‘Nobody but a Bunch of Mothers’: Grassroots Activism and Women’s Leadership in 1970s Melbourne

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Abstract: This group biography draws on oral history interviews to show how crucial women’s leadership was to Melbourne’s urban protest movement in the 1970s. Inner city residents’ action groups were characterised by a high degree of participation by women. For most it was a radicalising experience as they became involved in action for the first time in their lives. Their involvement in local action and politics contributed to the development of more open and participatory governance focused on community building and environmental issues.

Keywords: women, activism, Melbourne, urban politics

Women leaders in Melbourne’s inner-city residents’ associations in the 1970s developed a new model of women’s urban leadership based on public participation in planning, building neighbourhood communities and creating a sustainable future. It was a crucial period of change, especially in Sydney and Melbourne. In these cities the majority of members in residents’ associations were women and they developed a new style of leadership that was community based and operated through networks. Melbourne women had always been active in suburban communities but their participation in residents’ associations involved a more political and influential leadership role than that of mothers’ clubs and civic associations.

By the early 1970s, Melbourne’s residents’ associations circled the inner city: North Melbourne, Carlton, Kensington, Parkville, South Yarra, Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), Fitzroy and Collingwood all had one.[1] They were established in response to the Victorian government’s urban renewal program, especially the Housing Commission of Victoria’s (HCV) plans to develop multistorey residential high-rise towers and Country Roads Board (CRB) proposals to build inner-city freeways.

This group biography of women activists involved in these associations will draw on interviews conducted for an Australian Research Council project studying urban activism in Melbourne, especially interviews with Barbara Niven of the Emerald Hill Association, Ann Polis of the Carlton Association

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and Kaye Oddie of the North Melbourne Association.[2] These activists were women with young families and their involvement in public life was pioneering in 1970s Melbourne where the postwar suburban ethos enshrining the housewife and the suburban home was a powerful force. They had been born in the war years and were in their early thirties by the 1970s. They were fortunate in their secondary education at private schools or selective government high schools as there were limited opportunities for the secondary education of girls in early postwar Melbourne. Ann Polis and Barbara Niven had gone on to study on teaching studentships for a BA and Diploma of Education at Melbourne University, while Kay Oddie had graduated BSc from Sydney University. Both Ann Polis and Kaye Oddie had lived in the United Kingdom for brief periods following graduation. Kaye Oddie thought this experience of living overseas, where they had seen other options to suburbia, influenced urban activists to locate in the inner suburbs on their return to Australia.

> A lot of these people had lived overseas, because it was just the normal thing to go overseas once you got your degree, so people had got that very strong feeling of living in close communities from overseas and liked it.[3]

Melbourne's suburbs were criticised in this period for their conformity and the way they reinforced gender roles and these women found the strong sense of community and the diversity of Melbourne's working-class inner suburbs 'releasing'. Kaye Oddie identified 'a progressive feeling when you come into the inner suburbs, that you suddenly do realise that you are part of a community … and that's what has attracted people and what's probably been the base of all these associations'.[4] For Ann Polis, 'it was interesting, you know, there were Italians, there were Greeks, all sorts of people, pubs, all that sort of stuff. It was very vibrant.' Asked what were the disadvantages of inner city living, Polis replied she 'couldn't see a single one'.[5]

An important contribution of women activists was to strengthen the diverse communities they discovered in the inner city. This community building was opposed to the modernist urban planning associated with Melbourne's public infrastructure authorities. Jane Jacobs was an important international role model. Jacobs was leader of a community group in New York's Greenwich Village that in the late 1950s had successfully opposed the redevelopment plans of Robert Moses, an advocate of slum clearance and freeway building and the most powerful public official in New York.[6] Moses was frustrated by the initial success of Jane Jacobs and the Greenwich Village residents in preventing the construction of a freeway through Washington Park, angrily describing the residents as 'nobody, nobody, nobody but a bunch of, bunch of mothers'.[7] Jacobs went on to successfully fight Moses' later plans to demolish large parts of Greenwich Village for new housing developments and a cross-town freeway for the convenience of suburban

traffic. Jacobs' landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) was widely read by Melbourne activists. The book emphasised the importance of supportive communities for urban living and deplored the mass redevelopment of the inner areas of American cities such as New York, Philadelphia, St Louis and Chicago, which had destroyed the human and social capital of existing neighbourhoods. Melbourne's women activists were critical of the modernist assumptions of destructive urban renewal and freeway projects planned by public authorities and agreed with Jacobs that what made cities work were neighbourhoods with a mix of people and a mix of uses 'that produced vitality, community safety and spontaneity'.[8]

The Melbourne women were also largely 'nobody but a bunch of mothers'. Few women activists with young children undertook full-time paid work especially as childcare was virtually non-existent in Melbourne at this time. The small number of childcare centres that did exist were located in the inner city and mainly catered for the families of industrial workers. The governing bodies of inner-suburban kindergartens were adamant that their role was the education of young children not child minding. The peak body, the Free Kindergarten Union (FKU), strongly opposed extension of the very limited hours available at kindergartens, which ensured a very brief period between drop-off and pick-up. As well, many of the young mothers moving to the inner city underestimated the difficulty of combining activism and child caring. Anthea Mutton, an 'old duck' in the Richmond Association who was interviewed for the project, found many young couples unrealistic about the time involved in raising children. 'When a neighbour got pregnant – she said to me "I'm not going to be ruled by my child you know". I had to remind her "it's hard work having a child and bringing it up. It never stops".'[9] The accusation that inner-city women became involved in residents' associations as a distraction from the mind-breaking task of raising children was widely resented by women activists. Nevertheless, these well-educated women who had worked before childbirth found the traditional family roles constraining. Ann Polis recalled, 'I had a new baby and didn't want to go back to work and yet I needed something to do'.[10]

These women were on the cusp of the period when gender roles in the community and family were changing. Although sparsely represented in the official leadership of the residents' associations, women activists did not feel discriminated against by male office bearers because of their gender. Ann Polis recalled, 'I actually didn't feel anything like that [discrimination]. It was really odd you know.' Kaye Oddie 'never got the feeling that there was any kind of difference. Perhaps that was a sign of the times. Perhaps that was a sign of the fact that a lot [of RA members] were professionals working in universities where there was less discrimination.'[11] She later became secretary of the North Melbourne Association – an indication that as women became

more experienced in leadership, and their children became older, they moved into official positions although still fitting their participation around family obligations.

Women activists were essential voluntary community workers for the residents' associations. An especially important contribution was their extensive social community networks that strengthened the influence of the associations. One of the most successful strategies initiated by women activists was the 'telephone tree', used in the fight against the CRB proposal to extend the Eastern Freeway through the inner suburbs of Fitzroy, Collingwood and Carlton. This was a very effective communication method, especially when the bulldozers arrived at four in the morning![12] Families and social networks also played an important role in mobilising opposition to the proposed redevelopment of railway land in North Carlton for industrial use. The public protest began on a sunny Sunday afternoon in June 1970 with a meeting on the site of two hundred residents, including many families, and speeches by Melbourne City councillors, union representatives and Carlton Association members. 'Many more such protest meetings, often combined with a barbeque, were to follow on the railway land, generating a sense of community support and solidarity.'[13] This community support was vital, especially during the tensions and angry confrontations that followed union bans on the construction site.

A significant issue in the big battle over the Eastern Freeway extension was the future of the Isabel Henderson Kindergarten, marooned on a triangle of land surrounded by heavy traffic in Alexander Parade, Fitzroy. The experience of lawyer Anne Coghlan and social worker Onella Stagoll of the Fitzroy Residents' Association during negotiations with Lou Lieberman, the minister responsible for kindergartens in the Victorian government, underline the changing nature of both inner-city kindergartens and the roles of women.

Originally established to assist the children of underprivileged families in Fitzroy, the Isabel Henderson Kindergarten management committee had been drawn from former students of Clyde School, an elite private school for girls. By the time the kindergarten began agitating for a new site and building in 1974, the membership of the committee included parents and local residents. Onella Stagoll recalls that at their initial meeting, Lieberman was surprised to discover 'we were no longer the polite Clyde Old Girls' and 'was thrown off balance by our levels of knowledge, directness and determination ... He realised this community would not be a pushover, which was confirmed by subsequent events.'[14]

Involvement in the inner-suburban residents' associations opened up wider experiences and leadership opportunities for women. Many were surprised to find they could be active and influential in the community – yet their families and the world did not fall apart. Ann Polis 'had no money and

no experience in newspapers' but with Tony Knox became the joint editor of *The Melbourne Times* (*TMT*), which developed from 'a small rag sheet' produced by the Carlton Traders' Association into an influential inner-city newspaper. *TMT* 'didn't believe in impartiality' and pioneered investigative journalism in Melbourne that focused on the corruption and incompetence associated with the state government infrastructure authorities. Ann Polis recalls interviewing the new Victorian premier and his planning minister in the early 1970s. To her 'utter surprise, here I was still with a child on my hip and looking very scruffy ... but people like Rupert Hamer and Alan Hunt gave us interviews'.[15] Similarly, Barbara Niven – whose 'whole background was in school teaching and things and you weren't allowed to go near a minister, you know, you didn't go near members of Parliament' – was astonished at the access to these same ministers during the protest against a freeway proposal for the inner southern suburbs. She recalled a night when one of the members of the Emerald Hill Association:

> got fed up with the whole thing to do with the freeway stuff and she said 'this is nonsense. I am going to see Dick Hamer'. She got on a tram, went in and said she wanted to see him and confronted him and had a few things to say about the planning of the freeway.

However, these experiences were after the election of the Hamer Liberal government in 1972 and Barbara Niven admits 'it would not have been worth the tram fare' to attempt an interview with Henry Bolte, the irascible former premier.[16]

These activist women did not conform to the current stereotypes of women involved in public life. When a reporter from the *Age* went to interview 'the woman editor of *TMT*', he was expecting 'a sort of angry ant strutting her womanhood'. He was confused by finding a low-key Ann Polis with young daughter Mary playing around her desk and concluded that 'Ann Polis is no less a housewife than her counterpart in Brighton … Probably she is different because she decided to print her arguments rather than chat about them over a cup of coffee.'[17] Despite the patronising conclusion, the incident was an example of activist women demonstrating the leadership contributions that were possible from a 'bunch of mothers' – women with families who participated in public life.

The extent to which these women transformed the image of leadership was recalled by Barbara Niven of the Emerald Hill Association whose babysitting co-op was described by a local real estate agent as 'one of the most powerful networks he had ever encountered in South Melbourne'.[18] Kaye Oddie thought the influence of Melbourne's activist women was similar to that of Jane Jacobs and the Greenwich Village residents in their opposition to Robert Moses' plans for urban renewal, especially in the emphasis placed on the importance of urban communities. Oddie observed that the Melbourne

urban renewal proposals were overwhelmingly developed by the male engineers who dominated Victoria's powerful public authorities – the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW), the CRB and the HCV. '[Y]ou can imagine what the result was': isolating high-rise towers of public housing and destructive urban freeways.[19] In response, the women activists contributed to developing alternative planning models including the *Citizens Action Plan – North and West Melbourne* (CAN) of 1973, largely developed by the North Melbourne Association with input from other associations. This was a path-breaking community plan, much of which was translated by the Melbourne City Council (MCC) into the 'Plan for Melbourne' in 1982. Kaye Oddie recalls that CAN was also of interest to residents of other Australian cities, especially among those groups 'looking for an alternative to the development of car based suburbs on the American model as the CAN Report looked at issues such as neighbourhood focuses, facilities, heritage, traffic, various open space measures':

> It was hailed in its day as being an incredible work from a group of residents and I can remember even when I joined the North Melbourne Association as secretary that people were writing from all around Australia still wanting copies. So it was hailed as the work of a group of concerned people who just put this together as what they wanted for their community.[20]

Sheila Byard of the Kensington Association and a member of the CAN planning committee, thought the process demonstrated 'the promise that people in the street could assist to bring improvements about and to dissolve notions of planning as a mystery performed by experts'.[21]

Women involved in developing more participatory approaches to planning were mentored by an earlier generation of activist women. The role of Ruth Crow, a member of the North Melbourne Association and a major force behind the Citizen's Action Plan was outstanding. For Kaye Oddie:

> Ruth was the greatest facilitator I have known. She took our fledging interest, involved that interest by way of a particular project, nurtured it and watched it grow into a fully blown commitment and involvement in community issues and organisations. She tendered it as a loving garden, always encouraging our growth with words enthusiasm and praise … The sense of the future was very much to the fore, cross-fertilising our ideas with others, expanding concepts and visions with other groups, organisations and cultures.[22]

Like Jane Jacobs, Ruth Crow was a housewife and mother who inspired and encouraged women's leadership. She was a strategic thinker, well informed, experienced and drew on a Melbourne tradition of local activism. Disturbed by social and economic suffering during the depression, Ruth and her husband Maurie had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s. While living in Brunswick with a young family, Ruth pioneered the establishment of a childcare centre during World War II and became an active member of the

Union of Australian Women. Her large collection of publications on community planning was a valuable resource for women in the residents' associations.[23] Author and academic Professor Leonie Sandercock relied on Ruth Crow's knowledge and support following her appointment in 1972 to Footscray Institute of Technology (FIT, later Victoria University). She thought the CAN report and the Plan for Melbourne were outstanding critiques of the existing planning system and 'fully formed visions of an alternative city, based on the privileging of neighbourhoods and the communities they nourished', and that such neighbourhood-based metropolitan planning in the tradition of Jane Jacobs deserved 'a place in the canon of great books on cities in the twentieth century'.[24] Ruth Crow was an important mentor for Sheila Byard who taught urban planning courses at FIT and was later instrumental in establishing the Crow Collection at Victoria University Library, which includes the books, reports and papers collected and written by Ruth Crow over her lifetime. Ruth Crow also mentored women activists in pioneering neighbourhood-based and community-controlled childcare in the 1970s, especially encouraging Winsome McCaughey in founding Community Child Care.[25] To assist the community childcare movement Ruth assiduously researched the Melbourne Council archives for her comprehensive *History of Children's Care Services in Melbourne Municipality, 1910–1980* (1983).[26] Ruth Crow's mentoring was not just as a role model offering sympathy and support. She was also important in emphasising the need for women to be strategic and informed if they were to achieve change.

Emboldened by their experiences in the residents' associations, women activists became more political as 'the whole society was politicised'.[27] Many became involved in local government through joining the inner-city branches of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). This meant confronting the ALP's formidable inner-city 'Wren machine'. Anne Marie Mutton recalls that the Richmond Council, a bastion of machine influence, 'was against us because we were all middle-class communists, and worse, intellectuals, academics, it was terrible'. An important pioneer role model was Bev Genser whose 'tough Jewish background' helped her to confront Richmond's 'Tamany Hall', first as an activist and later as a member of council. Anne Marie Mutton recalls Genser travelling around Richmond on the back of a truck with a loud speaker informing residents of the HCV plans to demolish their houses so high-rise public housing could be developed – the first time the residents had heard of the HCV plans.[28]

Women activists were especially successful in being elected to the Fitzroy Council although they were not welcomed by sitting women councillors. These women rather identified with their entrenched male colleagues, a stark reflection of generational differences. Carol Carney,

elected in 1973 and later mayor, Louise Elliot, Barbara Gayler and later Helen Madden worked to appoint Jenny Wills as the first Fitzroy Council social worker. Wills established the pioneering Social Planning Office, a considerable achievement given that five years earlier Fitzroy was still a 'roads and rubbish' council.[29] By the late 1970s there were a considerable number of women who were inner-city councillors and some later became mayors. Despite the opposition of the influential Civic Group, with its entrenched business and financial interests, women politicised by the residents' associations were even elected to the Melbourne City Council. A notable victory was the election of Leckie Ord as the first woman mayor of Melbourne in 1987, followed by the election of Winsome McCaughey of the North Melbourne Association and Community Child Care as mayor in the following year. These women councillors and mayors managed the strategic move from the residents' associations to the more complex area of local government and were important contributors to the new style in metropolitan politics that emerged in the inner areas of Australian cities.[30] This move into local government by women activists was a significant advance in women's political leadership given Australian women's traditional low interest in political activity for which 'the most valid explanation seems to be the difference in male and female socialisation'.[31] What can be said is that activist women had demonstrated alternatives to the dominant stereotype of the suburban housewife and their involvement brought new life to moribund inner-city councils and transformed the limited agenda of local government.

However, limits to women's political leadership ambitions soon emerged. Although women were able to gain support from political parties for election to local government, preselection as candidates for election to state and federal government proved more difficult. It was the early 1980s before a woman with a background in the residents' associations was elected to the Victorian Parliament. Caroline Hogg, a member of the Collingwood Residents' Association and member and mayor of Collingwood Council, was a member of the Victorian Parliament from 1982 to 1999 and a minister and member of cabinet in the Cain ALP government. The difficulty for women candidates in all political parties to secure preselection for winnable seats in state and federal parliaments remained a considerable barrier to the extension of women's political leadership.[32] Nevertheless, women activists from the residents' associations had challenged assumptions regarding what politics was about and demonstrated the importance and possibilities of community politics.

The new opportunities offered by the inner urban residents' associations in the 1970s arose as the women's movement emerged but, surprisingly, activist women felt that they were driven more in response to the challenges confronting the inner suburbs than by the women's movement. Ann Polis

observed that activist women were learning on the job and had no direct connections with the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), which was getting off the ground at the same time. 'We were so passionate and tied up in what we were doing, whereas all around there was all that early feminist, all that stuff about women and I just didn't even feel it.'[33] Caroline Hogg 'was aware of the consciousness raising groups and the Women's Electoral Lobby during the 1970s', but she did not join either. 'She was too busy teaching, raising children and being a councillor and Mayor of Collingwood.'[34]

Women's leadership came through community activism and demonstrated that women could marshal popular support and political power against the male-dominated, often corrupt, planning and political leaders of Melbourne and their destructive projects. Anne Marie Mutton recalls of Richmond in that period: 'it was a community and we were the movers of it. We kept people together and we brought people together.'[35] Ann Polis thought that women's leadership through grassroots activism had been a crucial new direction, as:

> governments don't lead they follow. So in fact, the governments aren't progressive, they're just reflecting what the community is really saying and wanting and if that's true, that theory, then all the grass roots activism and grass roots activity [are] really important. It's that which leads the way for the next wave of legislation and the way you do things and procedures and stuff, how things work.[36]

Melbourne's 'bunch of mothers' had demonstrated a new political style of women's leadership through interaction of the personal and political that is characteristic of women's movements. Their focus on active citizenship, open government and public participation was unprecedented in the Australia of the 1970s. And the women were there to stay. Women's political involvement has now extended to all levels of government and leadership positions in political parties, important cabinet portfolios, state premierships and, most recently, the position of prime minister.

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