

Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0269

Australian Women’s National League

(1904 - 1944)

Born	1 January, 1904
Died	31 December, 1944
Occupation	Political organisation, Women's Rights Organisation

Summary

The Australian Women’s National League (AWNL) was a conservative women's organisation established in 1904 to support the monarchy and empire, to combat socialism, educate women in politics and safeguard the interests of the home, women and children. It aimed to garner the votes of newly enfranchised women for non-Labor political groups espousing free trade and anti-socialist sentiments, with considerable organisational success. At its peak, it was the largest and arguably the most influential women’s organisation in the country. By 1914 the AWNL claimed 52,000 members in three states. Closely associated with the United Australia Party, the financial and organisational support of the League was a key factor in the foundation of the Australian Liberal Party in 1944. At this point, the majority of members reconstituted themselves as the Women’s Section of the Liberal Party. The League continued in a much reduced state.

Details

The initial impetus for the formation of the Australian Women's National League came from moves by the Victorian Employers Federation in 1903 to form a conservative women's political organisation. Janet Lady Clarke was approached to sponsor this new group and held a meeting of three hundred women at her home in August 1903 to discuss forming an organisation. Nothing definite emerged, however, until the following year when another meeting, organised by Clarke's sister, Evan Hughes, was held at the Melbourne Town Hall in March 1904. A provisional committee was elected and the following month the League was formally established and Janet Lady Clarke was appointed first president.

Throughout its existence the League's aims were:

- "Loyalty to the Throne
- To counteract Socialist tendencies
- To educate the Women of Victoria to realise their political responsibilities
- To Safeguard the Interests of the Home, Women and Children."

Numerous suburban and country branches were subsequently formed. From 1909, the League's activities were extensively documented in its journal *The Woman*. An issue which attracted the early attention of the League, apart from combating left-wing politics was the provision of domestic science education for girls in schools and the establishment of domestic science as a university course. From 1905-1945 the League organised the Empire Day celebrations in Melbourne. During World War I *The Woman* acted as a rallying point for women in Melbourne. It encouraged women to cultivate medicinal herbs and plants, to make garments and towels for fund-raising stalls, to donate old linen, blankets, towels, bandages, toiletries and pipes to the Red Cross Society and gave advice on 'rural industries for women': poultry farming, gardening and even pig raising. After the war, the League's activities expanded considerably into the areas of women's and children's welfare. In 1918, the League inaugurated 'Baby Week' in Melbourne, which included the exhibition of healthy babies from charitable homes, displays of baby foods, pure milk and sample diets, and lectures by doctors and nurses. This led to the formation of advisory centres which contributed to the establishment of Baby Health centres and pure milk supplies in Victoria. From 1906 it ran classes in public speaking, debating and branch work for its members.

The League was initially very much committed to the belief that men and women had different, 'natural' spheres of interest and activity. Although working to provide a voice for women's specific concerns and offering some political influence for women, the League did not support the idea of women taking on political leadership. It was not until the 1920s that it endorsed the entry of women into parliament.

Both its important place in conservative politics, and its strong commitment to representing women's interests, are evident in its role in the formation of the Australian Liberal Party. In return for the support of their membership and considerable financial backing, the AWNL obtained two key undertakings from Robert Menzies: there was to be equal gender representation throughout the Liberal Party, and that the AWNL be permitted to continue within the new party's structure, as the Women's Section. Most League members thus left to form this new section of the Liberal Party. Some members, however, felt strongly that it was important for women to retain autonomous organisations and they continued the League in its original form although with greatly reduced numbers.

Published resources

Book

From Vision to Reality: Histories of the affiliates of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1987

Women of influence: the first fifty years of women in the Liberal Party, Sydenham, Diane, 1996

Out of the doll's house; women in the public sphere, Encel, Sol and Campbell, Dorothy, 1991

Liberal women : Federation to 1949, Fitzherbert, Margaret, 2004

History of the Australian Women's National League

A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia, Sawer, Marian and Simms, Marian, 1993

Book Section

The Australian Women's National League: A Theoretical and Historical Reconsideration, Scobie, Doug, 1997

Alfred Deakin and the Australian Women's National League, Fitzherbert, Margaret, 2001

'Most eminent woman' : Lady Janet Clarke, Bartle, Claire, 1998

Australian Women's National League, Smart, Judith, 1998

Eva Hughes: Militant Conservative, Smart, Judith, 1985

Journal Article

A sacred trust: Cecilia Downing, Baptist faith and feminist citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1995

'For the good that we can do': Cecilia Downing and feminist Christian citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1994

Homefires and Housewives: Women, war and the politics of consumption, Smart, Judith, 2004

Thesis

The 'Woman Question' in Melbourne, 1880-1914, Kelly, Farley, 1983

'Conservative Female Endeavour': The Australian Women's National League 1904-1914, McCarty, Elizabeth, 1985

Conference Paper

Conservative feminism in Australia: a case study of feminist ideology, Simms, Marian, 1978

Pamphlet

Constitution of the Australian Women's National League

Journal

The Woman, The Australian Women's National League, 1907-1934

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives

[Australian Women's National League](#)

State Library of Victoria

[Papers and history. 1920-1969 \[manuscript\].](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Dame Elizabeth May Ramsay Couchman, 1913-1970 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Dame Ivy Wedgwood, 1928-1972 \[manuscript\]](#)

Geelong Heritage Centre

[Australian Women's National League, Geelong Branch](#)

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