

THE VOICES OF WOMEN

Sara Dowse talks about her interviews with Lyndall Ryan, Dame Beryl Bearepaire and Anne Summers and their roles in the development of government policies for women

Back in 1990, while I was researching in the National Library, I was asked to begin interviewing women who had been active in Australia's feminist movement. A wonderful opportunity thus fell into my lap.

So far the Library has collected 27 interviews. All told, they form a collective history, a valuable component of any conversation about second-wave feminism, a period of dramatic change in Australian life.

Feminism's second wave crested in the seventies and eighties, when feminists were pioneers in every conceivable field. Writers like Helen Garner and filmmakers like Gillian Armstrong changed the 'look' of Australia and gave a strong, unequivocal voice to women's experience. Yet none of this would have happened with the force and rapidity it did had it not been for the role of government. With the election of a reforming Federal Government in 1972, the momentum of the movement grew. It was government funding across a range of activities that characterised this stage of Australian feminism, and the extent of government support distinguished it from



movements in comparable countries. The Australian brand of feminism was coloured by a certain pragmatism, and my focus here is on three women—Lyndall Ryan, Dame Beryl Bearepaire and Anne Summers—who had, accordingly, a significant impact on government policies for women.

Lyndall Ryan, historian and retired foundation Professor of Australian Studies and Humanities at the University of Newcastle, had been instrumental in securing Federal funding for two essential services: child care and women's refuges.

In Sydney, she helped to set up Australia's first women's health centre, and was a member of the editorial collectives of *Mejane* and *Refractory Girl*, the two Sydney-based Women's Liberation publications at the forefront of the movement. Needless to say, her move from grassroots politics to the straight-laced Canberra bureaucracy had been difficult, and the following exchange reflects the experience of many feminists who entered government then. Note the easy use of the word

above:
John McKinnon, Australian Information Service
Women on the march wave their placards at the International Women's Day march, Melbourne, 8 March, 1975
b&w photograph; 16.8 x 21.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3510654

below left:
Jacqueline Mitelman
Portrait of Gillian Armstrong, 1988
gelatin silver photograph
40.5 x 30.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an13145710

below right:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Portrait of Helen Garner,
15 March 2005
nla.int-nl39438-ls7





above:
Bob Givens
Portrait of Professor Lyndall
Ryan, 6 August 2005
coloured digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3572362

below:
Norman Plant, Australian
Information Service
Portrait of Dame Beryl
Beaurepaire, 1982
gelatin silver photograph
20.5 x 15.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23182910



'revolution', spoken in a way scarcely contemplated today.

Lyndall Ryan: Sydney's revolution was very much a street-based revolution. There were rallies what seemed like every day or at least we were liberating a bar in a hotel, sitting in a bus and paying only two-thirds of the bus fare because we weren't getting proper equal pay; all of those things.

Sara Dowse: And you believed it was a revolution?

Lyndall Ryan: Absolutely ... it was terribly, terribly exciting ... People wrote articles about what was going to happen in Women's Liberation. Of course, we didn't use the term 'feminist' at that time but there was a belief that big changes were happening. They were happening in the universities, they were happening on the streets, they were happening in the union movement ... I remember the day before I left, sitting in the kitchen in Piper Street in tears at leaving Sydney. I mean, I just thought I was ending my life and how I'd sold out my principles because I was taking a job and being paid money and why did I need money and all of this, all the things that postgraduates go on about.

Dame Beryl Beaurepaire's part in the story was decidedly different from Ryan's. Michael McKernan's biography of Dame Beryl was published in 1999, seven years after my interview, and much of the material we covered—her childhood, her schooling, the influences in her youth, her experience with the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force and her service as a war meteorologist, her work for the family business, marriage, motherhood—appears in greater detail in the biography. Moreover, what is missing from the interview is the period in her life when I knew her best: when, as head of the Federal Liberal Party women's section, she lobbied Malcolm Fraser for a women's advisory council. Dame Beryl and I spent hours on the road together, learning from women what kind of council they wanted. When the National Women's Advisory Council was established, Beaurepaire was its convenor for two terms.

Under her aegis, the Council took an independent stand on a number of issues, most notably against the proposed Lusher Amendment which, if passed, would have

removed abortions from the Medicare schedule. This is not at all what I had expected after Whitlam's dismissal in 1975, when Lyndall Ryan and I were still in the Prime Minister's department, awaiting the outcome of the election. During the campaign, Fraser released a women's policy, but little did we realise that Beaurepaire had been the influence behind it. Nor did we suspect how much of our thinking would coincide with hers.

My interview with Dame Beryl circles around, dipping in and out of the years, and the self-portrait that emerges is one of an assured, forthright woman, somewhat rebellious when young—characteristics of many of the other women interviewed. Her marriage to Ian Beaurepaire lasted fifty years until his death in 1996, but she describes herself as a bored housewife, and even in voluntary work she was never 'the tea and cake type'. Her work in the party, she notes, was crucial in getting 'the Liberal hierarchy take more notice of women as far as policymaking is concerned'.

Anne Summers wrote the groundbreaking history of Australian women, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, and later co-published the American feminist magazine *Ms*. Unlike Ryan and Beaurepaire, she has more than one interview in the Library's oral history archives, having been interviewed by Hazel de Berg in 1975, soon after *Damned Whores and God's Police* appeared. I interviewed her in 2002.

An early member of Sydney Women's Liberation, she was also active in the Women's Electoral Lobby and involved in the 1974 establishment of Elsie, Australia's first feminist women's refuge. In December 1983, she was appointed head of the Office of the Status of Women and supervised the drafting of the Sex Discrimination and Affirmative Action Acts. In 1991, she joined Prime Minister Keating's staff to advise him on women's issues in the run-up to the 1993 election.

My interview with Summers begins with her early life, treated more substantially in her 1999 memoir, *Ducks on the Pond*, and on the de Berg tape. She goes on to talk about her journalistic career and the opportunities she had at the *National Times* and, later, at the *Australian Financial Review*, where she was eventually Canberra bureau chief. In the interview, we explore the politics of

her position, both inside the bureau and in relation to Fraser in depth.

In 1983, after Fraser's defeat, Summers was approached by Susan Ryan, the newly appointed Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, about heading the Office of the Status of Women in the Prime Minister's department. Of this, Summers says:

I first of all felt that I should find out whether or not I was acceptable to Hawke and his office and I went and had an interview with Hawke ... One of the things that they were most concerned about, of course, was affirmative action, because it was Labor policy at that time to proceed with affirmative action. But the government, and particularly the Prime Minister, had just formed this new alliance between business, the trade unions and government.

Summers' action here signifies the changes occurring in Canberra between 1973, when Elizabeth Reid was appointed Whitlam's women's adviser in a burst of negative publicity, and ten years later, when another Labor government went about it more cautiously. More telling still is the degree to which senior appointments were becoming political—a departure from the Westminster system—although Summers comments that the public service was not yet as political as it would be. As for her own approach, Summers describes it as characteristically pragmatic:

To me that sort of pragmatism of Australian feminism I think has always been one of our strengths, it's been a hallmark and a strength, at least in those days when we were working

with government and what I like to call the 'era of the femocrat', which unfortunately is now over, but while it was happening I think we did develop a distinctly pragmatic style.

A key date linking us all is 1975, International Women's Year. That was the year when Summers published *Damned Whores and God's Police*, the book I sat reading in my office when the Whitlam government was dismissed, because all policy work was suspended until after the election. That, too, was when Lyndall Ryan and I decided that, no matter what the result, we would remain in the Prime Minister's department to help maintain the reform agenda.

And that was also the year when Dame Beryl Beaurepaire led a group of Liberal Party women to the Women and Politics Conference, scorned in the media, but assessed by her as an excellent occasion for women across the political spectrum to meet and, where possible, establish common ground. Opposed as she had been to the blocking of supply, it was Beaurepaire who seized the opportunity of the forced election to get Fraser to commit to a women's policy, a policy that Ryan and I ended up helping to implement.

As Summers said, we were pragmatists all.

SARA DOWSE, author of *West Block* and four other novels, headed the newly-established Women's Affairs Section in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1974. Under her leadership, the Section became the Office of Women's Affairs. She resigned from the public service at the end of 1977.



above:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Dr Anne Summers
addressing the National Press Club,
Canberra, 30 January 1991
b&w negative; 35mm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3997292

below left:
Drusilla Modjeska
Six children play in the front yard of
the Elsie Women's Refuge supervised
by a woman, Glebe, 1974
b&w photograph; 20.2 x 25.0 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3997705
Courtesy Drusilla Modjeska

below right:
Malcolm Lindsay, Australian
Information Service
Mr Whitlam discusses International
Women's Year with two members of
the National Advisory Committee,
Ms Elizabeth Reid and the Secretary
of the Australian Government's
Department of the Media, Mr James
Oswin, 1974
b&w photograph; 15.5 x 20.5 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3510683

