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‘How much longer will we allow this country’s affairs to be run by radical feminists?’

Anti-feminist Activism in Late 1970s Australia

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The historiography of Australia’s feminist and sexual revolutions has focused on activists who articulated new claims for rights and protections on the basis of gender and sexuality. Very few scholars have investigated anti-feminist women’s groups as part of this history. This article focuses on two anti-feminist women’s groups in late 1970s Australia: Women’s Action Alliance, and Women Who Want to Be Women. It argues that they adapted the women’s movement’s slogan ‘the personal is political’, using their identities as wives and mothers to authorise their political campaigns and contesting structures designed to facilitate women’s access to policy-making. Finally, the article argues that while these groups were small, they did influence federal politics. The rapidly changing economic orthodoxies of the late 1970s exerted particular pressures on women. Feminists and anti-feminists both offered a similar analysis of these economic pressures, even though the solutions they advanced were very different.

In mid-1976, the conservative *Toorak Times* began publishing a weekly column by Babette Francis, the wife of one-term Liberal Victorian MP Charles Francis and a well-known spokesperson for the Women’s Action Alliance. Francis used her column to take aim at feminists.¹ In May 1976, for example, she condemned the appointment of Penny Ryan as the first Women’s Advisory Officer in the Victorian Premier’s Department, believing her to be a radical feminist and a communist, ‘too young and too immature for the job’ and not a mother.

I would like offer sincere thanks to Penny Russell, who invited me to present this work at the ‘Sexual Revolutions’ workshop that she convened with Jane Kamensky at the University of Sydney in 2018. I would also like to thank the La Trobe history department who offered very helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper, and, as always, to acknowledge the collegiality and encouragement provided by my co-investigators Robert Reynolds, Leigh Boucher and Barbara Baird.

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¹ The quote in this article’s title comes from Betty Hocking, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 26 April 1981, 2; Babette Francis often criticized the Whitlam government’s funding of events for International Women’s Year. Babette Francis, ‘A Birds Eye View’, *Toorak Times*, 14 July 1976, 2; 4 August 1976, 2. Information on the *Toorak Times* (1972–1992) is scarce, but Damien Murphy’s obituary of Pacholli is one of the best sources: ‘A Midas Touch for Failure’, 11 December 2004, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/a-midas-touch-for-failure-20041211-gdkalm.html> (accessed 30 August 2020)

Moreover, she had written an article about masturbation for an Australian Union of Students' guide to sexuality that Francis thought was 'pornographic'.²

Ryan's appointment in early 1976 to make policy recommendations on the needs of women in Victoria was part of a suite of feminist initiatives, including the establishment of a Status of Women Inquiry in 1975 and the passage of the Equal Opportunity Act in 1976.³ Many of these initiatives were resisted by members of the Liberal Party, who were divided on feminism: while influential Liberal women like Eve Mahlab were prominent in the Women's Electoral Lobby, many in the women's section of the party viewed feminism as a threat.⁴ Ryan quickly became a focal point for anti-feminist activists, exposing a broader divide in the Liberal Party over whether the party could – or should – incorporate feminist perspectives in their policy-making and governance. Beryl Beaurepaire, head of the Victorian Liberal Party women's section, told Premier Dick Hamer that she had received 'a great number of complaints' about Ryan, and Women's Action Alliance exerted pressure within the Liberal Party calling for her removal.⁵ Charles Francis reportedly encouraged 'every Roman Catholic Parish Council [...] to protest to Hamer'.⁶ As the campaign grew, Ryan's daily activities were subjected to unusual levels of direct supervision.⁷ Within months of her appointment she was 'white-anted into resignation' on 5 September 1976, declaring that 'I was serving no useful purpose for women in Victoria'.⁸ Shortly after, the Australian Union of Students' Laurie Bebbington said she was alarmed at the 'incredible strength of a very small group of organized rightwing that we've got here in Victoria – the Women's Action Alliance – and I don't think we should underestimate them'.⁹

The case of Penny Ryan is instructive for investigating the strategies used by Australian anti-feminist women's groups in the late 1970s. Those strategies included a focus on feminists in government roles, a professed advocacy for stay-at-home wives and mothers, and a

² 'A special writer', 'Radical wins Libel Action Against Liberal', *Nation Review*, 1 March 1979, 357.

³ Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 162.

⁴ Tim Colebatch, *Dick Hamer: The liberal Liberal* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2014), 330.

⁵ Nancy Dexter, 'The Penny Ryan Row', *The Age*, 26 May 1976, 18; Nancy Dexter, 'Two Sides of Penny', *The Age*, 29 May 1976, 12.

⁶ 'Feminist Attacked', *Tribune*, 4 August 1976, 10.

⁷ 'Feminist driven out of P.S.', *Tribune*, 8 September 1976, 11.

⁸ Colebatch, 331; "'Hampered" adviser to go', *Canberra Times*, 6 September 1976, 1.

⁹ 'Women resign over Hamer's tokenism', *Tribune*, 15 September 1976, 3.

determination to contain what they saw as ‘radical’ feminism in public life. Anti-feminist groups developed their own brand of ‘feminism’ to assert public power and to dispute feminist policy-making. They advanced an anti-feminist agenda and gave it authority through public articulation of their private identities as wives and mothers. The language of maternal citizenship and the reproductive compact had long had significant public purchase for women, but it was increasingly challenged by the women’s movement’s insistence on making claims to rights on the basis of individual, rather than maternal identities. Feminists made claims for rights and protections on the basis of their gender, framing their demands through sexual, rather than maternal citizenship.¹⁰

This article focuses on two Australian anti-feminist women’s groups, active between 1975 and 1985: the Women’s Action Alliance (WAA), formed in 1975, and Women Who Want to Be Women (WWWW), formed in 1979. The WAA and WWWW were not the only two organisations to mobilise against the women’s movement, but they were the most prominent women’s groups to do so, and they framed their activism as explicitly anti-feminist (rather than, for example, as ‘pro-life’, which we would understand as implicitly anti-feminist). WAA formed in response to the heightened visibility of the women’s movement during International Women’s Year in 1975, while Women Who Want to be Women broke away from the WAA after the failure of the so-called Lusher motion, moved by Stephen Lusher MP in the House of Representatives in 1979, which would have restricted abortion access by removing it from the schedule of medical benefits.¹¹ WWWW were more vehemently anti-abortion and they appear to have been linked to Right to Life and the Catholic Church.¹² Both

¹⁰ On maternal citizenship, see Marilyn Lake, ‘Childbearers as Rights-Bearers: Feminist Discourse on the Rights of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal mothers in Australia, 1920-50’, *Women’s History Review* 8, no.2 (1999): 347–63; on the ways women’s liberation challenged maternal citizenship identities, see Michelle Arrow, “‘Everyone deserves a holiday from work, why not mothers?’: Motherhood, Feminism and Citizenship in the Australian Royal Commission on Human Relationships, 1974–1977”, *Women’s History Review* 25, no. 2(2016): 320–36. On sexual citizenship, see Diane Richardson, ‘Rethinking Sexual Citizenship’, *Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2017): 210–12. Also see Michelle Arrow, “‘These are a few of our daily oppressions’: speaking and listening to homosexuality in Australia’s Royal Commission on Human Relationships, 1974–77”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no.2 (2018):234–63.

¹¹ On the Lusher motion, see Erica Millar, “‘Too Many’”: Anxious White Nationalism and the Biopolitics of Abortion’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 83 (2015): 82–98.

¹² Irene Webley, ‘The New Right and Women Who Want to Be Women in Australian Politics in the 1980s’, *Hecate* 9, no. 1–2 (1983): 7–24.

groups built small but dedicated national networks, comprised of campaigners who were prodigious correspondents, petitioners and public speakers.

While these groups were small, they exerted political influence, as the Penny Ryan case demonstrated. However, they have been almost entirely neglected by historians. If we are to understand the impact of the women's movement from the 1970s onwards, especially the ways in which the movement ruptured and remade the foundational categories of 'public' and 'private' and reshaped women's citizenship identities, we must also consider the ways in which it enabled anti-feminism. This article argues that anti-feminist women's groups adapted the women's movement's slogan 'the personal is political', using their private identities as wives and mothers to authorise their political campaigns and contesting structures designed to facilitate women's access to policy-making. The article proceeds in three parts. First, I locate anti-feminist groups in their historiographical context. Second, in an era in which the women's movement was engaged in a 'fandango' with the state to secure new rights and protections for women (embodied by the work of women like Penny Ryan), I examine the ways in which anti-feminist women framed *their* claims on the state: as representatives of the 'silent majority', as wives and mothers, and as women who had been excluded from political power by feminists.¹³ Finally, I assess the impact of anti-feminism on Australian politics in the late 1970s. I show that there was some surprising overlap between feminist and anti-feminist diagnoses of the problems facing women in this period, even if their solutions were very different.

Gender and the historiography of the New Right in Australia

The historiography of Australia's feminist and sexual revolutions has overwhelmingly focused on activists who articulated claims for rights and protections on the basis of gender and sexuality. Most historians have situated these movements on the political left, partly because feminist history emerged from women's liberation, which itself developed from the New Left.¹⁴ It also reflects the convergence between activist movements and social democratic Labor governments, who expanded their class-based vision of equality to

¹³ Sara Dowse, 'The Women's Movement's Fandango with the State: the movement's role in public policy since 1972', in *Women, Social Welfare and the State*, eds Cora V. Baldock and Bettina Cass (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 205–26.

¹⁴ Susan Magarey, 'Australia', in *Companion to Women's Historical Writing*, eds Mary Spongberg, Ann Curthoys and Barbara Caine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46–8.

encompass women's rights, and later, gay and lesbian rights.¹⁵ The Whitlam government addressed long-overdue questions like equal pay, created policy machinery for women (including dedicated women's affairs staff in the Commonwealth bureaucracy) and worked (with mixed results) to respond to women's demands for services such as child care.¹⁶ Yet while the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was more immediately responsive to feminist claims, the rupturing effect of the women's movement's insistence that 'the personal is political' was felt on both the left and right of Australian politics, because it politicised the distinction between public and private life upon which both sides had long depended.¹⁷ However, the historiography has focused more on the broad left's response to this emerging politics, incorporating the feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements into a broader story of progressive inclusion.¹⁸ Few have investigated how those on the conservative side of politics made sense of this reconfiguring of politics, and new feminist claims on the state.

In the decades leading up to the 1970s, women were the 'organisational mainstays' of the non-Labor parties.¹⁹ While only a small number of women entered Federal parliament before the 1980s, most were from the Liberal or National/Country parties, where they could readily draw on the discourses of maternal citizenship that had long authorised women's claims to political participation.²⁰ The Liberal Party had active women's groups since its formation and the Federal Women's Committee was established in 1945 to assist women's progress in state divisions, but women found it difficult to be taken seriously as organisational leaders or political candidates.²¹ Warwick Eather suggested that the leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1950s was indifferent to the concerns of women members, which made membership of

¹⁵ Carol Johnson 'Gough Whitlam and the Labor Tradition', in *The Whitlam Legacy*, ed. Troy Bramston (Sydney: Federation Press, 2013), 357–65.

¹⁶ Lyndall Ryan, 'Feminism and the Federal Bureaucracy, 1972 – 1983', in *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions*, ed. Sophie Watson (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 71–84.

¹⁷ See Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, The Political and The Making of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2019).

¹⁸ See for example, Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000).

¹⁹ Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (Sydney: Sun Australia, 1993), 53.

²⁰ Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999); Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

²¹ Warwick Eather, 'The Liberal Party of Australia and the Australian Women's Movement Against Socialisation 1947–54', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 44, no.2 (1998): 191–207.

other conservative political organisations more attractive.²² By the late 1960s, the ALP's new appeal to many members of the progressive middle class was felt by the Liberal Party. As Judith Brett notes, the Party was 'deserted by a new section of the moral middle class which was forming around new values and principles, spearheaded by a new, nationalist intelligentsia'.²³ If, as Brett suggests, liberalism had long depended on notions of duty and service, the women's movement was one of the forces that challenged this, as 'conceptions of citizenship centred on duties gave way to ones centred on rights'.²⁴ For the Liberal Party, which had long relied on women's organisational work, the women's movement represented not just an electoral challenge, but a challenge to the position of women within the party itself. Established ways of exercising influence in the party came under question in the wake of organisations like the Women's Electoral Lobby, who interviewed political candidates about issues of concern to women.²⁵ The impact of this shift has not yet been closely examined by scholars and the scant historiography of women in the Liberal Party has tended to focus on well-known female MPs, rather than the party's organisational or policy responses to women.²⁶

Similarly, conservative activist mobilisations around gender and sexuality, particularly in the 1970s, have been little examined in the Australian context. With the notable exceptions of Judith Brett and Paul Strangio, the historiography of the Fraser era remains incomplete.²⁷ There is also the problem of archival scarcity: while progressive social movements produced extensive archives, those on the right have left few records.²⁸ In the wake of the Australian

²² *Ibid.*, 192.

²³ Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁵ Marian Sawer with Gail Radford, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008), ch. 1.

²⁶ See, for example, Margaret Fitzherbert, *So Many Firsts: Liberal Women from Enid Lyons to the Turnbull Era* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2009); Michael McKernan, *Beryl Beaurepaire* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999); Don Harwin and Jenny Gardiner, 'Women in the NSW Coalition Parties', in *"No fit place for women"? Women in NSW Politics, 1856–2006*, eds Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 111–30.

²⁷ Brett, *Menzies and the Moral Middle Class*; Paul Strangio, 'Instability, 1966–82', in *The Cambridge History of Australia Volume 2: The Commonwealth of Australia*, eds Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 135–61.

²⁸ On the archiving of second wave feminism in Australia, see Alison Bartlett, Maryanne Dever and Margaret Henderson, 'Notes towards an Archive of Australian Feminist Activism', *Outskirts*, 17

Christian Lobby's campaigning during the 2017 postal survey on same-sex marriage, and the push for a religious discrimination act in 2019–20, understanding the history of the Australian religious Right is urgent and important. Yet Australian historians have done very little to chart this history: for example, there is little scholarship on the Rev Fred Nile, an important figure in the New South Wales (NSW) Christian right since the 1980s, and we lack a comprehensive history of the Australian anti-abortion organisation Right to Life.²⁹ Scholars examining the influence of religious groups on Australian politics have tended to focus on the 1950s and 1960s, projecting the 1970s as a decade of secularisation and progressive reform.³⁰ The parallel rise of the New Right in Australia has also been neglected: the subject of considerable work by political scientists at the time, it remains to be fully historicised, and with the exception of Marian Sawer's *Australia and the New Right*, this work failed to take account of gender.³¹ This scholarly neglect has meant that the anti-feminist activists of the late 1970s have slipped from the historian's gaze.

While numerous historians have worked on the history of the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, very few have incorporated Australian anti-feminist groups.³² Irene Webley, one of the few scholars to examine them closely, connected feminist and anti-feminist politics and suggested that we need to understand anti-feminists as a reaction to the state acceptance of moderate feminism, and a desire to expel feminist groups from the

(May 2007): <http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-16/bartlett> (accessed 30 August 2020).

²⁹ Some pathbreaking work on anti-abortion politics: Judy McVey, 'The Right to Life Offensive Since 1969', *Hecate* 9, no. 1–2 (1983): 35–43; Erica Millar, 'Mourned Choices and Grievable Lives: The Anti-Abortion Movement's Influence in Defining the Abortion Experience in Australia Since the 1960s', *Gender & History* 28, no.2 (2016): 501–19; Rebecca Albury, *The Politics of Reproduction: Beyond the Slogans* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999).

³⁰ Gerard Henderson, *Santamaria: A Most Unusual Man* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015).

³¹ Marian Sawer, *Australia and the New Right* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin 1982); Marian Simms, 'Malcolm Fraser and the Emergence of the New Right', in *Liberal Nation: The Liberal Party and Australian Politics*, Marian Sawer (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982), ch. 8; Ardel Shamsullah, 'Fraserism in Theory and Practice', in *For Better or For Worse: The Federal Coalition*, ed. Brian Costar (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 19–30. Dominic Kelly's *Political Troglodytes and Economic Lunatics: The Hard Right in Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2019) focuses on hard right advocacy groups but not in women's policy.

³² Lake *Getting Equal*; Gisela Kaplan, *The Meagre Harvest: The Australian Women's Movement 1950s-1990s* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); Sawer with Radford, *Making Women Count*; and Susan Magarey, *Dangerous Ideas: Women's Liberation – Women's Studies – Around the World* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014).

Australian political establishment.³³ Robyn Rowland similarly insisted that the two groups be viewed in the same frame, characterising anti-feminism as evidence of backlash against the social change of the 1970s.³⁴ The subsequent lack of scholarly attention paid to these groups is not entirely unexpected: they were small organisations that attracted the support of relatively few Australian women. A 1981 survey of 300 Melbourne housewives found that while 46 per cent of them supported the aims of women's liberation, only three per cent supported the Women's Action Alliance and just five per cent supported Women Who Want to Be Women.³⁵ US historian Kim Nielsen notes that we need to be careful to avoid 'exoticizing' women of the right as a bizarre other. However, she also cautioned that 'historians must take right wing women seriously as political actors', because 'their actions and political alliances have potentially serious consequences'.³⁶

I argue that historians need to understand Australian anti-feminist women's activism for three reasons. First, it paints a more comprehensive picture of the political landscape in which the women's movement's 'gains' were being challenged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and can show us how conservative politics grappled with feminist demands. Second, while anti-feminist groups were small, they managed to attain some political influence, as I will demonstrate. Third, an examination of anti-feminist women's groups can raise some troubling questions about the ways that feminist conceptions of women's citizenship were both challenged and utilised by anti-feminist women's groups. Anti-feminist women used the policy machinery established by feminists to campaign for the rights of mothers to stay at home, and they did so using a politics of personal experience, just as women's movement activists did.

While few Australian historians have examined anti-feminist women's groups, international scholarship on anti-feminist women is more extensive, especially in the United States. A transnational context is important to understanding Australian groups, who mimicked and admired the strategies of US activists like Phyllis Schlafly, founder of the conservative

³³ Irene Webley, 'Women who Want to Be Women' in Sawyer, *Australia and the New Right*, 135–6. See also Webley, 'The New Right and Women Who Want to Be Women': 7–24.

³⁴ Robyn Rowland, *Women Who Do and Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

³⁵ J. Clarke and K. White, *Women in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Fontana Collins, 1983), 196.

³⁶ Kim E. Nielsen, 'Doing the "Right" Right', *Journal of Women's History* 16, no.3 (Fall 2004): 169.

interest group Eagle Forum who famously campaigned against the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³⁷ WWWW members met with Schlafly in the US and hosted her on a tour of Australia in 1983.³⁸ However, the political contexts within which these women operated were very different: in the US, anti-feminist women were part of a powerful coalition of conservative voters who elected Ronald Reagan as President in 1980.³⁹ Ideologically, anti-feminists in the US and Australia were both 'committed to a hierarchical, gendered division of social life'.⁴⁰ American anti-feminists organised around the traditional symbols of motherhood and the home, advocating for the so-called 'silent majority' of women and defending the nuclear family from 'the inside', as experts 'endowed with the emotion and privilege of the sanctity of motherhood'.⁴¹ They disputed the women's movement's claims to knowledge about women's 'needs'.

Framing anti-feminism

Despite a lack of organisational records, anti-feminists generated several valuable archival sources. Both the WAA and WWWW produced newsletters in the late 1970s and early 1980s and they were energetic correspondents to newspapers, government bodies and politicians. Based on a reading of these sources, I highlight three key ideas in their claims-making: that they, not 'radical' feminists, were 'true' representatives of the 'silent majority' of women; they were proud wives and mothers; and that they had been excluded from positions of influence by feminists.

Anti-feminist's most important rhetorical strategy was to argue that they, not feminists, were the best representatives of women's interests. WAA argued that WEL lacked 'expertise in the field of the woman at home' and had no 'understanding or interest in the position of the full-

³⁷ Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³⁸ Babette Francis, in Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 137.

³⁹ See for example Stacie Taranto, *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Critchlow; Catherine Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through to the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁴⁰ Kathleen M. Blee and Sandra McKee Deutsch, eds, *Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay Across Borders* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2012), 2.

⁴¹ Webley, 'Women Who Want to Be Women', 135.

time homemaker'.⁴² They constructed a constituency of 'the silent majority of women, even those who haven't heard of us, who want to be and are happy to be women'.⁴³ Women's affairs advisors were particular targets: WAA spokeswoman Diane Boland said 'I don't think Liz Reid [Whitlam's women's affairs advisor] understood most Australian women and the way they think or the sort of things they value'.⁴⁴ Jackie Butler, the Queensland co-ordinator of WWW, claimed that 'women all around Australia are sick of the anti-male, anti-child feminists claiming to speak for women, and are rallying to say they are Women Who want to Be Women'.⁴⁵ They positioned themselves within a longer tradition of maternalist citizenship and cast it as feminist by arguing that they were the 'third stage' of feminism: following the achievement of voting rights and equal pay and equal opportunity, they offered 'recognition and status for uniquely female roles'.⁴⁶ In this way, they could write themselves into a narrative of progress, framing contemporary feminist demands as both unnecessary and already achieved. Crucial to the anti-feminist repudiation of feminist's claims to speak for women was a rejection of the premise of women's liberation – that women were an oppressed group whose disadvantage was structurally produced. Anti-feminists instead asserted a liberal individualism in which state intervention was to be abhorred. Babette Francis commented that 'promotion of theories of women's oppression and disadvantage serve merely to destroy hope and initiative. Feminists, apparently, won't feel their utopia has arrived until they have herded all women into one gigantic women's refuge or rape crisis centre'.⁴⁷ Women and men were, they asserted, 'equal but different'.⁴⁸ Anti-feminist women viewed individual women as responsible for their lives, and therefore in no need of collective solutions.⁴⁹

Anti-feminist women identified themselves primarily as mothers, wives and homemakers, their rejection of feminist individualism situating them within an older tradition of maternal

⁴² 'Final report from the status of women committee', *Women's Action Alliance Newsletter*, no. 10, (December 1976): 6.

⁴³ 'Newsletter fee', *Women Who Want to be Women Newsletter*, November 1979, 3.

⁴⁴ Diane Boland cited in Barbara Hooks, 'Catchcry is Freedom, but with some limits', *The Age*, 14 January 1976, 14.

⁴⁵ Jackie Butler, letter to editor, *Canberra Times*, 3 May 1980, 2.

⁴⁶ Francis, in Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 131.

⁴⁷ Errol Simper, 'Feminists "herding all women into huge refuge"', *The Australian*, 21 February 1980, 5.

⁴⁸ Editorial, *Women Who Want to be Women Newsletter*, no. 16, (July 1982): 1. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 27–8.

citizenship.⁵⁰ Their 1970s activism was built on a paradox of defending traditional, private female roles in public. However, their campaigns to preserve traditional family roles also ‘represent[ed] a natural political extension of women’s work: family, children, church and morality’.⁵¹ Rowland described these women as ‘Professional traditional’, women who became symbolic housewives through delivering talks and appearing in the media to extol the virtues of domesticity, who relied on their personal values to ‘downplay their very non-traditional behaviour and lives’.⁵² They turned the language of liberation on its head by insisting that, in the words of Eric Miller, ‘traditional gender roles were freeing to women, ensuring their rights, while “liberation” could only lead to bondage’.⁵³ If women’s liberation encouraged women to conceptualise an independent, public identity beyond wife and mother, anti-feminists wanted to reclaim domestic, private roles for women. Patricia Judge told a WAA meeting in 1975 that ‘we want our motherhood recognised as a valuable contribution, and to be held in as high esteem as other vocations’, and suggested that if it was no longer economically viable for women to stay at home, then the state should intervene: ‘with so much government assistance being suggested for all day childcare centres, it is simply unjust that those of us who wish to stay at home should not have equal assistance’.⁵⁴ Anti-feminist women sought the state’s protection and support to maintain their traditional role.

Anti-feminist groups offered affirmation to women who felt demeaned by what American historian Rebecca Jo Plant has called anti-maternalism. Advanced in the mid-twentieth century by social scientists, psychologists and women including Betty Friedan, Plant suggests that anti-maternalism not only challenged older forms of maternalist politics, but also the idea that motherhood was a life-long identity for women. She argues that it ‘undermined the ideological basis that had previously allowed white, middle class American women to exert influence both within and beyond the domestic realm, yet without posing an alternative

⁵⁰ See Catherine Kevin, ‘Maternity and Freedom: Australian Feminist Encounters with the Reproductive Body’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 20, no. 46 (2005): 4.

⁵¹ Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter, ‘Sex, Family and the New Right: Anti-feminism as a Political Force’, *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (Winter 1977–78): 17.

⁵² Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 23; Prudence Flowers, “‘Voodoo Biology’: the Right-to-life Campaign Against Family Planning Programs in the United States in the 1980s”, *Women’s History Review* 29, no 2 (2020): 336.

⁵³ Eric C. Miller, ‘Phyllis Schlafly’s “Positive” Freedom: Liberty, Liberation, and the Equal Rights Amendment’, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 277.

⁵⁴ Maureen Bang, ‘Mothers are VIPs’, *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 18 June 1975, 9.

basis through which they might exercise authority'.⁵⁵ Into the 1970s, these women continued to be defined primarily as mothers and they continued to face discrimination, 'even as society repealed many of the privileges and compensations that prior generations had accorded to them'.⁵⁶ Anti-feminists sought to connect their activism to older traditions of maternalist politics while simultaneously presenting themselves as political outsiders, displaced by upstart feminist activists.

Depicting themselves in struggle against feminist 'insiders' within government gave anti-feminists greater credibility in their quest to gain influence over women's policy in the late 1970s.⁵⁷ Valerie Renkema wrote to Home Affairs Minister Bob Ellicott to express WWW's concerns with 'the current trend of our governments [...] appointing "Women's Advisers" or "Women's Advisory Councils": 'the most important single occupation of the women of Australia is that of motherhood, and yet continually we find that we are represented by women's advisers on so-called "experts" and "academics" in some field other than that of motherhood'.⁵⁸ Revealing the ways that liberal feminism had become commonplace in Australian politics by the late 1970s, many anti-feminists presented themselves as true or 'moderate' feminists. Nance Cotter of WAA described herself as a 'feminist through and through', but objected to what she perceived as the message of women's liberation: 'it seemed we were to be freed from the oppression of the family'.⁵⁹ For Cotter, liberation meant the freedom to be a wife and mother at home, for it was workplace drudgery, not domesticity, that was oppressive. Just as US anti-feminists framed feminists as 'savvy insiders who enjoyed backing from both major political parties and the government', WWW presented themselves as 'humble housewives' with few resources, excluded from new channels of power and influence.⁶⁰ This was critical to their attacks on feminist policy machinery, and it was also the basis for their demands for state support for economic and social policies to support mothers and single income families, as I discuss below.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Jo Plant, 'Anti-maternalism: A New Perspective on the Transformation of Gender Ideology in Twentieth Century US', *Social Politics* 22, no. 3 (2015): 288.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Taranto, 12.

⁵⁸ Valerie Renkema, letter to Robert Ellicott, undated c. 1979, in 'National Women's Advisory Council – Women Who Want to Be Women', National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) A463/70, 1980/63 Part 1.

⁵⁹ Nance Cotter, in Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 96.

⁶⁰ Taranto, 12.

Anti-feminism in 1970s Australian politics

Conservative women were active opponents of the Whitlam government, though they became more explicitly anti-feminist in the Fraser era. Whitlam's women's affairs adviser Elizabeth Reid was a particular target. Reid became the world's first women's adviser to a national leader when she was appointed in April 1973, and she became a lightning rod for anti-feminist dissent.⁶¹ Dr Claire Isbister, a paediatrician and 'pro-family' campaigner who often gave speeches at anti-feminist events, claimed in 1974 that Reid was 'unfit' to advise the Prime Minister 'because she is divorced'.⁶² During the 1975 election campaign, the future of women's affairs at the Federal level was uncertain, not helped by Fraser's campaign gaffe that having more women in parliament would 'brighten the place up a bit'.⁶³ Just before the election, Fraser committed to retaining the office of women's affairs and promised to establish an advisory body of women from a range of community groups, rather than having a single women's advisor. In 1978, this was established as the National Women's Advisory Council (NWAC). It was chaired by Beryl Beaurepaire, a well-respected figure in the Victorian Liberal Party who had a close relationship with Fraser. The Council's brief was to report and make recommendations to the minister on issues relevant to women, and to foster communication between community and government. The twelve member Council produced reports on the need for anti-discrimination legislation, the special needs of migrant women, and on domestic violence. Beaurepaire worked energetically to raise the Council's profile: she encouraged 'the so-called "silent majority"' of women to offer their opinions on women's health, education and employment.⁶⁴ This emphasis on direct representation echoed (perhaps inadvertently) the arguments of anti-feminist groups, who had long claimed that women's affairs under Labor had been dominated by women's liberationists who did not represent most women. Journalist Lyndsay Connors characterised the NWAC's first term as

⁶¹ Arrow, *The Seventies*, 90–100.

⁶² 'Report on Attendance at the Coordinated Women's Group 'Women's Protest Rally' at Gunnedah, NSW, on Saturday 9 November 1974', in Elizabeth Reid papers, National Library of Australia, MS 9262, Box 72, Folder 340, 'Public Enemies'. Published information on Claire Isbister, a notorious anti-feminist public figure, is scarce, but this obituary provides some important details: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/fount-of-knowledge-on-mothercraft-20080826-gdssfw.html> (accessed 30 August 2020).

⁶³ McKernan, 138.

⁶⁴ 'The Voice of Australia's Women', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 July 1979, 71–80.

advancing a 'sensible, useful and progressive program' which demonstrated the broad acceptance of 'moderate' feminism.⁶⁵

Despite its self-conscious positioning as 'moderate', the NWAC was targeted by anti-feminists who protested that it was not 'democratically elected' and '[did] not represent the real views of Australia's women'.⁶⁶ They presented dozens of small petitions to parliament calling for the abolition of the NWAC on the grounds that it was unrepresentative, 'discriminatory and sexist', and had been captured by radicals.⁶⁷ Beaurepaire warned that 'it would be most unfortunate if an organised minority managed to sabotage the council, which has been supported by the majority of Australia's large women's organisations'.⁶⁸ WWW was particularly exercised by the Council's 'unrepresentativeness', with Babette Francis alleging that the 'NWAC and the Women's Affairs Department ...is one way in which women's liberationists are circumventing the ballot box'.⁶⁹

Their antagonism can be explained by the role the NWAC played in the Lusher motion. In 1979, Federal National Party MP Stephen Lusher proposed a motion to cut Commonwealth funding to abortion services. Access to safe abortion was a totemic issue for second-wave feminists, and following the liberalisation of abortion laws at the beginning of the 1970s, public attitudes towards abortion had shifted towards (conditional) acceptance: almost three quarters of Australians supported some kind of access, and only eight per cent believed that abortion should not be available under any circumstances.⁷⁰ However, by attacking abortion funding, the Lusher motion allowed anti-abortionists to argue that 'their' tax dollars should not be used in ways they disapproved of.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Webley, 'Women Who Want to Be Women', 135.

⁶⁶ Rosemary Munday, 'Two Years' hard work but still a lot to be done', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 July 1980, 19.

⁶⁷ Webley, 'Women Who Want to be Women', 139–41.

⁶⁸ Munday, 19.

⁶⁹ 'A letter from Mrs Babette Francis', *Women Who Want to be Women Newsletter*, no. 2 (August 1979): 18.

⁷⁰ Katharine Betts, 'Attitudes to Abortion in Australia: 1972 to 2003', *People and Place* 12, no.4 (2004): 23.

⁷¹ Glenda Balantyne, 'Who Decides? Perspectives on the Abortion campaign', *Scarlet Woman*, no. 8 (1978): 23–4.

The NWAC worked hard to help defeat the motion and it was Beaurepaire's advocacy that most antagonised anti-feminists. While not pro-abortion herself, she believed that women had a right to choose, and she was aggrieved that the bill's harms would fall mainly on poor women.⁷² Anti-abortion groups complained that this demonstrated that the Council was 'not representative of women or women's organisations in Australia', even though a majority of women supported some form of abortion access.⁷³ The motion was defeated on 22 March 1979 and Women Who Want to Be Women was founded that evening.⁷⁴ The founders abandoned the WAA because the group had no official policy on abortion, and they were furious with the NWAC for opposing the Lusher motion: Babette Francis reflected that 'we felt if the NWAC was truly representative of Australian women, it would have been divided on the issue as Australian women are divided on abortion'.⁷⁵

Even though WWW were a tiny group, their criticisms were amplified in the mainstream media: In late 1979, *The Age* asked whether the Council was 'representative of Australian womanhood?' and wondered 'where is the dissenting voice or voices to match the dissent that is plain for all to hear in the community outside?'⁷⁶ As Michael McKernan noted, Babette Francis had managed to hang the 'radical "super-girl" tag on the Council'.⁷⁷ The Fraser government was clearly sensitive about these attacks, appointing Margaret Slattery, the NSW President of the WAA, to the second Council in 1980.⁷⁸ The emergence of WWW made the WAA appear moderate and this no doubt facilitated Slattery's appointment.⁷⁹ Yet Slattery represented a group that had sought to abolish the Council. Lyndsay Connors suggested that her appointment represented the government's 'inability to deal with ultra-conservatism when it comes in female form', arguing that other far-right organisations would never have found similar representation on government bodies. She

⁷² McKernan, 185.

⁷³ Valerie E. Renkema, letter to Prime Minister, 11 April 1979, in National Women's Advisory Council – Abortion 1979-1983, NAA: A463, 1979/909; Beryl Beaurepaire, letter to the editor of *The Age*, 21 November 1979, in National Women's Advisory Council – Abortion 1979-1983, NAA: A463, 1979/909.

⁷⁴ McVey, 37; Babette Francis in Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 135.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Michael Barnard, 'Is Women's Council out of touch?', *The Age*, 16 November 1979, 11.

⁷⁷ McKernan, 190.

⁷⁸ Lyndsay Connors, 'The Politics of the National Women's Advisory Council', *Politics XVI* no. 2 (1981): 241.

⁷⁹ Webley, 'Women Who Want to Be Women', 148.

suggested that the idea that the NWAC be open to the full spectrum of conservative views was a demand that seemed only to apply to women's affairs.⁸⁰ Of the fifteen members of the second council, all were, or had been, married, none were divorced, and only two were from a recognisable feminist group (the Women's Electoral Lobby).⁸¹

Anti-feminist women's groups were able to reshape some of the debate around women's policy in the late 1970s through their attacks on the NWAC and on women's advisors. Their advocacy for 'housewives' converged with the Fraser government's aim to reduce spending at a time of economic crisis. Australia grappled with a difficult economic environment across the 1970s: stagflation, high unemployment and inflation, and by the early 1980s, a global recession.⁸² By the mid-1970s, new economic prescriptions were emerging which insisted that free markets, not state intervention, were the key to prosperity.⁸³ Fraser had won a huge majority in 1975 by promising to reduce spending on social welfare, and 'for both economic and ideological reasons was committed to promoting the role of the family rather than expanding state-provided services to care for children and other dependents'.⁸⁴ Fraser's introduction of a new system of family allowances in 1976 weighted family assistance towards low-income families, but failure to index these allowances meant that they had lost real value by 1978.⁸⁵ Fraser also enacted what he called a 'new Federalism', progressively devolving responsibilities for many social welfare, health and education initiatives back to the states.⁸⁶ This had adverse implications for women, who had only recently secured expanded Commonwealth funding for child care, women's refuges and health centres. While there was some support in government (and the NWAC) for these services, and feminists inside the bureaucracy worked to maintain them, they suffered in the drive to cut government spending. For example, Commonwealth responsibility for funding women's refuges was returned to the states in 1981, imperilling refuges in Queensland and Western Australia; and

⁸⁰ Connors, 241–2.

⁸¹ McKernan, 210.

⁸² Strangio, 156–60.

⁸³ Marian Sawer, 'Introduction', *Australia and the New Right*, viii.

⁸⁴ Deborah Brennan, *The Politics of Australian Child Care: from Philanthropy to Feminism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 96.

⁸⁵ Anne Summers, 'Women', in *From Whitlam to Fraser: Reaction and Reform in Australian Politics* eds Allan Patience and Brian Head (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), 199.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

by the early 1980s, funding for childcare services had been cut and services were struggling to remain viable.⁸⁷

In this context, anti-feminist arguments against funding for refuges and childcare fell on receptive ears. WAA argued that

the major social problems of today can be traced to the breakdown of the family unit as a centre of love and affection and as natural agent of care of the young, the sick and the old ... the economic and social benefits of married women caring for their families at home are not properly recognised.⁸⁸

Keeping women at home was a better solution because the family was the 'least expensive welfare system of all'.⁸⁹ Feminist magazine *Scarlet Woman* suggested that the anti-feminists increased in strength in the late seventies because they used a language of public accountability to suggest that the women's movement's demands for childcare and women's refuges was extreme and unaffordable.⁹⁰ In 1981, WWW sent a copy of Phyllis Schlafly's *The Power of the Positive Woman* to Federal MPs, with a quote from Ronald Reagan which read 'the taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to bring about social change'.⁹¹ Francis had objected to the Office of Women's Affairs for the same reason, decrying it as an 'entire department dedicated to bringing about social change'.⁹² YES!

However, anti-feminist women had their own demands for state support. They wanted to reverse feminist 'social change' with their own preferred tax and welfare policy changes. They argued for tax concessions for two-parent single income families, higher rates of child endowment, and 'when the economy can stand it, a wage scale paid by employers based on

⁸⁷ Janet Ramsay, 'The Making of Domestic Violence Policy by the Australian Commonwealth Government and the Government of the State of New South Wales between 1970 and 1985: An Analytical Narrative of Feminist Policy Activism', (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2004), 127–8; Brennan, 118.

⁸⁸ *Women's Action Alliance Newsletter*, no.11 (February 1977): 3.

⁸⁹ 'Women's Action Alliance', *Women's Action Alliance Australia*, no. 1 (June 1980): 2.

⁹⁰ Carmel Flaskas and Betty Hounslow, 'Government Intervention and Right-Wing Attacks on Feminist Services', *Scarlet Woman*, no. 11 (September 1980): 14.

⁹¹ 'Positive Woman', *Women Who Want to be Women Newsletter* no. 10 (May 1981): 5.

⁹² Babette Francis, letter to the Director of the Business Research Centre, North Brisbane College of Advanced Education, 4 March 1981, cited in Webley, 'The New Right and Women Who Want to Be Women', 10.

family need'.⁹³ A wage set on the basis of 'need' had underpinned Australia's male breadwinner wage system for decades, resulting in unequal rates of pay for men and women that were overturned by the equal pay judgements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁹⁴ A wage set according to 'family need', according to WAA president Diane Boland, would give women genuine choice, because many were forced into working because their husband's wage was not enough to support a family. She added that 'years ago it was possible for a family to live off one wage'.⁹⁵ The fact that the 'family wage' ensured unequal rates of pay for men and women was of little importance to women who were not seeking entry to the paid workforce.

Yet while anti-feminists did not wish to facilitate women's workforce participation, they did argue for the economic value of women's unpaid care work. One their most persistent demands was for women to 'seek status and *economic* recognition for their uniquely female roles'.⁹⁶ In 1982, WWW delivered a cake with a note reading 'From the Women in the Home to the Men in the House' to the Fraser cabinet as they were devising the 1982 budget.⁹⁷ Babette Francis described it as 'symbolic of the work of homemakers which is not included in estimates of the Gross Domestic Product'.⁹⁸ WWW's Valerie Renkema told Fraser that women 'do a tremendous job rearing children and also being involved in voluntary work, which would otherwise cost our Government a fortune'.⁹⁹ In arguing for the financial value of women's domestic labour, anti-feminist women might have found common ground with the women's movement. The question of how to count, reward or replace women's unpaid domestic work was endlessly debated within the movement (and indeed, the

⁹³ Diane Boland, quoted in 'We're an Anti-Child Society', *Age*, 5 December 1975. Also see Webley, 'Women Who Want to Be Women', 149.

⁹⁴ Jocelyne A. Scutt, 'Inequality before the Law: Gender, Arbitration and Wages', in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, eds Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt, 1994), 266–86.

⁹⁵ Maureen Bang, 'Mothers are VIPs', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 June 1975, 9.

⁹⁶ Babette Francis, letter to editor, *Canberra Times*, 8 May 1980, 2.

⁹⁷ Webley, 'The New Right and Women Who Want to Be Women', 18.

⁹⁸ Francis, in Rowland, *Women Who Do*, 138. Similar stunts, involving the delivery of loaves of bread to state politicians 'from breadmakers to the breadwinners', took place in the United States as part of the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment. See Robin Morris, *Entering the Fray: Gender, Politics and Culture in the New South* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 161.

⁹⁹ Valerie E. Renkema, letter to Prime Minister, 11 April 1979.

issue had been raised by women's groups for decades).¹⁰⁰ Many feminists argued for a wage for housework, rather than social welfare for mothers, because they did not want government 'handouts', but 'wages for the work that we do ... the work we do in the house is no different to any other kind of work'.¹⁰¹ It was an idea with potentially radical implications, an embodiment of the idea that the personal was political. Yet as Merrindahl Andrew has demonstrated, many in the women's movement rejected the idea of a wage for housewives: Elizabeth Reid worried that a housewife's wage would lock women more tightly into the sex roles which feminists believed were the root cause of women's oppression, while others feared it would divert money away from child care centres.¹⁰² Anti-feminist women pushed for a housewife's wage because they believed it would protect their roles as full-time wives and mothers, especially as the economy continued to deteriorate. The Fraser government declined to take up the idea, instead emphasising 'strengthening the family' as an alternative to increased spending on social welfare.¹⁰³ The economy still relied on women's unpaid domestic labour, and married women's workforce participation was increasingly blamed for high unemployment.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Anti-feminist women's activism was curtailed by the election of the Hawke government in 1983. Labor took a dedicated women's policy to the election, and for the first time more than half of Australian women voted for Labor.¹⁰⁵ The new government dissolved the National Women's Advisory Council and created the Office of the Status of Women to advise on women's policy. WWW campaigned energetically against the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act in 1984, but the group faded away soon after, eventually changing its name to the Endeavour Forum.¹⁰⁶ Anti-feminist, 'pro-family' activists remained active in

¹⁰⁰ See Louie Traikovski, 'The Housewives' Wages Debate in the 1920s Australian Press', *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no. 78 (2003): 9–13, and Janeen Baxter, 'Domestic Labour', in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69–74.

¹⁰¹ 'I realised I'd been working hard for years at home...' *Vashti's Voice* 16, (1976): 5.

¹⁰² Merrindahl Andrew, 'Questioning Women's Movement "Strategies": Australian Activism on Work and Care', *Social Politics* 15 no. 3 (Fall 2008): 382.

¹⁰³ Brennan, 107.

¹⁰⁴ Webley, 'Women Who Want to Be Women', 137.

¹⁰⁵ Susan Ryan, 'Women's Policy', in *The Hawke Government*, ed. Troy Bramston (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003), 202.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Thornton and Trish Luker, 'The Sex Discrimination Act and its Rocky Rite of Passage', in *Sex Discrimination in Uncertain Times*, ed. Margaret Thornton (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2010),

Australian politics, but they no longer opposed feminism by co-opting and adapting feminist language and identities. The Hawke government's embrace of a reform agenda shaped by the demands of liberal feminism robbed anti-feminist's claims of their power and political purchase.

Examining anti-feminism in the 1970s reveals the disruptive and transformative effects of second wave feminism on conservative politics in Australia. The women's movement made new claims to rights and protections, and secured new forms of access to government like women's advisors and feminist bureaucrats. In the face of this challenge to older forms of women's political engagement, anti-feminist women reasserted a traditional maternalist citizenship. Anti-feminists attacked women's advisors and bureaucrats, asserted the political importance of their own personal experience, and argued that they too, should have access to women's policy machinery, even while their ultimate goal was to dismantle this machinery altogether. Yet anti-feminist activism also revealed the difficulties both feminists and anti-feminists faced in attributing value to women's unpaid care work. The new economic orthodoxies of the late 1970s, particularly the demand to reduce the size of the state, exerted distinctive pressures on women. Both feminists and anti-feminists grappled with this problem, though they posited very different solutions to it. Historicising anti-feminist activism as part of the longer history of the women's movement in Australia, then, can help us more fully understand the political, cultural and social environment that shaped both second-wave feminism and the state's response to it in the late twentieth century.

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28–9. The group's newsletter ceased publication around 1985, though Francis was publicly identified as its spokesperson as late as 1989. The Endeavour Forum's website states that the organisation was founded as 'Women Who Want to Be Women': <http://www.endeavourforum.org.au/about.html> (accessed 30 August 2020).