

# Who are the Founding Mothers? The Role of Women in Australian Federation

by Dr Helen Irving

The great historian of the Australian Constitution, J.A. La Nauze, commented in 1968 in a paper entitled 'Who are the Fathers?', that the identity of the nation's 'Mother' must be left up to 'political sociologists to determine'.<sup>1</sup> While the sociological task he had in mind here may not be obvious, La Nauze's statement does clearly capture the commonly held view that there is nothing for historians to find, no historical evidence that women contributed towards 'founding' the nation.

We hear this claim frequently today. In current debates about the need for constitutional revision, as well as in discussion about the means of increasing women's representation in politics, it is often asserted that women were not involved in writing the Constitution or that they were left out of the processes of federation. For this reason, the argument goes, Australia's political institutions were not designed to encourage or represent women's interests. There may be much truth in this conclusion, but it rests upon a set of assumptions which themselves need to be questioned.

There can be no argument that women's representation in Australian politics does need to be actively fostered in the present; this should indeed be one of the goals of constitutional re-thinking in the years leading up to the centenary of Federation. But we should argue for this, I suggest, not on the basis that women did not 'build' the nation, but by learning from the ways in which they did.

How is it possible for a nation to be born, without a female presence? How can we have fathers without mothers? Contrary to the commonly held view, there were several interrelated ways in which women did play a role in the Federation Movement and significantly influenced the Australian Constitution's drafting. To recognise this fully we need, ultimately, new ways of understanding what it means to 'found' a nation and this must inevitably involve identifying a complex process, much more than simply writing the words

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. La Nauze, 'Who are the Fathers?' *Historical Studies*, Vol.13, no. 51, 1968.

of a constitution; even La Nauze after all was compelled to include among his 'Fathers' men like Robert Garran who did not directly shape the Constitution's wording.

We also need to continue exploring the historical evidence of women's political activity in the 1890s which, for one reason or another, has never been researched before. Research now undertaken unequivocally reveals both direct and indirect participation by women in the federation processes of one hundred years ago. The story of women's role as 'co-founders' will be one in which this involvement and the influence of women's issues are inter-woven with a new concept of 'nation-building' in which the national community and the political culture this has shaped, rather than just the prominent political players, are foregrounded.

The Federation Movement entailed at least three clear stages.<sup>2</sup> Australian women came into this movement in what may be identified as its third stage. It was unlikely they would have entered it earlier. Since the first stage, from the establishment of the Federal Council in 1885 up to the first Constitutional Convention of 1891, was almost exclusively the work of prominent colonial politicians. Women, having neither the right to vote nor to stand for parliament in any colony, could have found no direct place in the movement at this time.

The second stage, beginning with the establishment of the Australasian Federal League and the Corowa Conference in 1893 and lasting until the 1895 Premiers' Conference in Hobart, offered more opportunities perhaps for women's involvement. But the dominant role played by the Australian Natives' Association in the movement at this time presented obstacles, since the ANA excluded women members. During these early years of the 1890s, however, separate women's organisations were beginning to grow, almost out of a total absence, into a significant number in most Australian colonies. These organisations would provide, as we step into the third stage, the seedbed for federation activity.

When, following the 1895 Premiers' Conference, enabling bills were passed in the majority of colonies providing for the election of delegates to a new Constitutional Convention and a referendum on the document they would write, a process was set in train where broader popular participation was not only possible, but necessary. Women immediately recognised, and in many cases took the opportunity for involvement. It should not be forgotten in this centenary year of 1994 that women in South Australia had by then obtained the vote. This alone would change the whole character of Australian women's role in politics.

Apart from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) which was established in most colonies in the 1880s, almost no women's political or cultural organisation had existed anywhere in Australia until the 1890s. By the middle of the decade, alongside a growing number of women's benevolent and charitable organisations, women's literary societies and discussion groups had been formed, and all colonies except Tasmania had Womanhood Suffrage or Franchise Leagues.<sup>3</sup> In Perth, the Karrakatta Club, possibly the first women's political discussion group in Australia, was established in 1894 and its first secretary, we may

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<sup>2</sup> La Nauze identifies two earlier phases, beginning in the 1840s and leading up to the third stage which he dates from the establishment of the Federal Council, but these, I suggest, are really stages in what La Nauze calls the 'Federal idea', rather than the movement which ultimately gave rise to the Federation. See J.A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Audrey Oldfield, *Women Suffrage in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1992. Tasmania did, however, have a 'Franchise Department' in its WCTU branch.

note, was Edith Cowan, the first woman to be elected to an Australian parliament. Later in the decade, many of these women's societies in a number of colonies joined each other in National Councils of Women, and among their other activities, sent delegates to a meeting of the International Council of Women in America.<sup>4</sup>

All of these groups — in particular the Suffrage Leagues and the WCTU — served as avenues for debate about Federation, and in some cases were the framework for women's federal or 'anti-Billite'/anti-federal organisations. We see this in particular in 1898 and 1899 in NSW, where a battle was fought within the Womanhood Suffrage League (WSL) over whether or not the League should hold a public position on Federation and where, as we shall see, a women's federal organisation was developed during this battle from among the WSL membership.

But earlier than this, in South Australia where the female franchise had been gained in 1894 and already exercised in one general election, women were to participate directly in the federation process. In 1897 elections were held in four of the colonies, including South Australia, for ten delegates each to the forthcoming Constitutional Convention. The first sitting of this Convention took place in Adelaide early that year, and the fact that South Australian women had the suffrage was to feature importantly in its debates. Not only did the women of that colony exercise the vote in the convention elections, they also had a female candidate, none other than the 'grand old woman' of South Australian politics, Catherine Helen Spence. By then she was seventy-two years old and a champion of proportional representation, or 'effective voting' as its advocates called it, which she made her platform for the election.

As a respected figure and an elderly spinster, Spence was probably the closest a woman could come at this time to being an ideal political candidate. In particular she could avoid the charges often made by suffrage opponents that the families of women involving themselves in politics would be neglected, that the women would lose their femininity, that their husbands would be left to wash the dishes or mind the children. Spence, who had already recently gained campaigning experience during the 1896 South Australian election, was nonetheless initially reluctant to be the first ever woman candidate in Australia. But she overcame her doubts and received several thousand votes, being placed twenty-second out of a list of thirty-three. She did, indeed, remarkably well, given the combined disadvantage of uncertainty about the ultimate legality of her candidature as a woman<sup>5</sup>, and the failure of any party or newspaper to list her on their 'ticket'. Although she was not a temperance advocate, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had endorsed her in their own circles and, according to their calculations, would have seen her elected if all women had voted as the WCTU did.<sup>6</sup>

Spence's example was, among other things, to feature in the convention debates on the issue of the Commonwealth franchise and in the shaping of what became section 41 of the

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<sup>4</sup> The importance of the international networks forged by women's suffrage organisations is emphasised by Ellen Carol DuBois in 'Woman Suffrage Around the World: Three Phases of Suffragist Internationalism', in Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (eds), *Suffrage and Beyond*, Auckland University Press/Pluto Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> *South Australian Register*, 8 March, 1897; C.H. Spence, *Autobiography* (1910), facsimile, Adelaide, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> *South Australian Register*, 1897; Minutes, WCTU Convention, Brisbane, 26 April-3 May 1897.

Constitution. Did her election result confirm that a woman candidate would not succeed, even that women did not want the vote? Mr Fraser, MLC, a Victorian delegate, thought so: 'I have as much admiration for the women as any man', he declared, 'I mean in their proper places ... A lady presented herself — a very estimable and eligible candidate stood for the Convention — but the people of South Australia did not elect her. Her own sex voted against her, probably.' 'Well?' interjected South Australia's Mr Kingston.<sup>7</sup>

Or did Spence's result demonstrate the reverse, as others thought? She had stood on a platform of 'effective voting', not as a woman, and it is now impossible to know what role her gender played in voters' minds. When the votes were counted she was placed a third of the way up the list, ahead of eleven men. Women's Suffrage organisations in other colonies and the WCTU found her result encouraging and sent their congratulations. History, I think, must be on their side, but we may only now speculate upon the impact her presence may have had on the Convention and on the shape of Australia's Constitution had she been elected.

Once the Convention began sitting, women's groups were among its many petitioners; they asked in particular for women to be included in Commonwealth suffrage and for this to be written into the Constitution. Through the WCTU and other temperance organisations, women also demanded that the states should retain the right to control the importation and sale of alcohol and opium (this was to appear in section 113 of the Constitution) and they featured in the numerous petitions — indeed a veritable bombardment of petitions — asking for the recognition of God in the preamble to the Constitution (giving rise to 'humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God' as we find it today, as well as, indirectly the secular codicil, section 116).

The very first petition presented to the Convention, indeed, was a women's petition from the central committee of the WCTU, urging that the Constitution should include the provision 'that all voting by electors for federal parliaments be upon the basis of equal voting rights for both sexes.' Further pro-suffrage petitions came from NSW and Tasmania. Petitions also appeared, from the National Defence League of South Australia and from 'citizens of Tasmania' opposing the grant of adult suffrage and arguing in the latter case that the women of Tasmania 'do not desire political responsibility to be thrust upon them', their interests being guarded well enough by men in parliament. 'How many signatures has it?' asked the Victorian liberal John Quick. 'Ninety-six' replied the clerk. 'From the whole of Tasmania!' said Quick.<sup>8</sup>

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, whose various branches also sent petitions on all three constitutional subjects — the suffrage, state control of alcohol, and the recognition of God — must be counted among the most significant of women's political organisations in this period. It had an estimated 8,000 members across Australia and its membership overlapped with many other Australian women's organisations, as well as representing part of an international network. The WCTU also had important links with temperance members in colonial parliaments and seems to have pioneered the technique used many decades later by the Women's Electoral Lobby, of assessing male candidates on the basis of the position they held on the temperance question. Its members were tireless activists, both on the matter of

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<sup>7</sup> *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates* (Adelaide, 1897), Legal Books, Sydney, 1986, Vol.III, p.720.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.637.

temperance and, through the WCTU's Franchise Departments, in the suffrage campaign. They corresponded with the press and with politicians, formed delegations to lobby members, demonstrated and petitioned.

The WCTU was also a strong advocate of Federation. It was itself a federated association, to which its members proudly made reference in their advocacy of Australian Federation.<sup>9</sup> They saw the advantages of Federation as lying in greater national cooperation and uniform welfare standards and thus, it was assumed, in greater social and political harmony. The likely immediate gain from Federation of the federal female suffrage would, the WCTU was confident, give women the chance to influence politics directly. The ultimate goal of prohibition might even be achieved, if not nationally, at least in one or two individual states. On top of this, the creation of a new federal capital held out the promise of its beginning as an alcohol-free zone. 'The members of the Federal Convention have been called "Nation Builders"', said the WCTU National President, Elizabeth Nicholls, in 1897, 'and we all admit their right to the title if they agree on a [just] constitution', but 'representatives of the organised motherhood and sisterhood' of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 'are equally entitled to the name of "Nation Builders"', for without temperance principles, alcohol and vice 'will eat away national prosperity, and cause ... decay and death. And unless Australia is federated in the interest of women as well as men, our national life will be one-sided, inharmonious and dwarfed.'<sup>10</sup>

In 1898 and 1899 and in Western Australia in 1900, the Australian Constitution, in the form of a Bill for an Act of Parliament, was put to the electors as a referendum question. The greatest evidence of women's organisation and activity around the federation question appears during the referendum campaigns of these years, in particular in those colonies where popular opinion on the merits of the Constitution was sharply divided, and where the referendum result was unpredictable.

The Bathurst People's Convention of 1896 had included a women's organising committee which may perhaps be counted as the first women's pro-federal organisation, but the first group specifically formed to involve women in the overall campaign appears to be that established in Sydney in early 1898 in preparation for the constitutional referendum held in June that year. This organisation — the Women's Federal League — was formed from within the Australasian Federal League (effectively the men's organisation), by Maybanke Wolstenholme, a prominent member of the Womanhood Suffrage League of NSW and its immediate past president. Given that the women of NSW did not themselves have the franchise, the goal of the Women's Federal League was principally to canvass for men's 'Yes' votes in the referendum by arguing for the virtues of Federation and by encouraging 'Men who are indifferent or hostile to the Bill, to at least give it serious consideration.'

'Let us look to the near future,' urged the Women's Federal League, 'when Australia, the new-born nation, may proudly take her stand among her Elders, helped to her great position by the slender hands, but staunch, true hearts, of our countrywomen! Women of New South Wales,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, editorial, 'Australian Federation', *The White Ribbon Signal*, April, 1897. There was not, however, a common policy on whether the WCTU should publicly advocate a 'Yes' vote in the referendums. See letter from the South Australian WCTU committee to *Adelaide Advertiser*, 3 June 1898.

<sup>10</sup> Minutes, WCTU Convention, Brisbane, 1897, op.cit.

YOU may turn the scale!’<sup>11</sup> Women should make efforts to understand the Constitution Bill and its debates, to set up WFL branches, to organise small groups of canvassers, and obtain promises from male voters of support for the Bill. They would be sent copies of ‘The Federalist’ newspaper, the organ of the Australasian Federal League in which around this time a ‘Women’s World’ column had begun to appear.<sup>12</sup>

Where the original idea for this League came from is uncertain. One of the prompting factors may well have been the campaign being waged around this time *against* the Constitution Bill by the Secretary of the Womanhood Suffrage League, Rose Scott. Scott appears to have been one of the most frequent speakers on Federation in NSW during the referendum years of 1898 and 1899. She appeared many times on platforms in Sydney and Newcastle with other prominent anti-Billites, including J.H. Want, William Lyne, and George Dibbs, and her speeches were reported in both the daily papers as well as the labour movement press.

At first Scott offered a particular attraction as a curiosity, a ‘lady orator’ at a time when women did not even attend official banquets, let alone speak at political meetings. ‘I had never heard a lady speak before,’ wrote one journalist, herself a woman, ‘and in my mind’s eye I saw a large, florid, tall, aggressive, not to say vinegary, person with a loud voice and ultra-offensive, assertive manner and spectacles, carrying fire and sword into the enemy’s country’. Instead, she found a ‘nice lady, not too large, with demure, not to say, quakerish ways’ whose meek presentation was occasionally coloured with humour and with ‘sly digs at the men’. The men in the audience sat back, she reported, their arms folded, their legs crossed, ‘quiet as mice’, as if they were ‘prepared to hear “mother” talk’.<sup>13</sup>

Having fairly quickly got over the novelty, press reports, especially as might be expected in the anti-Billite *Daily Telegraph*, gave full coverage to her arguments. Essentially these revolved around the proposition that Federation under the terms of the Constitution would increase taxation and the cost of living in NSW, would expose Australia to a greater risk of war, and would create an undemocratic institution — the Senate — in which the smaller states would adversely dominate the larger. Federation would be a financial disaster, Scott concluded, unless the federal treasurer was a woman.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this campaign, Scott’s most distinctive theme was her appeal against the sway of sentiment and her call for a rational examination of the Bill, as if it were a business contract.

In contrast, Maybanke Wolstenholme’s campaign, as new Secretary of the Women’s Federal League, stressed the centrality of the ‘sentimental’ side of the question: pride, love of country and home, and self-sacrifice. Very surprisingly, little comment can be found in the press at this time which reflects upon the supposed essential nature of women and their likelihood or not to favour sentiment in such a question. Although clearly a curiosity, the women’s arguments were mostly treated seriously. This was, perhaps, a legacy of the earlier struggles of women suffragists and a small, encouraging sign of a change in the political culture.

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<sup>11</sup> WFL pamphlet, Rose Scott papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>12</sup> WFL open letter, 25 April 1898, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS 38/63.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Soldene, ‘Sydney Week by Week’, March 1899, Rose Scott papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS 35/63.

<sup>14</sup> Notes for speech, 1899, Rose Scott papers, *ibid*, MSS 38/27.

Rose Scott's rapid rise to prominence in the anti-Billite campaign may well have led to concern within the pro-federal camp, and contributed to the resolution to form a Women's Federal League. Maybanke Wolstenholme soon joined Edmund Barton and other federalist advocates on the platform, and she was probably the author of the Women's World column in their paper, 'The Federalist'. The public attention drawn to Rose Scott's position also set off a dispute within the Womanhood Suffrage League of NSW itself. Scott was, it appears, frequently taken as a representative of this League at anti-Billite meetings where she spoke, and some fellow members seem to have believed she had permitted this confusion, even encouraged it. The WSL declared that it did not take a political position on any matter other than suffrage, and Rose Scott herself made the point (whether voluntarily or not we do not know) of publicly announcing this.<sup>15</sup> Having done so she added the comment, as if by afterthought, that the most democratic members of the WSL happened (like herself) to oppose the Constitution Bill. In the midst of this dispute, her fellow anti-Billite within the suffrage movement, Belle Golding, announced that the Newtown branch of the WSL had in fact adopted an anti-Billite position, and so the dispute went on.<sup>16</sup>

Women's views on the Bill and the federal question were tossed about in the newspapers, with the *Daily Telegraph* running articles on 'Women as Critics of the Bill' and the *Evening News* conducting a two-part survey of prominent NSW women, most, but not all of them, pro-federal.<sup>17</sup> Overall, it would appear that a majority of women, both outside and within the WSL supported Federation and the Constitution Bill, although some concerns had been held by suffragists in 1897 in particular, that the focus on the Convention and the federal question would distract from and delay the achievement of women's suffrage in NSW.<sup>18</sup> While there is no obvious, 'gendered' difference between the position Australian women took on the Bill as a whole and the position held by men, the promise offered in the 1898 draft of the Constitution of a uniform female Commonwealth suffrage (and thus the thin end of the wedge for the state franchise), seems to have consolidated women's support for Federation towards the end of the decade.

Belle Golding, however, resolutely anti-Billite, was scathing in her rejection of this promise. Barton, Wise and others, she wrote, are now appealing 'in their extremity' to women, yet they ridiculed and opposed the women's suffrage at the Convention. 'How dare Barton now say that Federation would bring about women's franchise, and hold up to public admiration what he so bitterly opposed and tried to defeat. Women of Sydney, be not used as tools [!]'<sup>19</sup>

The 1898 referendum was defeated, however, when in NSW the special required majority of 80,000 votes was not achieved. An amended constitution, negotiated among the Premiers, still failed to satisfy the anti-Billite campaigners, but the negative result in NSW led to renewed efforts among its supporters, including the women of that colony. With the approach of a second referendum almost exactly one year later, and still without the vote, new Women's

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<sup>15</sup> Press cuttings, April-May 1898, Rose Scott papers, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Report of WSL meeting, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1898.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May, 1899, *Evening News*, 8 February 1897.

<sup>18</sup> WSL Annual meeting, minutes, 1897 (Rose Scott papers, *op.cit.*).

<sup>19</sup> 'An appeal to the Women of NSW', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 1898.

Federal Leagues were set up again to influence the male electors. The most remarkable of these was in the little town of Hay in the Riverina, a region where pro-federation feeling was intense. Suffering from the combined affliction of prolonged drought and distance from Sydney, the people of the Riverina believed that their interests would have been better served had their region been part of Victoria. Federation was the next best solution to this disadvantage.

In May 1899, with the prospect of a second defeat in NSW, a meeting of almost eighty women (some already members of the WCTU and the Hay Benevolent Society) formed the Hay Women's Federal League. They went on to hold functions, raise money, to agitate and canvass for a favourable referendum outcome. It was the first taste of political activity for the majority of these women, the first demonstration to themselves and to many men, that women were capable of such responsibility, able to exercise judgement and capable of holding further political rights. They also demonstrated, no doubt, what one suffragist had earlier noted, that 'the dinner [got] cooked on election day'.<sup>20</sup>

This time the referendum was successful and the energy and courage of these women was rewarded by the visit to Hay of Edmund Barton and Mrs Barton three weeks after the referendum, and by the many toasts made in their honour. A consummate politician, Barton told his audience that Federation would have been lost except for the Riverina, and that the women of Hay were a model for all the women of NSW.<sup>21</sup> Mrs Barton, who did not speak on this occasion, despite the presentation of a bouquet from the Hay WFL, sent a private telegram of thanks to the women on her return to Sydney. In this simple contrast between the public performance and the private act (the record of which has survived only by chance), we glimpse not only the division between the political realms of men and women, but also one of the reasons (simple lack of historical sources of this kind) for women's apparent absence from the federation campaigns. We are also able to recognise the unusual nature of the public activity of women like Rose Scott, in the public silences of women like Jean Barton.

Shortly after the Hay League was set up, a second Women's Federal League, including Mrs Barton among its members, emerged in Sydney. 'Women may have the honour of materially helping this great cause,' the new League announced, 'if each woman can only induce even one man to vote in the right direction.' 'Anti-Federalist women', it noted 'are already well in the field, holding meetings, and using their influence widely against the Bill'.<sup>22</sup> Belle Golding, speaking only days later to an audience of three hundred at an anti-Billite women's meeting in Sydney, referred to this Women's Federal League as the '*Ladies*' Federal League' and the 'Society League', mocking at the same time its pro-federal politics and its establishment membership.<sup>23</sup>

The League's members were indeed mostly known in NSW by the position of their husbands: Mrs Harris, wife of the Mayor of Sydney, was the President and Treasurer, and a diplomatically long list of vice-presidents included Mrs Barton, Mrs Reid and Mrs Wise. Their

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<sup>20</sup> Minutes, WCTU Convention, Brisbane, 1897, op.cit.

<sup>21</sup> Reported, *Riverine Grazier*, 14 July 1899.

<sup>22</sup> Letter announcing formation of the Women's Federal League, signed by Mrs Harris, 9 June 1899, National Library of Australia, Dowling papers (Series 6).

<sup>23</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 June 1899.



manner was certainly genteel, and they adopted a behind-the-scenes, non-confrontationist approach to political activity. But there is no reason to assume that these women were less sincere than their critics, or that they acted purely as handmaidens to their husbands' political aspirations. No doubt they, like other women, found the experience of organising a politically educative one, both in developing their own skills and in providing a perspective on men's politics.

It is hardly surprising in any case that middle class women tended to dominate the political and philanthropic societies of the 1890s. These women had the obvious advantages of time, education and access to political networks. What is significant is their contribution to an emerging analysis of Australian politics based on gender rather than class, as well as their role in the evolution of twentieth century feminist organisations.<sup>24</sup> However, while speakers and organisers in the movement tended to be middle class, accounts of audiences suggest that many working women did take a close interest in Federation and sought to inform themselves on the issues.<sup>25</sup>

As the decade came to a close, women's federal activity increased. We find the greatest evidence of women's organisation in Western Australia, the last colony to agree to federate. There, by mid 1900, when the Western Australian referendum was finally held, women had been recently enfranchised. A special arrangement (on which the WCTU had petitioned the Premier) was made to allow women to register for the referendum, even where they were not yet on the colony's electoral rolls. Women did enrol, and made great efforts both to educate themselves on the federation question and to encourage others, both men and women to register and to vote. The Karrakatta Club invited pro- and anti-federation speakers to address their meetings, and women's federal committees were formed in Fremantle, Kalgoorlie, Boulder and Menzies.

The women of these local committees knocked on doors, canvassed the mines, held meetings, provided guides to voting and escorted other women to the polling booths. There were anti-federal campaigns as well, most strikingly in the animated addresses given on separate occasions by two women at the Perth Town Hall in July 1900. One, Mrs Bateson, captivated her audience with a combination of satire, mockery and serious argument. She poured scorn on the do-good motives of the WCTU, as well on the morals of male politicians, who had, she said, 'skeletons not only in their cupboards but in their cradles'. She mocked the politics of the Convention delegates (as well as their looks) and she argued that Federation would undermine the power Western Australian women had already gained with the suffrage. Mrs Bateson concluded by advising West Australians 'to keep Federation out as well as rabbits.'<sup>26</sup>

It is hard to appreciate now how far women of the 1890s had to go to force themselves into such campaigns. Even attending a polling booth was an alarming prospect for many, when anti-suffrage images were drawn of the degrading effect of 'mingling the sexes' in such

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<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old Worlds and New: Feminist Citizenship, Nation and Race, the Destabilisation of Identity', in Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, *Suffrage and Beyond*, op.cit., makes this point in relation to the apparently racist and imperialist politics of Australian suffragists in the same period.

<sup>25</sup> For example: 'As far as I could judge, most of the women present were workers': Report of Anti-Billite meeting, March 1899, press cutting, Rose Scott papers, op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> *The West Australian*, 30 July 1900.

public locations. Some, including a Convention delegate,<sup>27</sup> suggested that women should be allowed the postal vote to avoid this experience. But gradually, in this and in other areas, women began to gain confidence and to make their mark upon the Federation campaigns. Like 'the Coming Man', the 'New Woman' was becoming an increasingly familiar part of the political culture of the time.

Describing how it had taken her thirty years to gain the courage to speak up politically, the Convention candidate Catherine Helen Spence told an audience, 'including many ladies', at the Victorian Trades Hall in 1899 that she had waited in vain all that time for men to take up her political cause. 'It is said of us women,' she noted, 'that we keep waiting and waiting for the coming man, and very often he doesn't come at all — and sometimes when he does come we would be better [off] without him.' Hear, hear, shouted the ladies.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the 1890s the women could no longer be overlooked as they had been at the Convention of 1891, when the first draft constitution was produced. Although that draft served substantially as the framework for the debates in the 1897 and 1898 Conventions, certain very significant modifications were made to it, some of which reveal the emergence of women into politics. Even if no women's federal organisation had existed, the Mothers of Federation would still have left their traces in our Constitution.

There are at least two obvious sections of the Constitution where this is so. Section 113 ('All fermented, distilled or other intoxicating liquids passing into any State or remaining therein for use, consumption, sale, or storage, shall be subject to the laws of the State as if such liquids had been produced in the State'), bears the unmistakable influence of temperance groups, among which the WCTU was a major player. The women of the WCTU had been, as we noted, prominent petitioners to the Convention on this matter. In arguing for the inclusion of section 113, Alfred Deakin urged other delegates to recognise that 'a very large section of the population who are amongst the most active politically' were represented in the temperance movement and their support for the Constitution should not be jeopardised.<sup>29</sup> He might well have had in mind, among others, the enfranchised women of South Australia where temperance politics was notably strong.

But it is above all in section 41, that the presence of women is most clearly identified. It is here that the contribution of women can be recognised, even by those who are only convinced of contribution by direct 'black-letter' evidence. The very fact of Federation being referred to popular election and ratification, after its failure as a purely political movement, had raised quite starkly the question of why women were not permitted to vote: 'The people' are to decide the issue, commented one suffragist: 'Are women of the people? Are they not half the people and are their claims not to be considered?'<sup>30</sup> During the Convention elections, a NSW newspaper responded to such questions with a rhyme:

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Henry Grant, *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates*, op.cit, p.722.

<sup>28</sup> Lecture to Melbourne Trades Hall, *The Federalist*, 17 June 1899.

<sup>29</sup> *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates* (Sydney, 1897) op.cit, p.1042.

<sup>30</sup> 'A Woman's Powerful Plea for the Federal Female Franchise' Miss A. Golding, press cutting, Rose Scott papers, op.cit, MSS 38/35.

Pray Lovely Woman, cease to tease  
The Candidates with tearful pleas  
About your suffrage matter.  
Give us a chance, pray, if you please  
To Federate the colonies,  
Without your endless chatter.<sup>31</sup>

But the fact that South Australian women had gained the vote before the elections took place was to mean that this question could not be ignored in 1897.

Section 41 tells us that no adult person already holding the right to vote for the Lower House of a state shall be deprived by the Commonwealth of exercising that right in federal elections. Effectively, South Australian women had to be granted the Commonwealth vote, and since the Commonwealth, it was agreed, must have a uniform franchise, all women in its first electoral act would have the vote, regardless of whether they held it or not in any other colony.

The long, convoluted arguments across the three Convention sittings and the continuous re-wording and re-working of this section before the present formulation was reached, make this one of the most fascinating parts of the Convention debates. Its debate is also unusual in forcing the delegates to touch upon matters they normally avoided. They grappled to find the right words for this section, so that South Australian women would not be disenfranchised; that the other states would not be forced to grant their women the vote; and that neither 'Chinamen' nor 'infants of sixteen' (Edmund Barton's particular, idiosyncratic concern) could be enfranchised. At the same time they argued about the nature of rights, the experimental character of Federation, the identity of the new Australian citizen, and the nature of representation.

A number of the South Australian delegates sought, as the women petitioners did, to have the uniform franchise enshrined in the Constitution at the start. They presented arguments to the Convention very similar to those found in Suffrage League manifestos: that women were taxpayers, that they were bound by law and they contributed equally to the country. They repeated the point so often made by female suffragists, that the Queen was herself a woman, at the head of a great Empire, representative of the potential of all women to participate politically. It is 'most fitting', argued Frederick Holder, who reminded his fellow South Australian delegates that they had been elected to the Convention by women, 'that when Federation comes into effect it will come ... broad-based, not only on the will of the male electors, but upon the will of the adults throughout Australia.'<sup>32</sup>

Opponents argued along familiar lines, that the states should retain the right to decide this matter for their own elections, and that the Constitution should not be used 'to venture upon an experiment'. A few of them clearly struggled to couch their obvious disapproval of the principle of women voting at all in terms of states' rights and general caution. Bernhard Wise made the bizarre claim (as Belle Golding later pointed out)<sup>33</sup> that female suffrage was dangerous, since in America for example, it would have led to 'a complete disruption of the

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<sup>31</sup> *Australian Star*, 17 February 1897.

<sup>32</sup> *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates*, op.cit., Vol.III, p.717.

<sup>33</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 1898 (see fn 19).

Union' with women supporting the abolition of slavery without having the physical force to carry this into effect. Aye Douglas reported that he had read in an Adelaide newspaper an account of a domestic row caused by a woman's participation in election campaigning. Simon Fraser added that he was *not* disparaging female suffrage, but he knew of a town in New Zealand with a Lady Mayoress, and he did not think there would be another Lady Mayoress in New Zealand. Mr Grant from Tasmania thought that women were more 'subject to emotional or hysterical influences' than men, although he had *always* been, he assured them, in favour of female suffrage since 'before many members of the Convention were born'.<sup>34</sup>

Surprisingly, but significantly, almost all came to accept by the end that the first Commonwealth electoral act, through the force of section 41, would have to provide for women's enfranchisement. Perhaps opponents believed they could hold off the movement in their own states. Perhaps they were convinced by commonly heard arguments that women were more inclined than men to vote along conservative lines. Whatever the case, the constant suffrage work of women in most colonies had taken effect.

A nation which begins with a citizenship that encompasses a true majority of its people, when in most of the established nations this was far from accomplished, is a nation with much promise, with many battles already settled, with at least the potential to take further steps towards a more inclusive and representative polity. The suffragists, many of whom were also active in the Federation Movement, may claim perhaps more than any others, to be Australia's Founding Mothers.

One hundred years after these events, we can learn a good deal from this example. Among other things, the assumption that women were not involved in Federation indicates that Federation does not yet have a comprehensive history, written from the perspective of those outside as well as within its official arenas. This must surely be an important task of the centenary celebration project.

We can also learn that politics in the 1990s must, if we wish to broaden political representation, offer something its newcomers can identify with, something related to their own experience and interests, as the suffrage question did for women in the 1890s. The opportunities for popular participation provided in the later stages of the federation process gave women a chance to enter the movement, to use their vote in the colonies where they held it, and to begin the very long process of political education which has still not been completed today.

Above all, the lesson of the Founding Mothers, is that women should not wait for the Coming Man. Whether pro- or anti-federation, the women of the 1890s agreed on this point, but they had not yet fully found the means to stop waiting. One hundred years later we are still completing their search.

**Questioner** — In the latter part of your speech you alluded to two women who were prominent in the women's movement just before the turn of the century. You mentioned that one of them was Mrs Bateson. Who was the other one?

**Dr Irving** — I do not know anything about Mrs Bateson. She was an anti-federalist in Perth who gave that extraordinary speech. The other person you may be thinking about is either

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<sup>34</sup> *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates*, 1897, op.cit., pp. 718, 724, 720, 721.

Rose Scott or Maybanke Wolstenholme. They are the two people in New South Wales. One spoke against and one in favour of federation.

Maybanke Wolstenholme, now known as Maybanke Anderson, spoke in favour of federalism in the 1890s. Her biography, *Maybanke Anderson*, was written by Jan Roberts.

**Questioner** — I want to touch on one theme you raised in your lecture, the importance of female institution building. What we found in the 1890s is that women created their own public space. They created their own organisations within which very important debate went on.

It is that creation of their own public space which gave those new women the confidence to participate in the other public debates. I am not going to say that the other debates were broader, because the kinds of topics that were being discussed by women in their institutions, topics such as the philosophy of John Stuart Mill or the economics of Oliver Shrine, were just as broad as anything else that was going on in society at the time. We need to keep this in mind today. It is female institution building that provides the springboard and the political base for women within the broader political arena.

**Dr Irving** — I can only agree.

**Questioner** — I have found that there are many important issues that we should have been paying attention to but have not because the powers that be direct our attentions so that we join groups of this against that and that against this. It is terribly important that we try harder to work together. One of the important things is the amount of political correctness today both in Melbourne and Canberra. Groups which get a grant as an incorporated group seem to consider that if they do not toe the line to a party political politician who has the power to give them the grant then they will not get it.

**Dr Irving** — I want to comment on the view that people are, in a sense, manipulated by the strings that pull them. It does an injustice to the women we are talking about and groups to suggest that they have not made up their own minds and have not arrived at or reached their own conclusions on questions and that they were not themselves just as capable of making political decisions and being politically active as anybody else.

**Questioner** — What was the thinking of these organised women and suffragettes towards Aboriginals? As you know, when the franchise bill came into effect in 1902, some of those who championed the exclusion of Aboriginals, very much tied it to the inclusion of women in the franchise. One would have hoped that women, particularly the more active ones, would have had an opposite view. Have you done work on this? What is the evidence on it?

**Dr Irving** — No, I have not. I cannot really comment much on the historical evidence on this. I think Pat Grimshaw has done some work on this in the department of history at Melbourne University. History is full of contradictions and paradoxes and historical characters do not always do the things one would like them to have done, which is not the reason why I have overlooked it or failed to mention it. I really wanted to address the question of women's organisations around Federation. I would not be necessarily confident that you would find that the women were progressive along those lines in the 1880s in terms of what we regard to be progressive in the 1990s, unfortunately.

**Questioner** — You mentioned Catherine Helen Spence as the first Australian female political candidate, but it is Mary Lee who is the hero in terms of her indomitable campaign for votes for women in South Australia. Is there any record of Mary Lee's opinion of Federation and in what respect, if any, did she influence the referendum in South Australia?

I might take an educational opportunity inspired by the previous questioner. In South Australia we have been very frustrated by the media's inability to understand that there were no suffragettes in South Australia. The word was not coined until 1906, when an English journalist of the *Daily Telegraph* aimed to use the diminutive to put down the English women campaigning for the vote. Of course, South Australian women and women throughout Australia by that time had obtained the vote by the means of the suffragist campaigns, which embraced men and women working together.

**Dr Irving** — If I can comment on that second point first. I hope you did not think you heard me say 'suffragette', because I did not. I very carefully avoided that. I did not focus on Mary Lee and the details of the development of the womanhood suffrage and franchise leagues in my paper, because that has been done elsewhere. I wanted to draw their activities beyond the suffrage question, or at least to make the links with the suffrage question and the federation question. In my research, I have not found any documents that would throw specific light on Mary Lee's attitude to Federation.

Unfortunately, the documentation is very sparse and it has not been easy to research the role of women in Federation for a range of reasons. It has required a lot of very fine detective work. I have the most wonderful research assistant who has followed through a lot of traces and trails. But a lot of the papers of the prominent women suffragists of the 1890s do not reveal anything very fruitful or useful in that direction.

Rose Scott was extraordinary in keeping all her papers, speeches and newspaper cuttings which ever mentioned her. Then she lodged them in the Mitchell Library, which was established on the basis of the collection of her cousin, David Mitchell. It is a treasure trove. It is one of the few substantial sources which throw light on women's involvement in Federation. I have not come across anything on Mary Lee, unfortunately.

**Questioner** — You mentioned the confluence of the women's movement and the temperance movement. On the subject of institutions that may help women's representation, the temperance movement was one of the big movers behind the adoption of proportional representation in Tasmania, and women were highly involved in that. Was there any similar movement at the federal level, because proportional representation has been a crucial factor in many countries in getting women into parliament.

**Dr Irving** — I do not know and it is a very good question. That is a very interesting research topic as well. Of course, when proportional representation was introduced in the Senate, which was not until 1948 for the 1949 election — and this extends a bit beyond the area I have been looking at — whether the Woman's Christian Temperance Union or other similar women's groups were involved, I do not know.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union is still active, but it does not have the mainstream prominence that it had in the 1890s, where many wives of politicians and women who were

important professional women in their own right were established with it. It really had, in many cases, quite a lot of access to male politicians. But my feeling is that the Woman's Christian Temperance Union is a much smaller mainstream organisation now. The campaign for proportional representation in the Senate went on for many years before that. There is no doubt about it, but I do not know the answer.

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