

A Women's Anthem...

In 1873, the Victorian Parliament debated a bill to enfranchise female property owners. George Higinbotham, a strong supporter of female suffrage (and later Chief Justice) decided to up the stakes. He moved a clause to give every adult female a vote. The bill was defeated 40-16¹.

Women began to organise. Henrietta Dugdale helped form the first Victorian Women's Suffrage Society in 1884. In the same year, she wrote to the Melbourne *Herald* attacking the courts for not protecting women against violence. 'Women's anger,' she wrote, 'was compounded by the fact that those who inflicted the violence on women had a share in the making of the laws while their victims did not'².

In 1889, Dr. William Maloney introduced the first female suffrage bill to the Victorian parliament. He was greeted with 'jeers, sneers and catcalls'³. The bill did not reach debating stage. This was to be the first of nineteen legislative attempts to enable Victorian women to vote in State elections.

Two years later, the new Premier, James Munro, received a deputation which included members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The Premier sought to clarify whether these women wanted the vote for female property owners only. They replied 'we are asking for and expecting to get the same privileges as our brothers'⁴. In that case, advised the Premier, women needed to show a united and representative front⁵.

And so was born the 'Monster Petition.' In the space of about six weeks, 30,000 signatures were collected across the entire colony of Victoria – in hamlets, towns, regional centres and the suburbs of Melbourne. Women walked whole streets, knocked on doors, and collected signatures where women gathered. According to the official census data for the same year, these signatures comprised about ten percent of the adult female population of the colony.

From this time onwards, the campaign for female suffrage stepped up. More suffrage organisations were created. The WCTU formed many more branches. Deputations were made to political leaders. Vida Goldstein founded a monthly newspaper, *Women's Sphere*. Letters were written to newspapers. Public meetings were held on the subject. Leaders of the various suffrage organisations travelled thousands of miles to attend meetings and rally supporters.

Increasing numbers of men came out in support. Between 1904-08, five private members bills were introduced. While each of these received large majority support in the House of Assembly, they were all defeated in the Upper House⁶.

During this last stretch of agitation, Premier Bent was not helping the cause. Apart from refusing to meet deputations, at one stage he attended a public meeting on female suffrage in his own electorate, at the Brighton Town Hall, and made a point of sleeping through most of it⁷.

This is not to suggest that all women were in favour of the vote. In 1900, a short-lived Anti-Suffrage League was formed by Freda Derham and Carrie Reed, both daughters of Assembly members. They gathered 22,978 signatures and submitted these to the Upper House⁸. In what can be seen as an early example of push-polling (!), Anti-Suffrage campaigners asked women 'Do you want women to neglect their

homes and become MPs?' and 'Are you in favour of all the bad women of Melbourne getting into Parliament?'⁹.

But by 1908, the writing was on the wall. Premier Bent succumbed to the will of the many women and men who sought to enfranchise women. The vote on the 1908 bill was carried on the voices only, with no names recorded.

Touchingly, after winning the vote, some 20,000 women signed a testimonial to Dr. William Maloney in gratitude for his initial attempt to secure their voting rights nineteen years earlier¹⁰. Annie Lowe, who had helped to form the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society in 1884, and who campaigned for decades for women's right to vote, did not live to exercise her franchise¹¹.

It took courage to advocate for women's right to vote. Female supporters of suffrage were more commonly lampooned in cartoons, public comment and on the parliamentary record. They were viciously typecast as miserable, home-breaking women, as angular, hard-featured withered creatures with shrill harsh voices and no pretence to comeliness¹²!

Significantly, female advocates of suffrage were not simply wishing to vote for the sake of it. They wanted change and reform. Although Victoria was prosperous and thriving, conditions were tough for many people, especially for women. At the time of the 'Monster Petition', the average woman gave birth to seven children. Limited contraception meant involuntary child-bearing. There was extensive poverty, significant levels of alcohol-fuelled violence against women and family violence. Thousands of babies died in the summer heat. Poor industrial conditions existed in many workplaces, including unjust child labour practices.

Since achieving the vote in 1908, Victorian women have worked hard to pursue change and reform on many social, economic, political and legal fronts. As the Victorian Women's Trust showed in its second Public Forum in June this year, women over the century have used several main political avenues to express their active citizenship - protesting and resisting; forming numerous organisations as a base to come together and give voice to issues of concern; tirelessly advocating on critical issues, such as equal pay and violence against women and girls; working at the international level, and more recently, entering parliaments and local councils in increasing numbers.

Late November 2007, when thinking about what the Victorian Women's Trust might do to celebrate the forthcoming Centenary of female suffrage in Victoria, I had the idea of a Women's Anthem. Why not?

I broached this with Kavisha Mazzella, whose musicianship, creativity and personal qualities I had admired greatly for many years. Thankfully she loved the idea and accepted a commission.

T.S. Eliot once wrote that 'between the idea and the reality....falls the shadow'.

Kavisha and I sat down in March 2008 to start the serious business of bringing the idea of the Anthem to fruition. What followed was a very special collaboration. We talked at length about the historical context, the ways women have been active citizens in attending to rights and wrongs of their communities and society overall, and their efforts to secure equality. We shared conversations about the extraordinary things that women do day after day, month after month, usually unheralded and unremunerated. We looked back and appreciated the tremendous hard work and the courage of countless thousands of women in achieving the political liberty we now so

much take for granted. We both understood that while great gains have been made in improving conditions for women, the journey was still incomplete – and that some issues for women are yet to go away, including violence, equal pay and representation in our society’s decision making forums and processes.

We also knew in our hearts and minds that true freedom for women is achieved when women and men are able to live peacefully and respectfully with one another.

The Anthem, *Love and Justice*, sets out to reflect these many deep layers in the quest for justice and gender equality. While I was a privileged party to these conversations with Kavisha, the poetry, melody and the power of the composition are hers alone.

In late July 2008, I placed a half-page advertisement in a program of The Boite, a wonderful, Melbourne based community music organisation. I repeated the advertisement in a Trust newsletter. I called for 300 women to come together in four rehearsals at the Northcote Town Hall to learn the Anthem and sing it for the first time on 29 November 2008. I had the 300 within eleven days – from suburbs all across Melbourne as well as from regional Victoria. It was impossible to turn women away.

Over 400 women will sing the inaugural performance at BMW Edge Theatre in the same month as women won the vote one hundred years ago in 1908. Like me, these women see *Love and Justice* as a powerful political metaphor for celebrating this milestone – women finding their voice, claiming a voice, using their voice and coming together to strengthen their voice.

This is why, after the inaugural performance of the Anthem, we at the Victorian Women’s Trust and Kavisha, are delighted to be able to gift *Love and Justice* to women everywhere – in Victoria and beyond. This gifting of the Anthem means women can keep the song alive – and indeed, never lose their voice.

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Victorian Women’s Trust

29 November 2008

Footnotes:

¹ Audrey Oldfield *Woman Suffrage in Australia* Cambridge University Press 1992:132.

² *Ibid.*, p.136.

³ *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.147.

¹⁰ Australian Dictionary of Biography, On-Line Edition, Dr. William Maloney

¹¹ Audrey Oldfield *Woman Suffrage in Australia* Cambridge University Press 1992:163

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 186-211