Entry type: Organisation
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Women’s Electoral Lobby (ACT Branch)

(1972 -)

Born	19720101
Occupation	Feminist organisation

Summary

The Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) is a feminist political organisation founded in 1972. It is a non-party-political and non-sectarian women’s lobby. Members of Canberra Women’s Liberation organised the first meeting of WEL-ACT in May 1972. WEL, which began in Melbourne, was to interview candidates for the Federal elections to be held later that year and publish the results. WEL-ACT was particularly active running public education campaigns on what mattered to women in the ACT and interviewing local candidates and sitting Members. Women had flocked to join WEL around Australia and 400 women attended the first National Conference held in Canberra in January 1973.

Over the years WEL-ACT played a major role in supporting the WEL National Office in Canberra and lobbying for national campaigns such as access to affordable childcare; the introduction of sex discrimination, equal employment opportunity and affirmative action legislation; and changes to industrial relations, taxation and economic policies. Locally members entered parliament and the public service. WEL-ACT provided support for those working for women in the bureaucracy, continued to lobby for local issues, such as the repeal of abortion laws, and continued to question candidates standing for election.

Details

WEL-ACT's first year
The first meeting of WEL-ACT was held on 3 May 1972 in the Women's House, 12 Bremer Street, Griffith, the meeting place of Canberra Women's Liberation. Bea Faust had written to Canberra Women's Liberation and her contacts in the Abortion Law Reform Association explaining that she and a group of women in Melbourne had formed WEL with the intention of surveying candidates for the forthcoming Federal elections on issues of concern to women and publishing the results. The Women's Liberation Action Workshop replied to Bea that they were 'very interested in taking part in WEL' and 'would establish a sub-committee for WEL in Canberra'.

The newly formed WEL-ACT embarked on a program to educate the candidates and the public in general about what mattered to women in the ACT. It organised public education campaigns or 'blitzes' on family planning and contraception; the employment problems of women in the ACT; lack of childcare; retraining opportunities for women; and discrimination and equal opportunity. They handed out well-researched information sheets on these topics, organised demonstrations and prepared press releases. The screen-printing workshop at the Women's House was busy producing WEL T-shirts, bumper stickers and posters.

For its campaign on family planning and contraception, WEL-ACT wrote a submission to the Tariff Board asking that the tariff on contraceptives be reduced. This received good coverage in the media, which was used to publicise WEL's demands to remove the 'luxury tax' on all forms of contraceptives, place The Pill on the 'free list', remove restrictions on advertising contraceptives and family planning clinics and provide funding for family planning clinics.

While WEL-ACT had been busy with education programs, WEL-Victoria had finalised the questionnaire for the candidates. WEL-ACT not only interviewed candidates for the ACT and surrounding electorates but also many sitting Members for other WEL groups. WEL groups were also holding public meetings with candidates, asking them, 'why women should vote for you?' In September the Convenor of WEL-ACT, Gail Wilenski (Radford), chaired a meeting in Wagga Wagga and invited an ABC television team to attend. The result was a very informative *Four Corners* program, 'The Hand that Rocks the Ballot Box', on WEL that went to air on 7 October 1972. WEL-ACT held its public meeting on 3 November in the Griffin Centre in Civic. All the candidates for the ACT were invited to speak and answer questions.

The results of the WEL survey were analysed by WEL Victoria and released in late November. Each WEL group released its own results. They were very newsworthy and received excellent publicity around Australia. In the ACT Pat Eatock, a Black Liberation candidate was given full marks and Kep Enderby, the sitting Member and Labor candidate, was a second with 91%. On Election Day, 2 December 1972, WEL-ACT handed out information sheets at the polling booths with summaries of the results of the WEL questionnaire for all ACT candidates.

WEL was delighted when Gough Whitlam, the new elected Prime Minister, announced that he would meet numbers of WEL's demands. WEL's agenda on contraception and family planning was to be implemented and the equal pay case before the Arbitration Commission was to be re-opened to support equal pay for work of equal value. Also, the Prime Minister was to appoint an adviser on women's affairs to his personal staff, an idea originating with the Convenor of WEL-ACT.

There was no summer holiday for WEL-ACT in January 1973, as it organised WEL's first national conference in the middle of a heat wave. 400 or so women attended the conference; surprised by the numbers of women who were coming from all parts of Australia, WEL-ACT hired a tent to accommodate the extra numbers. Women stayed up all night talking, excited by WEL's successful first year, little realising that there would be years and years of hard work to follow.

1973-Reform or revolution?
Canberra Women's Liberation questioned WEL's success and the relationship between the two was discussed in early 1973. While agreeing that Women's Liberation was very important as it provided a theoretical basis for WEL, WEL-ACT members said that they could not wait for 'the revolution' but wanted reforms to urgent problems now. However, there was none of the animosity between WEL and Women's Liberation members in the ACT that was seen in some States and the two groups continued side by side in the Women's House.

WEL-ACT and National WEL
There had been suspicion at the first national conference about the prominence that WEL-ACT had on the national scene. Rules were laid down about who could speak or lobby for WEL, locally and nationally. If the majority of groups approved, WEL-ACT could lobby on an issue and contact the national media. However, it was inevitable that, given its location close to the federal government and parliament, WEL-ACT would continue to play a significant role nationally in the following years. With finely honed media skills and many contacts in the national media it continued to have a high profile.

It was not until 1978 that a national office was set up in Canberra. Initially it was housed in the new Women's House in O'Connor, where WEL-ACT had moved in 1975. The offices of both groups were co-located until the 2000s when the national WEL office moved to Sydney and WEL-ACT started to work from members' homes and offices.

Compared to other WEL groups, WEL-ACT always played a disproportionate role in supporting the national office and national campaigns. As the group with the troops on the ground, WEL-ACT could be relied upon to provide members to lobby politicians, organise demonstrations and conferences, contact the media and help members visiting from other WEL groups. WEL-ACT, therefore, over the years continued to play a major role in the national campaigns for affordable childcare, the introduction of sex discrimination legislation, EEO and affirmative action legislation and changes to industrial

relations, taxation and economic policies.

WEL-ACT Submissions
WEL groups were great submission writers and WEL-ACT was no exception, preparing 77 submissions to inquiries, the ACT government and ACT departments in the years 1972-2003. However, two submissions to the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration (RCAGA) were particularly important as they addressed the question of how to make government policy women-friendly.

A 1974 submission recommended taskforces in the central areas of departments to monitor policy development and program administration for women, initiate research, maintain liaison with target groups of women and brief inter-departmental committees and advisory councils. In a further submission in 1975, WEL-ACT stressed the need for departmental units and for reporting mechanisms to ensure that women's needs were integrated into programs and policies at an early stage of development. In 1976 RCAGA recommended the trial of women's policy units in departments to reinforce the work of the Women's Affairs Branch in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

This model, which became known as the 'hub and wheel model', was not only implemented in the federal public service but, thanks to the energetic work of WEL members, was adopted in State and Territory public services.

1975-Working from the inside
1975 was International Women's Year and the year that WEL decided to question its effectiveness. Fed up with the slow pace of change, particularly within the bureaucracy and parliament in Canberra, members decided that they must work from within as well as lobbying from outside.

Susan Ryan, who had been a Deputy Convenor of WEL-ACT in 1972, stood for the Senate in 1975 with strong support from WEL-ACT using the slogan 'A Woman's Place is in the Senate'. She went on to become the Minister Assisting the Prime Minster for the Status of Women in the Hawke government and was responsible for the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act in 1984, an event celebrated by WEL with a party in front of Parliament House. Legislation to support affirmative action programs in the private sector followed in 1986. WEL-ACT member Chris Ronald assisted her with the drafting of both of these pieces of legislation.

In October 1975 Gail Wilenski, the first Convenor of WEL-ACT, was appointed to head the newly created EEO unit in the Public Service Board in Canberra. Known by her professional name, Gail Radford, she pioneered EEO programs in the Australian Public Service; these were to spread to all State public services and were to serve as a basis for the affirmative action programs in the private sector.

WEL-ACT member, Ann Wentworth, was the first Women's Adviser in the ACT. Appointed in 1985, she played a key role in the development of women's services such as the 24-hour domestic violence intervention service and the women's health service.

Many other WEL members moved into women's units or EEO units in the public service in Canberra. WEL-ACT kept a watching brief on their activities, lobbying strongly at election times and provided support for their work between elections. For example, at the end of the 1980s WEL-ACT and the Institute of Public Administration organised a large workshop that focused on strategies to support women trying to preserve feminist values in government.

1980s-Taxation and the Economy
WEL-ACT members played a major role in the development and promulgation of National WEL's policies on taxation and the economy in the 1980s. Following the re-election of the Fraser government in 1980, conservative politicians pushed for income-splitting or family-unit taxation. It was the economist Meredith Edwards who managed, via the media, to explain to the public the impact such a move would have on women who were secondary income earners.

In the Hawke/Keating years the economic agenda was very much to the fore. Campaigns and conferences organised by National WEL tried to focus attention on the gender dimension of economic issues.

In June 1985 a *National Women's Tax Summit* was held in Canberra. Marian Sawer from WEL-ACT chaired the Steering Group for this Summit, which was originally the idea of WEL but later other organisations joined them. It was very influential in warding off Paul Keating's preferred option of a broad-based consumption tax.

WEL-ACT members also formed a working group on the economy and prepared submissions for National WEL to the Economic Planning Advisory Council and worked with others on a submission to The National Tax Summit: New Directions held in July 1985. WEL-ACT member Frances Davies spoke on behalf of National WEL at the Summit.

1990s and beyond
The Howard years were difficult years for WEL nationally as government funding for WEL ceased. Changes that had been made, or were being made, to EEO programs and women's programs reduced their effectiveness. The ACT was not immune from such changes as seen by WEL-ACT submissions to the Chief Minister on 'Curtailment of Staffing Resources for ACT EEO Unit' in 1995 and another on 'The Need for Women's Policy Structures' that included WEL's questionnaire that was sent to all candidates for the 1998 elections for the ACT Legislative Assembly.

WEL-ACT was undaunted by the difficult times and a pamphlet published in 1999 stated that there had been a 50% growth

in membership since the cessation of federal government funding. Much of this increase was due to the emergence of Young WEL-ACT, an active and energetic group. Many of its members were university students attracted by the moves to decriminalise abortion in the ACT. They joined with older Canberra women who had been doggedly working for change to laws relating to abortion since the defeat of the McKenzie-Lamb Bill in 1973.

WEL founded a coalition of pro-choice groups, Options for Women, which successfully lobbied for the passage of two Territory Bills in 2002. One Bill made the ACT the first jurisdiction in Australia to remove all references to abortion from its criminal code and the other repealed offensive legislation that had tried to force women considering an abortion to view photographs of foetuses.

Young women worked in executive positions in WEL-ACT. One of their concerns was the paucity of women in the Legislative Assembly. Roslyn Dundas, who had been the ACT Co-ordinator of Young WEL and was later Convenor of WEL-ACT, was elected to the ACT Legislative Assembly in 2001. She was an Australian Democrat and, at the time of her election, was the youngest member ever elected to an Australian parliament.

The arrival of the Internet, particularly email, was a boon to women's organisations. WEL Australia set up its first website in August 1995, the first women's organisation to do so. It was created and maintained by WEL-ACT member Val Thomson and became a valuable resource, particularly after the defunding of WEL. In 1998 WEL-ACT established a general email list called ACTWomen for sharing information about issues and events of particular interest to women in the ACT. This proved to be a very useful initiative and is still in operation in 2012.

In a spirit of fun but with serious intent, WEL-ACT launched The Gregs in 1999. Named after Legislative Assembly Speaker Greg Cornwell, they exposed sexist statements made by public figures. Who was to receive the Greg trophy for the year was decided in a boo-off as entries were read out, often at Tilley Devine's Cafe at Lyneham, and the winner's name was added to a Wall of Shame on the WEL-ACT website.

Candidates for election
Over the years WEL-ACT has continued to question local candidates standing for election to Federal parliament and, after self-government for the ACT, candidates for the ACT Legislative Assembly. Sometimes they organised meetings with the candidates, with or without other women's organisations participating. For the Federal elections in 2010 WEL-ACT also published the results of a postal survey of candidates in the ACT and Eden-Monaro.

In preparation for the Legislative Assembly elections in 2012, WEL-ACT examined progress made by the ACT in implementing the government's gender equality commitments. Sarah Spiller researched and wrote a very detailed report, *The Full Picture: An Audit of the ACT's Gender Assessment Processes*, which listed 12 recommendations for improving performance.

Published resources

Book
WEL Women: Recollections of the some of the first WEL-ACT women, Benson, Julie McCarron, 1990

Making women count : a history of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia, Sawer, Marian, 2008

Resource
History of WEL, 2010,
http://wel.anu.edu.au/

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Records of the Women's Electoral Lobby, 1952-2010 [manuscript]

Papers of Shirley Kral, 1953-2015 [manuscript]

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