

The Making of a Not-so-Accidental Politician

Ann Symonds described herself an accidental politician and, when she arrived in the Legislative Council to fill a casual vacancy, some of her Labor colleagues were inclined to agree. Who was this housewife from the affluent Eastern Suburbs of Sydney? Barney French, MLC, heard her fighting ‘maiden’ speech and wondered aloud ‘What would you know about the workers?’¹ Ann’s male colleagues soon discovered that she was no privileged newcomer parachuted into a Council seat, but her path to Labor activism had been rather different from their own.

A Good Catholic Girl

Elizabeth Ann Burley (always known as Ann) was born in Murwillumbah on 12 July 1939. Welcoming a child on ‘the Twelfth’ – the day when Ulster Protestants celebrate the triumphs of William of Orange – was mortifying to her mother, Jean, and the rest of Ann’s Catholic family. Even her father Frank, who ‘had a healthy disrespect for the Church’ was reluctant to inform his parents about the birthday.² Although some members of the Burley family were active in the Labor party – one of her uncles sponsored John Johnson into the local branch – Ann was not one of those children who grew up handing out how-to-vote cards. It was Catholicism rather than Labor politics that shaped her childhood, although the distinction between the two was not so clear-cut in the New South Wales of the 1940s. Ann’s Catholic education – at Mount St Patrick’s Primary, Murwillumbah and later as a boarder at St Mary’s College, Lismore – stimulated her love of music, theatre and the visual arts. As a teenager she sang unaccompanied at mass and also won singing prizes in local pub contests; as an MLC she would occasionally liven up the Members Bar with a word-perfect rendition of ‘Buddy Can You Spare a Dime’ or ‘Joe Hill’. But what most impressed Ann about the Catholicism she grew up with was its strong social justice message. As for the troubles of the working class, she saw them in her large extended family and they eventually came home.

When Ann was born, her father was running a butcher’s shop in Murwillumbah. It was not the life that he would have chosen but the 1930s Depression had cut short his education and thwarted his ambition to practise law. At least the shop kept the family secure and Ann recalls her early childhood as ‘absolutely serene.’ But when the business began to fail, life got harder for Ann and her

four younger brothers. Unlike Monty Python's 'Four Yorkshiremen' Ann did not over-dramatise a deprived childhood, but she watched her mother working hard to keep her children fed, clothed and respectable. Keeping up appearances was not easy. She did remember the shame of kneeling at the altar and knowing that the holes in the soles of her shoes were visible. (Not going to mass was never an option.) The future politician would 'understand the humiliation of poverty'.³

The two scholarships that allowed Ann to board at St Mary's College, Lismore offered her an escape from the family crisis. Her father did not, like many others who were cheated of their future by the Depression, put a premium on education for his children. He neither encouraged nor discouraged his daughter and took little interest in her academic results. But growing up with a man who was famous in Murwillumbah for giving impromptu poetry recitals in the pub must have had an impact on the woman who was 'not scared at all' when she stood up to make her first speech in the Legislative Council. At St Mary's Ann did well, although the nuns made sure she never fell into the sin of pride.

Although she would eventually leave the Church, and once described herself as an 'agnostic atheist', Ann's career suggests she was imprinted with the social values of the school.⁴ The early lessons were sometimes painful. Once her mother responded to complaints from a hungry daughter and sent a cooked duck to the school for her birthday: the nuns insisted that every girl got her fair (and very small) share of the treat. Being 'naturally rebellious' and allergic to Latin, Ann spent rather too many hours in the punishment room, translating Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. A younger cousin, who grew up in Lismore, remembers that Ann would come to lunch with her own family once a month, bringing her laundry. Smuggled into the washing were notes for the impressionable cousin to pass on to a Lismore boy.⁵ At the same time the girl who graduated from St Mary's in 1955 was, in her own words, 'naive' and a 'pious Catholic girl'. Rebellious but pious: this contradiction will be familiar to a generation of Catholic schoolgirls.

A 'born teacher'

Ann won a Commonwealth Scholarship but realised that her family could not afford for her to take up a university place. Instead she accepted a scholarship to Armidale Teachers' College and completed the primary school program in the years 1956-57. However much she may have hankered for university,

Teachers College was a revelation to a 'limited little country girl'. The College had a large art collection and was on the itinerary of Arts Council regional tours, which meant that Ann had the chance to hear and meet the great American soprano Leontyne Price. The College program covered every subject a primary school teacher could be expected to teach. While Ann languished in the sports sessions and persuaded a sympathetic young man to finish her woodwork assignment, she revelled in subjects such as English, History, Music and Drama as the lecturers challenged a girl who had never been encouraged to read beyond the syllabus set books. Her political colleagues will not be surprised to learn that she took out the Dramatic Arts Award in her final year.

Teaching may have been the default option for bright country girls, but in Ann's case she had a real aptitude for the profession. At the age of eighteen she was in her first classroom at Casino Public School where she ran the junior choir and even did duty as a sports mistress. An Education Department Inspector reported that the new teacher was 'neat in personal appearance and bright in manner' and 'has undertaken her teaching duties with sincerity'. A later report credited her with 'the attributes of a born teacher'.⁶ Despite doing well at Casino she was keen to transfer to Sydney where it would be possible to enrol in university courses that would allow her to upgrade her teaching qualifications. That was the official reason, although the city had other obvious attractions for a young woman with a passion for music and theatre. Ann got the desired transfer to Sydney, but then her career took a sharp detour.

Marriage, Motherhood and – eventually – Politics.

By 1962 Ann was teaching at Bronte Public School, where her Year 3 Class included the twins Michael and Meredith Symonds who, along with their elder sister Katharine, had lost their mother a few years earlier. Their father, Maurie Symonds, was then lecturing at Alexander Mackie Teachers' College, where he pioneered full, four-year degrees integrating art and art education. The life story of this particular parent was bound to resonate with Miss Burley. Born in Bondi in 1921, he was one of the six children of Saul (Solly) and Leah Symonds. His father's death when Maurie was four years old, followed quite soon by the death of grandfather Reuben, left the family without support and Maurie always credited their survival to the Lang Labor government, which introduced widows' pensions in 1925. Talent and tenacity took him to the first

Opportunity Class at Woollahra Public School and he then won one of only two state-wide bursaries, allowing him to beat the 1930s Depression and complete secondary education at Sydney Boys' High School. Going to Sydney Teachers' College, rather than university, was a guarantee of employment in uncertain times, but teaching in a series of small country schools had him planning his escape. His obituary records that he told his children 'when you get to a town go to the highest point and if you can see the outskirts get out as fast as you can'.⁷ After war service he taught in Sydney while taking a university degree at night before accepting the position of lecturer in charge of visual arts at Armidale Teachers' College. (He left before Ann arrived.) The arts, politics and family histories all forged connections between Maurie Symonds and Ann Burley, who joked that his annual subscription tickets to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra were the real attraction. They were married at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Murwillumbah on 16 January 1965, when Ann disappointed her mother by substituting a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat for the traditional veil.

In 1966 Ann accompanied Maurie and the children on a 'mind-blowing' sabbatical tour of Europe, which took in art galleries from the Uffizi to the Louvre to the Prado as well as theatres and opera houses. Although this 'elitist' itinerary might seem to justify Barney French's misgivings about Ann's Labor credentials, she saw far more than the inside of the galleries. In Spain the contrast between the grandeur of the churches and the poverty of the worshippers reinforced a growing disillusion with the Catholic Church. In London she took time to visit the House of Commons to see something unknown in Australia since her childhood: a national Labour government in action. Across Europe she observed the growing campaign against the Vietnam War. Finally, the tour confirmed Ann's conviction that the upper classes did not own beauty and creativity; that arts policy must be an integral part of a progressive political program not tacked on as an afterthought.

A few years later she would have the chance to put her ideals into practice when she and Maurie were part of a group of enthusiasts aiming to transform the run-down Bondi Pavilion into a cultural and community centre. Renovating the disused ballroom into a small but well-equipped theatre was the first element of the project. It was part of the plan that the theatre would not only house professional productions but be available for community events and especially for theatre workshops and vacation programs designed to attract Waverley's many 'latchkey children'.⁸ This was exactly the kind of cultural project that

appealed to Ann. In the early 1970s the theatre group, which included Ron Penny, Rolf and Betty Grunseit, Babs and Leo Fuller Quinn and Jone Winchester, successfully lobbied Waverley Council to finance structural alterations, raised extra funds and also did a lot of labouring work themselves. Volunteers cleaned, scraped and painted walls while Maurie, soon to be Chairman of the Theatre Board, happily ripped up rotting floorboards. The theatre would be opened by Gough and Margaret Whitlam in March 1974, by which time Ann was an active Labor Party member.

When and why did Ann join the ALP? When the Symonds family returned from Europe, the movement against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was beginning to gain momentum, through the work of left-wing unions and politicians from the Labor Left, notably Jim Cairns. Although Ann and Maurie shared opposition to the war and admiration for Cairns, it was a local rather than an international issue that finally turned them from Labor voters into party members. In 1967 the Labor Mayor of Waverley Council, Ernie Page, was trying to develop the municipality's small library. He wanted to move the cramped collection to an old ten-pin bowling alley, which would allow for more acquisitions and new services. To buy the bowling alley he had first to convince unenthusiastic Labor aldermen and then use his casting vote to override the opposition of Waverley's non-Labor councillors. Although the *Weekly Courier* of 7 June led with the shocking news that 'Communists have distributed a pamphlet throughout Waverley congratulating the Council' on the library plan, there was much broader support for the project as Page demonstrated by reading out several letters in Council.⁹ The most powerful argument for an expanded library came from Maurie Symonds, which prompted the mayor to suggest that the Symonds belonged in the Labor Party. They became members of the Bronte branch in 1967. Because of the Left's role in the anti-Vietnam movement, they always identified with that faction. Ann's attitude was 'Where else would you go?'

Labor Women and the Fight for Child Care

Any account of Ann Symonds' activism before she arrived in the Legislative Council must include her involvement in the 1970s campaign for affordable child care. This was the issue that lifted her profile in the Labor party. A later chapter will discuss how this early interest developed into a long commitment to

children's rights and to the improvement of services for young children and juveniles. But some overlap between this biographical sketch and the thematic chapter is inevitable, because it was personal history – the birth of her daughter Rachel in January 1968 – that prompted Ann's entry into the politics of child care. Twenty years later she told the graduating class of the Institute of Early Childhood Studies:

My personal history with children's services began with the birth of my first child [...]. There is no greater radical experience to be had. Wonderful and joyous, yes: but also a revelation.

Abruptly one is led to an appreciation of where power lies in families and in society. My path of discovery led me via seeking good quality child care for my children, to examining the needs of women and children in diverse situations and the impediments to the delivery of available, affordable, quality care for children.'¹⁰

That abrupt discovery of 'where power lies' was shared by a generation of educated women, pushed out of the workforce by marriage and motherhood: their experience helped fuel a second wave of feminism from the late 1960s. To keep her brain ticking over in the post-natal fog Ann organised a book group. It was short-lived but brought her into contact with Jeannette McHugh, a future member of the House of Representatives, a friend and fellow warrior for fifty years. Jeannette joined Ann in Labor's Bronte branch and both women had children at Bronte Public School, where they belonged to its strong Parents and Citizens' Association. Finally, they were both recruited into the New South Wales Labor Women's Committee (LWC) in the 1970s, when it was particularly active.

Founded in 1904, the 'Labor Women's Organising Committee' had been expected to mobilise the new 'women's vote' for Labor. But it was never just a tea-making ladies' auxiliary: in the 1920s, for example, the Committee advised Premier Lang to introduce the widows' pensions and child endowment that saved Maurie Symonds' family from destitution. In the days before affirmative action, when Labor women were hugely under-represented in parliament and in the decision-making forums of the party, presidents of the Women's Committee could expect a place in the Legislative Council. The 1950s and 1960s were, however, relatively quiet years. This was about to change with the rapid growth and renewed activism of the LWC in the 1970s. Ann and Jeannette, who joined

the LWC in 1971, were part of an influx of new younger members, women galvanised by second-wave feminism, as well as the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements.¹¹

In the 1970s and early 1980s the LWC occupied a strategic position at the intersection of the Labor party and the wider women's movement, which included the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and the more radical activists of Women's Liberation. That strategic position was not always a comfortable one: the new recruits to the LWC faced questions about their credentials from outside and inside the party. Were they sufficiently feminist? What progress could be achieved inside such a male-dominated institution? On the other hand long-standing party members asked whether these new arrivals were really Labor people or just middle-class 'entryists'. When it came to addressing inequality, did they privilege new-fangled concepts of gender over class?

Relations between the LWC and WEL were generally amicable and Labor women admired the successful ambush staged by the Electoral Lobby at the 1972 federal election. The very new organisation had produced – and publicised – a questionnaire for candidates on women's issues and followed this up with public forums where politicians faced women voters. These innovations put the demands of the women's movement inescapably onto the parties' agenda.¹² After 1972 some women, such as Edna Ryan, belonged to both organisations. Ann Symonds herself joined WEL, although she would put most of her energies into the LWC. But WEL and the LWC each had reasons to keep their distance. The Electoral Lobby resented the fact that conservatives labelled it a 'Labor front'; WEL insisted that it was non-partisan and was often critical of the ALP. For their part Labor women were always *Labor* women: the feminism of the LWC was broadly construed and inflected with traditional Labor values. Consequently the LWC discussed a breathtaking range of subjects, including some – such as nuclear weapons, uranium mining, solidarity with revolutionary movements overseas, Aboriginal disadvantage, prison conditions, the independence of the ABC and homosexual law reform – that lay outside the conventional definition of 'women's issues'. And while the LWC shared WEL's commitment to accessible child care, rape law reform, equal pay and more educational opportunities for women, it chose to push for progress through the party. It was not easy to negotiate feminist priorities and party loyalties within Labor's structures and disciplines: LWC secretary Lois Welsh once declared that trying to work through 'proper channels' was 'like bashing your

head against a brick wall'.¹³ But the fact that the party was in government, federally in the years 1972-75 and at state level in the years 1976-88, gave Labor women a chance to influence policy on issues such as child care.

Although this chapter concentrates on Ann's individual contribution to the fight for child care, her role should not be exaggerated nor divorced from the context of a growing, though far from concerted, effort by women's groups to respond to the needs of an increasing number of mothers in the workforce. Women unionists, community child care activists, women in the media and staff of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labour and National Service were all working on the question 'what can we do for the children?' while Ann was beginning her own search for affordable quality care. The Women's Bureau, for example, provided the data that made it easier for activists to lobby sceptical male politicians.

At the beginning of the 1970s mothers had few options. There were pre-schools for children over three, but not enough of them. In Ann's home state of New South Wales a mere three per cent of eligible children were in pre-schools/kindergartens, and most of these were located in affluent areas.¹⁴ The schools were not just inaccessible, but also inappropriate to the varied needs of women working in shops, factories, hospitals and schools. They had babies and toddlers as well as older children in need of after-school, before-school and holiday care. The few child care centres available were unregulated and often too expensive for mothers in low-paid women's jobs. Many of them had to fall back on help from family, friends and neighbours. Women's groups saw the need for a program catering to the different demands of mothers and children, but this was not the approach taken by the Labor government elected in 1972. Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, and his Education Minister, Kim Beazley Snr, made the expansion of pre-schools their priority, while other services merited a single sentence in the party platform: 'Where the need exists child care centres should be provided in conjunction with pre-school centres'.

The Cinderella status of child care seemed to reflect some tenacious prejudices. Beazley was influenced by the pre-school movement, which tended to see other forms of care as mere 'child minding' with little social or educational value. And there were plenty of social conservatives in Labor as well as the other political parties who felt that children under three should be at home with their mothers, whatever the demands of the labour market. The Olympian vagueness of 'Where the need exists' confirmed that child care did not have effective

advocates in the party. To rewrite government policy, different women's groups engaged in – not so much a competition as a relay race – to demonstrate the variety and urgency of working mothers' needs.

After WEL had an unproductive meeting with federal ministers in 1973, Labor women carried the issue of children's services forward, unpicking their own party's policy.¹⁵ Whitlam and Beazley were committed to the expansion of pre-schools to improve the educational opportunities of poorer children. This appeared an impeccably egalitarian aim. But it did not survive the scrutiny of Labor women as they brought together professionals – doctors, social workers and teachers – with mothers reporting from the frontline. Two of those mothers were Ann Symonds and Jeannette McHugh. They actually had children in a pre-school and from this privileged vantage point could see that the schools, as currently constituted, actually reproduced inequality. Pre-schools took children for part of the day only, expecting mothers to take over for the rest of the day. Their programs were geared to the single-income middle-class family and had little to offer the shift worker, for example. Expansion of pre-schools was a necessary part of a progressive policy, but should not be allowed to starve other services of resources.

The LWC built a policy on the unusual basis of listening to women and was able to push it through party processes. Essentially Labor women wanted the ALP to adopt a child care policy quite distinct from its pre-school education policy. They proposed a 'comprehensive Child Care Service', which would be publicly funded, needs-based and community-driven. This service would provide different kinds of care, including centres, playgroups and family day care, a system that authorised women to look after small groups of children in their own homes. And the LWC insisted that these services should offer children social and developmental benefits, not simply 'warehouse' them so that their mothers could go to work. In March 1973 Dr Win Childs successfully moved a resolution embodying these ideas at the New South Wales Women's Conference.

To revise Labor policy, however, these proposals had to be accepted at the party's National Conference held in July in Surfers' Paradise. As usual, the New South Wales ALP sent no women delegates to the conference, but LWC members Ann Symonds, Jeannette McHugh and Anne Gorman paid their own way to Surfers to lobby the men. They were briefed exhaustively by the Women's Committee; it was even suggested that they should avoid wearing

assertive red and dress in soothing pale blue.¹⁶ More importantly, the women came armed with evidence and spoke to every delegate. The men's instinctive response was 'Why can't we leave it all to the pre-schools?' The lobbyists were able to use their own experience, pointing out that pre-schools suited women like *them* but not the nurses, teachers, shop assistants and factory workers who should be the concern of a progressive party. They also answered the men with statistics and testimony from mothers, including horror stories of women leaving babies in their cots with a few bottles of milk. So convincing were their arguments that the relevant resolution was carried. Kim Beazley, who had set up an expert committee to advise him, complained that Labor policy had been hi-jacked by non-delegates 'on the vague grounds that a lot of women want it'.¹⁷ In a way Ann agreed with him, but for her the exercise demonstrated the value of policy making that began with the lived experience of its subjects. They were the experts. This was an insight she carried into later work with HIV-positive patients and women prisoners.

Mavis Robertson, who combined membership of WEL and the Communist Party, congratulated Labor women on picking up some lobbying skills from WEL.¹⁸ But everyone realised that the resolution was only a first step. Implementation depended on the budget decisions and political will of male politicians in Canberra, so child care remained a battleground. At the federal election in May 1974 the Whitlam government promised an ambitious and expensive program, only to delay it once Labor was re-elected. WEL and other women's groups held rallies around the country to protest at what were effectively cuts to child care. The LWC was loyally less vocal but was already working to counter the continuing preference of Beazley and his experts for pre-schools. The child care sub-committee, with Ann Symonds as convenor, lobbied federal politicians, contacted Marie Coleman, the head of the new Social Welfare Commission, and used union contacts to build public support.¹⁹ For example, the Electrical Trades Union invited the LWC to chair a child care seminar for shop stewards, and Labor women spoke at a public meeting in Wollongong organised by the Miscellaneous Workers Union. In February 1975 an amended child care policy got through the mayhem of the Federal Conference at Terrigal. **Trying to get access to ALP National Conference Minutes to complete this section.**

The dismissal of the Whitlam government in November was doubly traumatic for the women who had worked so hard to put child care on the Labor agenda.

Although Fraser did not dismantle the program, regular funding cuts meant that it was struggling by the early 1980s. It was this situation that fuelled Ann's angry 'maiden' speech.

Waverley Council, 1974-77

In 1974, while she was lobbying for child care, starting a three-year stint on the board of the Bondi Pavilion Theatre and enrolling as a miscellaneous student in Drama at the University of New South Wales, Ann Symonds found time to run for election to Waverley Council. As she was third on the Labor ticket for Waverley Ward, no-one expected her to win. But Ernie Page was at the top of the ticket and the overflow from his very large vote carried two colleagues onto the Council. Despite success in one ward, Labor lost its Council majority and Ann's first experience of representative politics was not a particularly happy one. Perhaps being repeatedly outvoted on Waverley Council was good training for a life in the Labor Left and helped Ann to perfect the persistence that marked her later career. But it was irksome when her expertise in child care was overlooked and Council nominated the non-Labor Alderman, Rosemary Blake, to the Pre-School and Child Care Committee of the Local Government Association. Behind the scenes Alderman Symonds could at least push cautious colleagues to use the federal funds available for child care development: Waverley's Family Day Care had begun in July 1974 and two years later its first child care centre was opened in Rattray (now Gardiner) Street, Bondi Junction.

A feminist alderman was a living oxymoron in the 1970s. While Ann was attempting to improve what she saw as the Council's lacklustre response to International Women's Year in 1975, the *Weekly Courier* was covering IWY activities in its 'Women's World' column alongside engagement announcements and make-up tips.²⁰ Although the writers of 'Women's World' never knew quite what to make of Ann, they could at least congratulate her and Maurie on the birth of David Symonds in March 1975. David's arrival also meant that the Town Clerk got into the habit of diverting calls to Alderman Symonds who was likely to be at home during the day. Although she enjoyed contact with constituents and the range of issues they presented, she complained that she had to take the phone off the hook to change a nappy. Finally, Alderman Symonds did achieve one small step for womankind when she served as Waverley's first female Deputy Mayor in 1977. The new Mayor was David

Taylor, who was Ann's polar opposite. He had argued that Bondi Pavilion should be turned into a casino, objected to wasting ratepayers' funds on International Women's Year and insisted that 'A woman's place is in the kitchen'.²¹ They were Waverley's Odd Couple but the busy solicitor, Taylor, actually delegated many ceremonial duties to his 'housewife' deputy. Ann particularly enjoyed presiding over citizenship ceremonies.

What do women want *now*?

Ann did not stand for Waverley Council again in 1977, slightly tarnishing her feminist credentials by choosing to accompany Maurie on another sabbatical. On her return she re-connected with the Waverley community and the Council, where Ernie Page was the mayor for several years. Among other commitments she joined a steering committee to establish group homes for intellectually handicapped adults in the Eastern Suburbs and belonged to a regional planning group on youth issues in the Waverley municipality. Over the next few years Ann's work for the ALP at local and state level would justify her pre-selection as a Labor candidate in the 1981 Legislative Council election. There was nothing accidental about it.

The election of the Wran government in 1976 opened up new opportunities for women. The Catholic patriarchs and male unionists of the New South Wales Labor Party had never been overly concerned with women's issues or children's services. Wran's government by contrast dedicated state resources to child care, funded women's refuges and housing programs for homeless women, reformed rape law and legislated against sex discrimination. Mike Steketee and Milton Cockburn, Wran's unauthorised biographers, argue that his 'starting point in politics was always winning, not changing society', but when it came to women's issues winning and changing went hand in hand.²² Women had traditionally been less inclined than men to vote Labor: improvements in their services and status were expected to close this gender gap.

Consultation with women was integral to the new regime. A Women's Coordination Unit was set up in the Premier's Department. This central location meant the unit, headed by WEL member Carmel Niland, could monitor policy relevant to women across the whole of government and was not consigned to some out-of-the-way female ghetto.²³ (More cynical observers noted that the arrangement also allowed Wran and Gerry Gleeson, head of the

Premier's Department, to keep an eye on the women). Almost as soon as he was elected in 1976, Wran appointed the Women's Advisory Council (WAC). Jeannette McHugh was a founder member. WAC was cleverly 'crafted to balance the Left and Right of the Labor Party with the Country Women's Association and the Liberal Party together with WEL, Women Lawyers, the National Council of Women, representatives of ethnic and Aboriginal women and finally, a Catholic nun'.²⁴ This broad church prompted the government – and gave it the necessary political cover – to take on issues such as rape law reform. In March 1981, when the Premier introduced a bill 'to remedy major defects in the law relating to rape and sexual assault', he singled out the 'splendid' work of the WAC in building support for proposed reforms among women's organisations, even though certain government lawyers had been dubious about the role of amateur and 'emotional' women.²⁵ The LWC, which was growing into the largest women's organisation in the state, was one of the groups consulted, but had also established its own direct line to the Premier.

Ann looked back on the Wran years as the Golden Age for Labor women but LWC influence should not be exaggerated. The Committee had its first formal meeting with the Premier in 1979 when – unsurprisingly – they discussed child care. Subsequent delegations lobbied him on issues from foster care to women's housing. Ann remembered that the Premier could open a meeting with the question 'What do you fucking women want *now*?' But she felt that the relationship was productive although, inevitably, other feminists criticised Labor women and the 'femocrats' inside government for not pushing really radical reform on rape law and other issues. For his part, Wran took a particular interest in the LWC sub-committee 'Winning the Women's Vote for Labor'. When the sub-committee suggested that he talk directly to women's groups, he complained mock plaintively that the LWC was the only organisation that invited him to speak.²⁶

Part of the Wran government's reform program was a major revision of the Community Welfare Act. Ann, as convener of the LWC sub-committee on children's rights, foreshadowed her future interest in juvenile justice by raising concerns about the interrogation and treatment of young offenders.²⁷ She had access to the relevant minister, Rex Jackson, because she was appointed to his Family and Children's Services Agency Advisory Council in 1977, while her LWC colleague Anne Gorman became head of the agency itself. Most people only remember Jackson's downfall as Minister for Corrective Services in 1983.

An internet search will quickly turn up details of his own prison sentence after he accepted a bribe to settle gambling debts and then conspired to arrange early release for three prisoners. But Ann also remembered him as a sympathetic Minister for Youth and Community Services who, for example, set up the first youth refuges. He expected his Advisory Council to help him drag children's services out of the 'Dickensian Age'.²⁸ As a member of the Council Ann had the opportunity to travel the state, assessing the impact of existing policies and recommending changes. Other appointments followed. In 1978 she was chosen as the New South Wales representative (Non-government organisations) on the National Committee convened to oversee Australia's response to the International Year of the Child. This brought her into contact with Helen L'Orange, a future director of the Women's Co-ordination Unit and another long-term friend and ally. Then in 1980, when the state government set up a Task Force on Residential and Alternate Care for children, Ann was selected as the community representative.

'A Prominent Member of the Left Wing'

By the early 1980s Ann Symonds had established a profile as an effective children's advocate. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she was also recognised as a 'prominent member of the Left Wing'.²⁹ She and Jeannette McHugh had juggled the positions of president and secretary in the Bronte branch as it was transformed into a stronghold of the Left faction. They demonstrated their allegiance at the party's 1971 State Conference in dramatic fashion. This was one of Ann's favourite stories. With the blessing of the veteran right-winger, Syd Einfeld, the Waverley State Electoral Council chose the two women as conference delegates. As conference contingents were seated alphabetically, the Waverley women were next to representatives of the right-wing Vehicle Builders' Union and surrounded by 'a sea of men'. When it came to the ritual vote on the party's socialist objective, those men were amazed when the matrons from the Eastern Suburbs voted with the 'extreme' Left for the 'democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange' *without compensation*.³⁰ Like many other members of the faction, Ann was active in extra-party movements against uranium mining and for nuclear disarmament. Within the party she held offices in her State and Federal Electorate councils, as the Left cemented its control of Eastern Suburbs constituencies.

In the years immediately before Ann's arrival in the Legislative Council, factional tensions were high, with Right and Left accusing each other of branch stacking in the inner city to control Labor pre-selection for the safe federal seat of Sydney. The ugliness of this contest erupted into plain sight with the bashing of one of the contenders, the Left's Peter Baldwin, in July 1980. The Right had also been busily rewriting party rules in the late 1970s; for example, the faction reversed an agreement to accept proportional representation in pre-selection of candidates for the Legislative Council. The Left saw itself being locked out. But curiously one of the bitterest disputes Ann Symonds experienced did not involve the Right and hinted at developing fault lines within her own faction. And it all unfolded within the 'safe space' of the Labor Women's Committee.

By the late 1970s the Left was very much in the majority in the LWC, and some members wondered why left-wing women were not exploiting this advantage to respond to the aggressions of the Right. For some years the LWC had operated an unofficial power-sharing arrangement: at the annual election of its executive the Left did not nominate for the presidency, ceding that role to the Right in return for the arguably more important position of secretary. Ann and Jeannette McHugh, along with Win Childs and Delcia Kite, wanted to keep this agreement, arguing that abandoning it would make it harder for the Left to make the case for restoring proportional representation in other contests. This was the position taken by male leaders of the Left's Steering Committee. In 1979 the 'official' Left ticket for the election of LWC officers duly nominated the Right's Trish Kavanagh for the position of president. Another group of younger women saw no reason to conciliate the Right and defied the Steering Committee to put the Left's Cathy (aka Kate) Butler at the top of a rogue ticket that was otherwise identical to the official version. They revealed their ticket at the last minute and their guerilla campaign saw Cathy Butler elected. In the next few years the Left would dominate the LWC executive.

This dispute over tactics mapped onto other tensions within the Left of the LWC, some personal, some ideological. The *Sun-Herald* reported on the 1979 conference under the headline 'Women to nudge Nev?' and noted that the increasingly radical members of the LWC had differed on how hard to push the Labor government on issues such as abortion. Wran himself, though sympathetic to women's demands on many issues, was never going to alienate the party's conservative Catholics and had no intention of venturing onto the dangerous terrain of abortion law reform. Pro-reform resolutions passed at the

Women's Conference rarely survived the party's policy committee to reach the agenda of the State Conference. The *Sun-Herald* suggested that the new executive was going to be more forceful.³¹

For several months left-wing members of the LWC had also been conducting quite an intense debate on the relationship between feminism and socialism. Certain contributors called for more emphasis on radical cultural as well as economic change; although feminism was incompatible with capitalism, the necessary socialist revolution would be incomplete without the transformation of gender relations.³² Pointing to the betrayal of feminism in the socialist revolutions of Russia and China, they deplored the tendency of male leftists to promise but endlessly postpone feminist policies. Women and their concerns were always at the back of the bus.

The arguments over the 1979 elections – which still resonate today – have to be seen in this context. Ann and Jeannette were criticised as inauthentic feminists, not prepared to nudge Nev and too willing to take direction from men on the Steering Committee who did not think the LWC was worth fighting over. Ann was equally convinced that a certain measure of power-sharing with the Right would safeguard the organisation. She was not very interested in the theoretical debate over the relationship of class and gender in the production of inequality. Her practical focus was always on their mutually reinforcing impact on vulnerable women and their children. But when pushed she would put the word 'socialist' in front of the word 'feminist' to describe herself.

As 'a prominent left-winger' Ann achieved an unwinnable position on the party ticket for the Legislative Council election in 1981. And once she got her casual vacancy in 1982, her position was still precarious: some party colleagues in the Council seemed to regard her as a transient. Her parliamentary career was only secured when Neville Wran called an early election in 1984 and confirmed the selection of all incumbents. Ann believed that these events justified the title of 'accidental politician'.

Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell prefer to see Ann Symonds as an example of the 'outsider within', one of the women who brought new issues into the Labor party and retained alliances outside it.³³ Ann's political odyssey was in *some ways* a familiar story. Like many of her male colleagues in 1982, childhood experiences inclined her towards Labor and this was reinforced by Maurie Symonds' history. Like other members of her generation, the Vietnam

War was a strong influence. But her experience as a woman – as a mother – also shaped her politics. It is fashionable for journalists and retired politicians to deplore the fact that too many of today’s Labor MPs have only worked as union officials or party staffers. They recall the days when members of parliament had ‘real world’ experience as shearers, dockers and factory workers. But they do not say much about the real world experience of the women who entered parliament in the 1980s. Nurses (Wendy Fatin) and teachers (Ann Symonds, Jeannette McHugh and Joan Kirner) could not boast a manly and heroic narrative, but their knowledge of inadequate children’s services was *one* of the factors encouraging them to political activism. And their challenge to the party hierarchy on issues such as child care did begin to shift Labor’s attitude to women and women’s attitude to Labor.

Being an outsider within was never a comfortable existence. To be effective the small cohort of women MPs worked with the femocrats who had established beachheads in the bureaucracy, but also needed to mobilise Labor women. In the 1980s the disputes within the crucial Labor Women’s Committee were still simmering. Right-wing women, resenting their unfamiliar minority status, began to argue that the LWC was ‘elitist and sexist’ and had outlived its usefulness. At the state conference in 1986 the Right’s Dorothy Isaksen, MLC, successfully proposed the abolition of the LWC. The removal of this large organisation, and its delegates, was designed to reduce the voting strength of the Left at conference. Reporting on this manoeuvre the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that it was the mirror image of the situation in Victoria in 1971, when a Right-aligned women’s group was abolished by the dominant Left faction.³⁴ It appears that women’s organisations in the two state branches were not so much left at the back of the bus as thrown under it by factional number crunchers.

Both episodes reminded Labor women that reconciling feminist objectives with their commitment to the party and their factional/fractional allegiances was a long-term project. For Ann 1986 was a discouraging year. Premier Neville Wran, who had been responsible for progressive legislation and new services, resigned at the same State Conference that dissolved the LWC. Finally Labor women were facing the strong possibility that the party would lose the next state election and they would lose precious access to government. It was just as well that being comfortable was not one of Ann’s ambitions. She realised that advancing women’s issues, along with causes such as prison and drug law reform, demanded a persistence that became her trademark.

¹ Ann Symonds (AS), Interview with Robert French (RF), 3 May 2016. **I can't yet specify where the oral history tapes created by Robert French will be deposited.**

² AS, Interview with RF, 19 May 2016.

³ AS, Interview with RF, 21 April 2016. Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations on the childhood and early career of AS are taken from this interview.

⁴ Alex Mitchell, 'A feisty reformer in parliament and out of it', *cometherevolution.com.au/the-weekly-notebook-84*, 15 November 2018 (accessed 5 January 2019).

⁵ Lynne Cusack, Interview with Hilary Golder (HG), 26 April 2016.

⁶ Report of Inspector upon Teacher, Casino, 24 July 1957; Report of Principal upon Teacher, Bronte, 31 December 1960, Ann Symonds papers [Box 48] **Box numbers provisional. Ann Symonds papers have not yet been arranged and described.**

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 5 January 2007, p. 16.

⁸ *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 November 1973, p. 85. For a history of the Bondi Pavilion project, see Bondi Pavilion Theatre: 1970s, Waverley Library, Local Studies Collection, Vertical Files (WL/LSVF) WL/LSVF BOND; Bondi Pavilion Theatre, Richard Hall Papers, State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW), ML MSS 2968 Add on 998/2 (2).

⁹ *Weekly Courier (WC)*, 7 June 1967, p. 1. For the story of Waverley Library, see Waverley Library: History, 1960-69, WL/LSVF WAVE.

¹⁰ AS, Graduation speech, Sydney College of Advanced Education, Institute of Early Childhood Studies, Sydney Opera House, 20 May 1988, AS Papers [Box 19].

¹¹ Blaise Lyons, 'The LWC Agendas Research Paper', Internship Project, Session 1, 1995, University of New South Wales (UNSW), pp 5-8; Rebecca Huntley and Janet Ramsay, "'Never made to follow, never born to lead": women in the NSW ALP', in *"no fit place for women"?: Women in NSW Politics, 1856-2006*, ed. by Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell (Sydney: UNSW Press 2006), pp. 89-105.

¹² Marian Sawyer, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008), pp. 10-5.

¹³ *SMH*, 26 February 1972, p. 7.

¹⁴ Deborah Brennan, *The Politics of Australian Child Care: Philanthropy to Feminism and Beyond*, rev. edn (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 58. See pp. 56-95 for a concise account of child care policy making.

¹⁵ This account of Ann Symonds' role in child-care policy-making is based on AS Interview with RF, 21 April 2016; Jeannette McHugh, Interview with HG, 3 April 2018.

¹⁶ McHugh, Interview with HG, 3 April 2018.

¹⁷ *SMH*, 17 July 1973, p.12.

¹⁸ *Tribune*, 21 August 1973, p. 6.

¹⁹ Labor Women's Committee (LWC) meetings, July 1973, 12 September 1973, 10 October 1973, 10 April 1974, 14 August 1974, 11 September 1974 and February 1975, Minute Book, 1967-75, pp. 107, 113, 115, 122, 128, 130, 135, LWC Records, SLNSW, **Again these records have not yet been accessioned by SLNSW, so have no shelf number, The Minute Book is in Box 1 of the collection.**

²⁰ *WC*, 2 July 1975, p. 6 and 18 June 1975, p.1.

²¹ *WC*, 18 June 1975, p.1; *Sun Herald*, 6 July 1975, p. 21.

²² Mike Steketee and Milton Cockburn, *Wran: An Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 334.

²³ Carmel Niland, 'Women's Policy', in *The Wran Era*, ed. by Troy Bramston (Sydney: Federation Press, 2006), pp. 184-92; Louise Chappell, 'Working from within: women in the NSW bureaucracy', in Brennan and Chappell, pp. 162-67; M. Sawyer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp. 152-62.

²⁴ Niland, pp. 186-7.

²⁵ 'splendid', *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates (NSWPD)*, 18 March 1981, 3rd series, vol. 160, p. 4759; 'emotional', Anthea Jackson, 'Sexual Assault Legislation in NSW: A Case Study of the Role of Women in the Bureaucracy in Policy Development and Implementation', Department of Social Work, University of Sydney, February 1991, pp. 15-16.

²⁶ LWC meetings, 23 October 1979, November 1979, 27 May 1980 and 25 October 1980, Minute Book, 1976-81, pp. 105, 108, 125, 142, LWC Records, SLNSW, **no shelf number yet**, Box 2.

²⁷ For examples of LWC action on this legislation, see LWC meetings, August 1977; 26 September 1977, Minute Book, 1976-81, pp. 38-9, 42, LWC Records, SLNSW, **no shelf number yet**, Box 2; Welsh to Jackson, 28 September 1977, Jackson to Welsh, 7 November 1977, Jackson to Welsh, 2 December 1977, LWC Correspondence, 1977, LWC Records, SLNSW, **no shelf number yet**, Box 1.

²⁸ *SMH*, 5 January 2012, p.12.

²⁹ *SMH*, 6 April 1981, p. 3.

³⁰ AS, Interview with RF, 21 April 2016.

³¹ *Sun-Herald*, 1 April 1979, p. 151.

³² Eg. Margaret Duckett, 'Interdependency: Feminism and Socialism', *Challenge*, February 1979, pp. 6, 11.

³³ Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell, 'Gender and NSW politics', in Brennan and Chappell, pp.11-2.

³⁴ *SMH*, 9 June 1986, p. 2.