Australasian Catholic Congress*, Melbourne, 1904, 562.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

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. They needed to be empowered by the acquiring of skills to become economically independent as single women and thereby in a position to make more free choices. As is well known, Catherine saw the education of women as fundamental to the welfare of the family, the building block of society. The Mercy Sisters were noted from the beginning for being prepared to do what was necessary in particular circumstances to promote the common good<sup>27</sup> and they therefore became involved in health and social welfare work in addition to teaching. But always education was seen as the basic means of promoting long term solutions to problems in all areas of ministry.

In Australia it is clear that women religious generally and the Sisters of Mercy in particular have made a significant contribution in the educational field. It was noted 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'.<sup>28</sup> Presently in Australia in the forthcoming federal election the Prime Minister is being challenged in his electorate by Maxine McKew, a 50 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.<sup>29</sup>

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

- \* 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.

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<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

- \* 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 e.g. Anne states that the main cause of Kibera's dire state is 'international and national policies'.<sup>30</sup> Presently Australia's foreign aid budget is abysmally low and the prevailing economic policy of the government supports exploitive international policies in relation to developing countries. It is expected that with more women involved in political decision making this situation would be redressed. It is pertinent to note that Pius XII declared after World War II:

If more attention were paid to the anxieties of feminine sentiment, the work of consolidating peace would move ahead more rapidly. Those nations which are well-supplied with the goods of this world would be more hospitable and more generous toward those who are in want. Those in charge of public property would be more cautious in their dealings. With women in charge certainly the organizations set up to take care of community needs in the fields of housing, education, hospitals and employment would get more done and be more foresighted.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Anne Itotia, 'Africa Urbanisation and Proliferation of Slums – A Case Study of Kibera – Nairobi', MIRC Conference, social analysis paper, International Mercy Research Conference.

<sup>31</sup> O.M.Liebard, *Official Catholic Teachings: Love and Sexuality*, Wilmington, N.Carolina, McGrath Pub. Co., 1987, 188.