Leading the Call for ‘One Vote and No More’:
Emma Miller (1839–1917)

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Abstract: Emma Miller’s crucial contribution to democratic processes in Australia was through her steadfast commitment to one person one vote, in her leadership at the intersection of the women’s political movement and the emerging labour movement in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Queensland. Revisiting Pam Young’s seminal biography Proud to be a Rebel, Emma Miller’s early Chartist and Unitarian background, her marriages, her family and emigration, and her work as a ‘tailoress’ can be framed in the context of her emergence as a leader through the women’s trade union movement. As the long-term president of the Women’s Equal Franchise Association, she opposed the property vote and worked with the emerging, and successful, Labor Party. Her courageous, popular and political leadership (as made evident in the 1912 General Strike) highlight her capacity as an inspired politician and gifted speaker, one of a bevy of talented Australian women of that era excluded from the houses of parliament because of their gender.

Keywords: Emma Miller, Queensland, labour movement, Labor Party, women’s suffrage

Emma Miller has variously been called the ‘grand old Labour woman of Queensland’, ‘Mother Jones’ by her suffragist compatriots in Victoria, and the ‘Mother of the Australian Labor Party’. In her important historical biography, Proud to Be a Rebel: The Life and Times of Emma Miller, Pam Young finds Emma Miller was:

a humane woman of courage, fearless in expressing her convictions and staunch in her beliefs; a pioneer and propagandist of the emerging labour movement; a recognised leader of Queensland women’s fight for the right to vote; and a friend and organiser of women workers and active supporter of the trade union movement.

Was this tiny woman a feisty, outrageous direct-action radical who should be remembered for wielding her umbrella and sticking her hatpin into police horses and disabling police commissioners? Or was she, rather, an astute and disciplined strategist, steeped in the culture of the working classes, embodying authoritarian, managerial leadership qualities? In the following pages, Emma Miller’s significant contributions to Australian political history will be revisited in terms of Queensland women in leadership roles.

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A leader of women, Miller certainly was. She was president of Queensland’s Women’s Equal Franchise Association from 1894 to 1905, president of the Women Workers’ Political Organisation from 1903, and president of the Queensland Women’s Peace Army. She was particularly active in the 1890s, working with other women to form their own unions before their inclusion within male unions, and becoming a foundation member of the Australian Labor Party. In recognition of her contribution, she was made a life member of the ALP in her later years. As an organiser for the Australian Workers’ Union she travelled through Queensland, and was only the second woman delegate to attend a Commonwealth Labor Conference. Miller was a charismatic leader and spoke frequently alongside Labor Party dignitaries. Although framed in the 1980s by Pam Young and later the Queensland Council of Unions (who make an annual Emma Miller Award) as an ‘activist’ and ‘rebel’, she can also be seen as an astute political leader and a politician without a seat: one of a bevy of gifted Australian women of that era excluded from the houses of parliament because of their gender.

Representations of leadership are invariably gendered. Leadership, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, has been considered the province of men operating in hierarchical and patriarchal structures. In narratives of the colony, state or nation, women have been cast as progenitors, but not part of the main script; that is, as mothers and daughters not leaders. Miller is an elusive subject. She left few records. She neither wrote down nor retained notes of her speeches, rather, a ‘woman of humour as well as principle’, she was a gifted impromptu speaker with a capacity ‘to speak from her heart’. None of her private papers have survived. Any portrait of Miller has to be built up through accounts by journalists, sympathetic and critical, perceptive and blunted, that is by ‘researching around’ her and ‘reading against the grain’. The closest we can approach her intention, spirit and ‘voice’ is through the briefest notes in her hand, in the often truncated reports of her speeches, or in the memories others held of her.

Miller’s primary frame must be her relationship to the emerging Labor Party and the women’s suffrage movement. Miller was a transformational leader, holding to a belief system of core values. Even more than this, Miller was positioned at the intersection of two social movements: the nineteenth-century women’s movement and the labour movement at the time of transition from social movement to institution. Were there alternative experiences of leadership based on collaboration, empowerment and inclusion practised by these early feminists and socialists? In the fluid colonial society, Miller’s leadership, both as key organisational figure and a public voice for the rapid changes in the colony as the British diaspora established itself, was very much of the moment. Miller emerges as a dedicated, pragmatic even revolutionary leader. She guided women, especially, in the search for equality between the
sexes and classes. She had the capacity to communicate and inspire, and was backed by different organisational structures which she helped establish and sustain. While theories of leadership can be grouped according to their focus on different aspects of leadership, that is with first a focus on the actual leader, second the organisational or sociopolitical context or third, the relationship between leaders and followers, we need to draw on all three strands to address Miller in her historical context.7

Miller was born in June 1839 in Derbyshire, England, the daughter of Daniel Holmes, a boot-maker, and his wife Martha, née Hollingworth. She was the oldest of four children, and there was a considerable age gap between her and her two younger sisters and the youngest, a brother. Did she assist in their management as the entire family made boots? Emma’s mother was illiterate, but Emma learnt to read and write at the Chesterfield Unitarian chapel. Her father was a Unitarian, and through Unitarianism, which urged the active participation of women and sought to educate the working classes, she presumably found inspiration and stimulation.8 Her political education continued with her father when they attended political meetings and open air rallies, organised by the Chartists, agents for political and social reform with a vision of equality and justice based in praxis of mass action.9 According to Young, Emma took to heart the creed of Thomas Paine, in The Rights of Man: ‘The world is my country: to do good is my religion.’10

In 1857 Emma married Jabez Silcock, university educated and reportedly a brilliant scholar. Their first son, Thomas, was born two months later. Emma continued to work as a shoe-binder for her father, alongside her brother and one of her sisters. She and her husband had two daughters (Mary, born 1861 and Catherine (Kate), born 1865) and a second son (George, born 1867). Jabez was working as a shipping clerk when he died of tuberculosis in 1870. At only thirty-one years of age, Emma was widowed with four young children. Her parents moved in with her, and Emma became a seamstress, sewing for six days a week. She became an extremely competent ‘gentleman’s white shirt maker’.11

Four years later, Emma married William Calderwood, a stonemason. The couple and Emma’s children migrated to Brisbane, arriving in March 1879. By the following year, Emma’s second husband was dead. She again went to work, as an outworker, cutting and sewing shirts, and worked six days a week to supply major department stores. Yet the family was not impoverished; the oldest daughter was old enough to marry and Emma owned freehold property.12 For five of these twenty-five years, Emma was able to employ a girl to work alongside her on her twelve-hour days.13 Emma married again in 1886. Her third husband was Andrew Miller, an elderly widower working as a customs agent. With a grown family, was this when Emma was freed financially to become involved more politically? She was ‘in a position
to do without’ outwork.\textsuperscript{14} She formed links with the radical Collings family and was active in the formation of a Freethought Association in the late 1880s.\textsuperscript{15} In the debates, discussion, and social activities of this highly political and secular association, she found a fertile training ground and precedent for her later public and organisational roles.\textsuperscript{16}

Within five years, Miller was sufficiently recognised as a leader to be on the platform in the series of public meetings on suffrage. Young maps Miller’s belief in the trade union movement’s aim to right the wrongs of industrialisation and sweated labour, of harsh working conditions and lack of property rights, her ensuing involvement in the emerging union movement, and her specific involvement with other tailoresses. She was active in the Early Closing Association, a reform movement to limit trading hours. She was also active in the Great Strikes of the early 1890s, supporting the strikers, supporting the women and working for those incarcerated. She was a foundation member and one of the first women to join the Brisbane Workers’ Political Organisation. But the actual details of her involvement and what she thought about these events are only available in general terms. We know nothing of her specific participation in the early suffrage movement in the late 1890s, which faltered when divided over the role of men and the property vote. The histories of significant Queensland women, especially progressive and radical women, are still largely hidden despite decades of historical research.\textsuperscript{17}

Miller was elected president of the Women’s Equal Franchise Association (WEFA) at a critical moment in the progressive women’s movement in Queensland when it split over gender and class priorities.\textsuperscript{18} In the series of mass suffrage public meetings held in Brisbane in 1894, after New Zealand women won the vote, a motion from the floor caused chaos in the call for ‘one woman one vote’; that was, not multiple votes like some men with property were entitled to. Miller, on the platform, with Eleanor Trundle, Léontine Cooper and others, called for a show of hands to settle the issue ‘amicably’.\textsuperscript{19} At a following meeting, Miller moved a similar amendment to the effect that one woman should have one vote and one only. Miller would vote for every woman in the colony having a vote, but not one woman three or four votes. Miller ‘believed in making every woman know that she was only entitled to one vote and no more’.\textsuperscript{20} Her comments are worth close scrutiny as one of the few direct indications of Miller’s way of thinking. The \textit{Telegraph} journalist believed the labour women hijacked the agenda, and were ‘beneath contempt’ and autocratic.\textsuperscript{21} Miller was elected president of the WEFA, and those believing in the autonomy of women’s oppression and that theirs was a separate struggle to that of men, left to form the Woman’s Franchise League (WFL). Miller responded ‘emphatically’ that the WEFA ‘is not allied to the Labor Party or any other party’ when Léontine Cooper of the WFL accused
them. Miller continued: ‘The powerful organisation that backs it up consists of the energies of the Democratic element of which it is chiefly composed.’

The WEFA was allied to the Labor Party, then in its infancy. The group was extremely well positioned to ride the wave of the emerging party, which eventually supported electoral reform for both men and women. Miller was backed by a strong executive and a large committed council, many of whom were the mothers, friends, wives and daughters of the increasingly successful Labor politicians. The WEFA circulated a questionnaire to all candidates in forthcoming elections on their attitudes to one vote per person; all the responses were printed in the *Worker*, the Trades Hall newspaper. Women from the WEFA attended many of the public election campaign meetings and asked prepared questions. Candidates, who supported the women’s vote (mostly but not all Labor), were then helped in their election campaigns, in the full gamut of activities right through to polling day. Miller was instrumental in getting Frank McDonnell into parliament; she canvassed door to door on his behalf. Once elected, the politicians were fêted by the WEFA. Politicians chaired meetings and presented papers to the audiences of mostly women. Flamboyant cruises down the Brisbane River, with three hundred people aboard one of the government’s vessels often with the Metropolitan Brass Band, were a yearly event. There were ‘at homes’ or afternoon teas where guests were ‘received’ by ‘Mrs Miller’, and ‘socials’, which were formal dances or balls with live music.

New members continued to join. The WEFA ordinary meetings were held monthly; on alternative fortnights the sixteen women council met in committee. Miller claimed that WEFA was now a ‘power in the land’. As the ‘only non-sectarian women’s franchise association’, The WEFA ‘would accept the hand of any or all white woman’. Social historians in Queensland were early in addressing issues of racial ideologies. The question of race is more complex, however, than framing these settler women as ‘unswervingly endorsing dominant racial ideologies’ and being ‘enthusiastic supporters of “a white Australia”’ as Kay Saunders did over a decade ago. Fears about competition from black labour usurped moves to include all women; journalists do report dispute about the issue in one of the few meetings they attended. In a broader context, white women in the colonies gained the vote early partly as a means to assuage racial anxieties. Recent calls to address women’s history from the position of dual cultures or ‘co-existence’ will allow recognition of different political processes and cosmologies.

The WEFA was ‘a crew armed to the teeth and ready for every emergency’. Mass public meetings and resolutions were also part of their fare, as were deputations – most often to the premier – where they were introduced by the Labor Party leader. The long-lasting combination of president and secretary was important. The executive exerted a strong control...
over the membership: meeting procedure was emphasised and radical dissent suppressed. When Florence Collings attacked a sentimental presentation praising women’s charity work, rather than having her critique of poverty discussed, she was ruled out of order by the chair (Miller as the iron butterfly) for not standing to address the chair and for raising religious topics. The WEFA was arming its members with the tools of meeting procedure and confrontational debate. And Miller was honing her own skills of representation. She took part in joint deputations with other women’s organisations to the premier. In 1900 she ‘spoke very briefly, but to the point … she was terribly afraid that the Upper House would throw it [the franchise bill] out. If the women got the vote, she was sure they would do their duty.’

In 1903, when Queensland women had been granted the right to vote in federal elections, Miller was instrumental in setting up the Working Women’s Political Organisation (WWPO), formed at a meeting at Trades Hall. Several different groups were established to mobilise women voters, who were being addressed as political actors for the first time. Miller was initially elected president and Kate Collings was the secretary. The WWPO was set up after the WCTU, the WEFA and women from the Pioneer Club convened a meeting in the School of Arts to form the Queensland Women’s Electoral League (QWEL). Such was the power of Miller and the WEFA that the QWEL was explicitly ‘anti-socialist’. The WWPO held mock elections, arranged and addressed public meetings, printed leaflets and canvassed, and lobbied women in the factories and workshops. Miller travelled into the country regions, forming WWPO groups after addressing local Labor meetings. Like the WEFA, the WWPO held afternoon teas and had a notable membership of Labor Party MLAs. Miller’s third husband had died in 1897, aged 86. Miller was coming in to her power, as a speaker, well able to enthuse and rouse an audience. She was finding it invigorating. After long and loud applause on one occasion at Toowoomba in 1904, she spoke of only then beginning to live – at the age of sixty-five. A couple of months later, reporting on a meeting at Dunwich where she ‘tried her hand’, she was again cheered when she told of the solid Labor promise. The WEFA had gone into abeyance during the election campaign and when the Brisbane Political Labour Council was formed in 1904, Miller stepped down from the presidency of the WWPO to become part of it.

Miller was re-elected continuously as president of the WEFA until it dissolved in 1905 when white women in Queensland achieved the vote in the House of Representatives. Miller and the WEFA had been critical in maintaining pressure on the government especially through their close engagement with the Labor Party. They were well placed strategically to push through the vote. The WEFA, however, was only one of the key organisations working for suffrage and women’s political reform in Queensland. Elizabeth
Bretnall, as shown in John McCulloch’s important biography, was both eloquent and dignified, speaking for an entirely different movement of WCTU women, in the discourses of religion and class patronage. Léontine Cooper’s WFL and the Pioneer Club appealed to radical professional women, and the ‘new woman’. Christina Corrie (later Thynne) emerged through her work with Margaret Ogg and QWEL as a powerful force in liberal politics that lasted into the 1960s. Why did WEFA finish? Does its dissolution suggest pragmatism? Miller was already bound up with her work in the labour movement as an organiser. She continued to be active in its intellectual and socialist spheres, such as in the Social Democratic Vanguard (SDV), in the formation of the Workers’ Education Association, and in the establishment of a labour daily newspaper.

Different questions about Miller’s leadership style arise when we address her role in the 1912 general strike. An extraordinary first in Australia’s history, in the days before secondary boycotts were outlawed, Brisbane working institutions came to a standstill. The strike lasted five weeks and the police recruited specials to assist them in enforcing order. The Queensland premier called for federal intervention. A daily strike bulletin was edited by Joe Collings (brother to Kate and Florence), a friend of Miller’s and later a senior ALP politician. Of Brisbane’s total population of 140,000, the strike opened with 23,000 unionists in procession through the streets, with supporters and spectators numbering another 50,000 women, men and children. Seventy-three-year-old Miller led the women’s section (of six hundred women) through the streets. ‘Noble’ women, ‘no butterflies of fashion’ opined the official Strike Bulletin. Miller, at the mass meeting that evening, promised to lead the same again the next day.

Permission, however, was refused for a procession on 2 February 1912, early that morning. Were the women informed? The official strike leaders, including David Bowman, ‘leader’ of the Queensland Labor Party, urged dispersal and requested that people return home. Then the women – not the men – with Miller at the head, lined up, formed into procession and marched off from Trades Hall for Parliament House. Was Miller aware of how dangerous this was? Dangerous, that is, symbolically, politically and physically? A double line of police on foot and mounted on horses, armed with baton, rifle and sabres, blocked the road ahead of them. Miller and the chief inspector negotiated, according to Young, and the procession of three hundred women diverted along a different route. Unlike the day in 1904 when Miller had led suffragists down to Parliament House and convinced the premier to recall parliament and overturn the vote on suffrage, the incumbent premier, Digby Denham, was not there. Miller and the much younger, but equally feisty, Helen Huxham addressed the women and the crowds of spectators, until the police dispersed them. In the interim, back at the Town
Hall Square, the strikers and police, the specials and the locals, had been involved in an ugly melee. Were Miller, Huxham and the women still in procession when they sought to return to Trades Hall? When the women’s path was blocked again by a line of police, they ‘showed a bold front and defied the police, and walked through their ranks. The crowd thought it hilarious.’\(^{35}\) The police then drove the women back with a violent baton charge. Miller and the women were caught by police in a pincer movement, as they also moved in from behind. The real potency of the story of Miller’s hatpin used as a weapon against the Police Commissioner’s horse (or was it rather the Commissioner’s leg?) on Black Friday, which left him with a limp, stems surely from the audacious step she, Huxham and the women took in forming an illegal procession. It was a spectacular symbolic and real challenge to conservative forces and the white men in Queensland.

At how many rallies or mass meetings did Miller speak? Young maps a plethora of events where Miller was billed. She was on the platform of the Trades Hall meeting with the strike ‘leaders’ when the strike was declared, and again when it was over. Helen Hamley has begun to reconstruct Huxham’s enormous energy and involvement in labour organising, often speaking every day, and it is likely Miller was similarly involved.\(^{36}\) It was tireless work, preparing speeches, travelling, addressing meetings and participating in all different kinds of activities from deputation to collecting signatures. Young believes that Miller’s special ‘pride of place’ near the head of the 1912 Labour Day march was the trade union movement honouring her. Yet rather than leading with the usual union officials and parliamentarians, Miller came next, supported by two girls representing Australia with floral crowns and red ribbons. Despite her militant leadership, Miller was being represented as ‘Mother’, not as part of the main script.

In 1915, Miller joined the Anti-conscription Campaign committee, and became the president of the campaign’s women’s auxiliary in 1916. That year she attended the Peace Alliance Conference in Melbourne. She continued to speak at significant functions, and was included with the Labor dignitaries in public events. In 1917 she died of cancer, just a couple of days after a public speech on the need for peace at a mass meeting. As might be expected of a woman who devoted most of her energies to others, she made no will. Throughout her life she had the support of her daughter, Kate MacFie, and son, George Calderwood, who attended political meetings with her. Calderwood even attempted to protect and extract her from the baton attack on Black Friday, and she moved to live with him when he married in 1906. It was he who refused the offer of a state funeral, and signed the list of Miller’s assets of her very modest residence to the value of £360.\(^{37}\) Miller’s support networks were wide and deep. As an organiser she was often accompanied by
stalwarts of the WEFA and in her later life Margaret Thorp, the ‘peace angel’, worked closely with her.\textsuperscript{38}

The myths of Queensland frontier origins continue still, in the hope that the establishment is not strong enough to always block the corridors of power. Marg O’Donnell argues that women in Queensland public life have to be well behaved, well dressed and well rehearsed still, and need to have male mentors.\textsuperscript{39} Miller’s ultimate contribution to the world’s ‘good’ stems from her pivotal role in achieving universal suffrage and her work building a strong labour movement – which saw the first Labor government worldwide, the first general strike, and the anti-conscription Labor government during World War I. Her tireless disciplined energy, her dedicated and enthusiastic optimism and clarity, her wit and capacity to speak and negotiate, her ability to inspire and discipline her followers, and woo male supporters, and her militant and courageous actions were essential in a colony fraught by deeply entrenched divisions between labour and capital, a masculinist labour movement and nominated life peerage in the Upper House, and built as it was on not only Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders dispossession, but also on Pacific Islander labour. Because of Miller’s vision of the ‘worker’s paradise’, her guild socialism with its privileging of the white worker, and her ‘armed crew’ of women, other voices, even other women’s voices were suppressed. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the immensity of Emma Miller’s achievements in leading Queensland women.

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11 Ibid., 20.
12 Given her freehold property, she may have been able to vote at municipal elections.
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14 Miller qtd in Young, 71. When the prices tumbled in 1889, she ‘would try something else’.
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