

**Madeline Grey, *Challenging Women: Towards Equality in the Parliament of Victoria*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2009. pp. v + 358. \$39.95 paper.**

**Marian Sawer, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009. pp. vi + 317. \$39.95 paper.**

Victoria was the second place in the world to grant women the right to vote in state elections, when the framers of the *Electoral Act* of 1863 enfranchised all of those listed on local government electoral rolls. They had forgotten that women already had the vote in local government elections, so these newly enfranchised women turned out to vote in the 1864 state poll. The male MPs were horrified at their 'mistake' and withdrew women's franchise the following year. The women of Victoria would have a long wait to get it back; in 1908 Victoria was the last state in Australia to grant women the right to vote and to stand for Parliament. Since then women in Victoria, as in other parts of Australia, have continued to work to increase women's participation in politics.

*Challenging Women* largely deals with women's political activity in Victoria from 1972 (which marked the rise of 'third wave' feminism and the establishment of the Women's Electoral Lobby) to 1997, although an epilogue brings the reader up to date with women's political activity to 2009. The first part of the work covers the history of women in politics in Victoria, the rise of the Women's Electoral Lobby and the introduction of 'femocrats' into the public service. The book also examines the political parties' differing ideological approaches to increasing the numbers of women in parliament, and tackles the question of whether a critical mass of women MPs can change the culture of those parliaments.

The second part of the book provides the perspective of some of those women who have been elected to Victoria's parliament, and who recount their experiences in going through the pre-selection process, campaigning for seats, how they were treated as women in parliament and their success (or otherwise) in placing women's issues onto the political agenda. Grey interviewed 11 women MPs – five each from the Liberal and Labor parties, and one from the National Party. The women's careers span the period from 1982 to the present (two of the women are still serving MPs), which provides a useful insight into how the treatment and experience of the women had changed over more than a quarter of a century. The most striking, although perhaps not surprising, difference between the Labor and conservative women is their divergent views on how women should be recruited for political life, and in particular whether merit or affirmative action should be the key to a woman's success in politics.

*Challenging Women* is good mix of women's political history, analysis and first-hand accounts by women who have made their mark on Victoria's political landscape. My only quibble with the work is that at times it reads like the thesis from which it springs, including statements as to what is about to appear in individual chapters. The conclusion, too, is more a summary of the book's findings, whereas a forward-looking discussion of how the role of women in politics might evolve could have raised some interesting issues. That being said, however, *Challenging Women* is a useful and worthy addition to the field, providing as it does a solid historical background and context to the current role of women in Victorian politics. Even more importantly, the

perspectives of the politicians interviewed for the book provide a valuable insight into how these women have dealt with, and survived, the demands of political life.

It seems surprising that such an important Australian political and social organisation as the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) has not been the subject of extensive study before this, but *Making Women Count* goes a long way toward making up for this historical omission. The author is the first to acknowledge that the work benefited greatly from the information gathered by the WEL history survey. Former WEL-Australian Capital Territory convenor, Gail Radford, who co-ordinated the survey and gathered much other information besides, is also credited on the cover page of the book.

Marian Sawer has made use of this plethora of information to create a history of WEL that is detailed, extensive and very entertainingly written. Sawer takes the reader on a journey from the beginnings of WEL in 1972, through the heady days of the 1980s and the *Sex Discrimination* and *Affirmative Action Acts*, and to the 1990s and 2000s, when WEL found itself struggling in a hostile political and social environment. However this is not presented simply as a timeline; rather, the work examines the strategies that the various WEL groups used to place women's issues into the public arena and, more importantly, to pressure politicians to take those issues seriously. Those strategies included the introduction of surveys asking MPs and political candidates their views on a range of women's issues, a means by which WEL changed the political agenda across Australia to the point where at least one MP would blame WEL for the loss of his seat.

The book's chapters are not arranged on a strictly chronological basis. Instead, Sawer uses individual chapters to examine aspects of WEL's operations, including how each WEL group was organised and the ideology behind that organisation. Another chapter dealing with WEL's use of the media to transmit its message should be used as a blueprint by other social or political groups. As Sawer points out, many WEL members were journalists who knew what needed to be done to get the interest of news editors, and the media events detailed in the chapter had a vital role in getting the organisation's message across.

Sawer also devotes a chapter to how WEL differentiated itself from Women's Liberation, and the praise and criticism it has received over the years for its determination to work through established political systems, rather than attempting to change those systems. However this chapter does not concentrate solely on public life. One of the striking aspects of this chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, is that it also shows the human face of the women of WEL – women who for the first time realised that there was more to life than being a housewife, that they could make a difference, and that, if they joined forces with others, they could be powerful. So while the book rightly tells the stories of the prominent WEL members including Susan Ryan, Beatrice Faust and Carmen Lawrence, it also relates the experiences of women across Australia who were never in the public spotlight but who worked for, and were inspired by, WEL's ideals.

The author points out that *Making Women Count* is not the final word on the history of WEL, but it is an excellent beginning from which further research will be able to grow.