

Gaining Women's Suffrage in Victoria, 1908

It is fitting that on the celebration of International Women's Day this year we should acknowledge past activists for political citizenship for women, since 2008 marks the centenary of the passage of the women's vote for elections in the state of Victoria. I intend in this talk to indicate briefly some of the interesting features of this milestone in our political history. First, I will note a few of women activists in Victoria who campaigned for the vote. Victoria had what was probably the strongest and most diverse women's movement in Australia, and possibly the most comprehensive in its reform aims. Second, I will consider why, despite the vitality of the campaign, Victoria nevertheless was the last of the Australian states to give women the vote. Third, I want to explain the anomalous position of Victorian Aboriginal women, since although the Adult Suffrage Act introduced universal suffrage, Aborigines found themselves in an ambiguous position in relation to political citizenship for several more decades.

Victorian women with a mission

The female protagonists for women's rights in Victoria were remarkable for their diversity, tenacity and courage. These women were sometimes quite radical in their support for the vote, which they claimed along with a slate of civil and human rights issues. These rights they claimed both on the basis of individual human rights, and also on the basis of their specific competence to contribute to the body politic as mothers.

The outstanding women who fought for the vote may be assessed from a sample drawn from those who founded one of the suffrage organizations. Henrietta Dugdale, author of the utopian publication, *A Few Hours in a Far-off Age* (1883), was a migrant who had witnessed Chartist riots, become a free thinker, wore the bloomer costume, and combined concerns for the suffrage with outspoken advocacy for women on property issues and education. Her co-founder in the Victoria Women's Suffrage Society, the Australian-born Annie Lowe, was Australian born. Her grandfather had been one of the early settlers on the Hawkesbury, her father had entertained liberal views on girls, and in her early married life on land she lived 'beyond the frontier, as she described it,' in New

South Wales. In Victoria she combined efforts to highlight the scourge of male assaults on women that she linked with the systemic disadvantage that flowed from women's exclusion from the political system. North Melbourne widow Brettana Smyth, founder of the Australian Women's Suffrage Society, Like Dugdale a free thinker, a draper and apothecary, Smyth had studied medicine briefly at the University of Melbourne, and after financial difficulties forced her departure, delivered talks on women's health that she combined with the need for fertility control. At her shop she sold contraceptives along with baby charms, comforters, and silk stockings.

Bessie Lee was an early organising member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the programme of which included a sleight of women's rights issues. Brought up in a mining town and married to a railway worker, Lee proved to be a charismatic speaker and for many years worked as an itinerant campaigner around the country towns of Victoria, where she promoted a temperance message along with advocacy for women's need for empowerment through political rights. (After her second marriage Lee was to move to New Zealand where she became a founding member of the New Zealand Labour Party). The most prominent working-class suffragist was Lilian Locke, a wage earner who was a similarly compelling speaker. Locke was organiser for labour's Women's Social and Political Reform League that promoted women's political rights; she subsequently recruited women to the Victorian Labour Councils.

Annette Bear-Crawford, Victorian born and bred, had a wider exposure to feminist ideas than most. For a time she worked with the Bishop of London in the East End slums, she met the Beatrice and Sidney Webb, became active in the suffrage movement under Millicent Garrett Fawcett, returned to Melbourne where she promoted the shilling fund with Vida Goldstein, and established the United Council for Woman Suffrage. Vida Goldstein, who entered the suffrage stakes at twenty-one as a canvasser for the giant 1891 petition, was smart, articulate and innovative. She founded the Women's Political Association and the journal, the *Australian Woman's Sphere*, and became the first woman to stand for the Commonwealth Senate in 1903. Goldstein was the Victorian suffragist who forged a truly international reputation. Life at home must have had some interesting moments: her father, Jacob Goldstein, supported a short-lived Victorian Anti-Suffrage League in 1900.

Over their years of activism these suffragists and their fellow workers met with some fervent opposition. Not that this was unexpected: they were after all fighting to overturn a basic tenet of the prevailing gender code. Men ideally protected and provided for wives and children and represented their interests along with their own in the public realm. Women's entry to citizenship was a radical idea that engendered considerable anxiety, implying as it did the concept of female authority over men. Some politicians in the Legislative Assembly, more in the Legislative Council, voiced their concerns with complaints on these lines. As one opponent phrased it: 'The relations of the two sexes are becoming completely changed ... and it will increase under this Bill. Instead of women being content to allow the other to represent them they are to be a separate entity with separate aims and ambitions.... I prefer that women should link their fortunes with men...' And home comforts for hard-working men would dissolve.

Some men personalised the case. Robert Reid, father of ten children, (one of whom, Carrie Reid, helped set up the Anti-Suffrage League in 1900), foresaw a sorry time ahead: 'When a man goes home after his jaded weary night, he has the sympathy of his wife. He has escaped from all the worries of division-bells ringing, and the annoyance of having been beaten on a division, and his home is his paradise'. If women became involved in politics this haven would be destroyed. Many opponents of the suffrage denigrated the activists as 'he-women' in whom nature had gone sadly wrong; or, since many suffragists wanted to control the use of alcohol, bitter and humourless wowsers and killjoys, whose aim in life was to stop men having any fun.

As the years of the 1880s and 1890s passed, however, the public clearly became increasingly convinced of the justice of the women's claim. Vida Goldstein in a state known for its prominent liberals put the case in 1902 in the *Woman's Sphere*: 'self-government in the home and the State should be the inalienable right of every normal adult', so that just as women should not have to owe obedience in the home to a man, nor should she 'to men as a whole, as prescribed by modern governments.' Having argued for the vote on the basis of individual rights, most suffragists, female or male, could pursue a case also for women's enfranchisement on the basis of specific gender attributes. As one politician asserted, womanhood and motherhood were at the very foundation of national life. A woman had to 'stand by her home and brave many dangers of life', he said, and 'it

was really she who built up the nation, and performed many important duties which went to make up the strength of the nation' At a time when there was widespread concern about children's welfare, 'why should women be debarred from ... the right to say who should sit in the Legislative Assembly or in the Legislative Council?'

Why the delay in the passage of the vote in Victoria?

And so Victorian suffragists were a resolute group who had widespread support. How to explain, then the delay in the passage of the vote? Women's suffrage was passed in South Australia in 1894; in Western Australia 1899; Australian women received the vote and the right to stand for office for Commonwealth elections in 1902, and the vote in New South Wales in the same year; in Tasmania in 1903; Queensland in 1905; and yet the date was 1908 in Victoria.

In 1889 when Dr William Maloney, a socialist doctor who was the most foremost of the male suffrage supporters, prominent of whom was Dr William Maloney, introduced the first suffrage bill into the Victorian parliament, political power was by no means equally shared among men? White males dominated, but men of property held a privileged position. Property holders were allowed a plural vote, meaning they could vote for both houses of parliament in all electorates in which they held property. The situation in the house of review, Legislative Council, made their capacity to dominate politics even stronger: only property holders could vote or stand for office. The plural vote, which the emerging labour movement saw as a threat to their potential rise to power, was abolished in 1899 when it became clear that there would be no plural vote allowed for in the forthcoming Australian Constitution. The privileges of property holders, however, stayed in place in the electoral provisions for the Legislative Council.

These Legislative Councillors were for the most part social as well as economic conservatives, and inherently likely to oppose women's emancipation. Under our existing laws, one Councillor thundered, women were encroaching on 'men's domains', into waged work: some men had become 'street loafers', while the women whom the men 'should protect and earn bread for had become the breadwinners'. The result was a class of 'bachelor women' who were not fulfilling the high duties for which they were intended. The women of the state surely had 'something higher and nobler to contend for

than the franchise. They had their homes to look after and the rearing of their children'. The next anomaly they would see would be married women all wanting waged work, and then even demanding equal pay! In a state at the forefront of industrialisation, where one in four women were already in the workforce, Councillors could prophesy an alarming scenario of female home neglect and unwarranted demands on the hapless male of the household.

Above all, Conservative politicians feared that the entry of women – the most forthright of whom seemed alarmingly radical - into the voting system posed a threat to the balance of politics and conservative interests in particular. There were 19 separate attempts to pass the women's vote through the Victorian parliament between 1889 and 1908. Conservatives voted against suffrage bills in the Legislative Assembly but seldom had the numbers to prevail. It was otherwise in the upper house. Time after time conservatives used their entrenched position in the Legislative Council to defeat suffrage bills.

As the suffrage passed successively in the other states, and especially after Victorian women received political rights for Commonwealth elections conservatives struggled to find some chivalrous excuse for opposing the vote, other than the truth: that they feared an undue number would vote against them. They failed to discover a more cogent defence of their intransigence than the somewhat lame argument that women did not want the vote. This flew in the face of the evidence of the 1891 petition that 30,000 women had signed; and of the more recent evidence that, in the absence of compulsory voting, Victorian women enrolled and voted in good numbers for the federal elections. One Councillor declared in the second reading of the Adult Suffrage Act in 1908 that there was not an atom of evidence that the women wanted the franchise. 'The women who do not say anything about the matter are, in my opinion, in a majority. It was only those who were anxious and noisy' who wanted the bill passed.

We should have some pity for the conservatives. They had told women it was unfeminine to consider casting a vote and now they feared that the good conservative mistresses of their households would stay home on polling day while the servant girls would go off to vote – and vote for the Labor Party or progressive liberals. The result would be anti-conservative majorities that would act against conservative interests in the

state. They expected the state rather than the federal government to drive policy on matters closest to their economic interests, such as the regulation of land, commerce, industry and finance.

The breakthrough came in 1908. A bill went from the Legislative Assembly to the Legislative Council early in 1908 but was defeated as usual. Then the conservative Premier, Sir Thomas Brent, hitherto a strident opponent of the suffrage, who was involved in political trading with some liberals, agreed to make a second bill a government measure rather than as the more fragile private members' bill. Furthermore, he persuaded a critical number of Councillors to switch their votes to support it. It seemed that the activities of conservative women (now organised in the Australian National Women's League) to get the conservative vote out for the federal elections, had lessened their fears of a female backlash. One Councillor who switched his allegiance confessed that whereas he had previously voted against the women's suffrage, he was now satisfied that 'the majority of women would vote in the same way as their husbands and that the balance of the political parties would remain very much as it was at present'. And so the women's vote finally passed both houses in November 1908. It was promulgated the following year.

Victorian Aboriginal women and the vote in 1908

The Victorian Equal Suffrage Act gave the vote to all adults. Aboriginal men had had the vote since the 1850s; now ostensibly Aboriginal women gained the vote in Victoria also. But the citizenship of Aboriginal women and men was being affected drastically by decisions made at the Commonwealth level. Political citizenship for Aboriginal Australians (also migrants of colour) were defined in the 1902 Commonwealth Franchise Act. If you had the vote in the state you had the vote for federal elections. However, a legal interpretation of the Constitution meant that only Aboriginal men already on the electoral roll on 1 January 1901 were enfranchised for federal elections. No more would be added. This exclusion from new registrations flowed on to Aboriginal men and then from 1908 to Aboriginal women for state elections.

The aftermath

Aboriginal women and men thus found their political rights compromised for several decades. In 1949 the Commonwealth government under Prime Minister Chifley reinstated the state vote for Aborigines for federal elections. Many Indigenous Victorians however looked to the referendum of 1967 as the beginning of their political and civil rights. It is not enough to have rights in the law; rights need to be communicated and implemented.

Non-Indigenous Victorian women enrolled and voted in good numbers in their first state election in 1910 - compulsory voting was not introduced until the 1920s. Women did not however receive the right to stand for election to the Victorian parliament until 1923. The first woman was elected to parliament in a by-election in 1933 was Millicent Peacock, the widow of the sitting member. When Pauline Toner, the first woman in a Victorian cabinet, was elected in 1977, she was only the sixth woman to enter the state parliament. As Marilyn Lake will show in her talk, however, Victorian women did organise effectively, not merely in political parties, but even more effectively in women-only organizations joined into the lobby group, the National Council of Women. It took till the 1980s and 1990s for the numbers in Victorian parliament to expand appreciably, to its current critical mass of over one-third. This new wave of politicians will reshape the culture of politics and policies in the coming decade.

NOTE

*A fully referenced larger paper will be available electronically at a later date on request to the author at: p.grimshaw@unimelb.edu.au

