"EVERY WOMAN! THIS IS YOUR BUSINESS": THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AGAINST SOCIALISATION

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Abstract
The Australian Women's Movement Against Socialisation (AWMAS) was formed in Sydney in September 1947 in response to the Federal Australian Labor Party government's decision to nationalise the private banks. During the thirteen years of its existence, the AWMAS also campaigned against the ALP, trade unions and communism/socialism. Branches were formed throughout New South Wales, and in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. By 1951, the NSW Division claimed to have 7,000 members in 97 branches throughout the state. An extreme right-wing organisation, the AWMAS drew many of its members from both mainstream conservative parties. Other women from middle and upper class Australia, who had shown little previous interest in politics, also joined in large numbers. The paper analyses why women joined the AWMAS and what they achieved both inside and outside the movement. To this end, the lives of selected leaders and members from New South Wales are discussed. These women came from a variety of backgrounds and classes, and from urban and rural areas. The biographical outlines illustrate a range of social and political activities that have been largely ignored by historians.

On 10 July 1961, the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) published its fifth Australia Unlimited supplement. This extremely long document provided a 'comprehensive survey of national progress ... [it] reports and illustrates achievements and developments in commerce and industry'. A 'special section' entitled 'The Australian Woman' was included. It began with a full page illustration that portrayed 'notable women' in Australian history, and included under the heading, 'Public Service', Caroline Chisholm, Daisy Bates, Edith Cowan, May Holman, Mary Tenison-Woods and Dame Enid Lyons. Articles on activities related to the status of women, women in public affairs, women in commerce, working women,
country women and women in community service were written by Mary Tenison-Woods, Jean Arnot, president of the National Council of Women and Dame Mabel Brookes, the respected social and charity leader from Melbourne, among others. Each article emphasised the contribution that women had made in a host of areas and the barriers preventing them from advancing further. These barriers included ‘male prejudice’, the lack of wage equality, the central role of the family and the woman’s position in it, and the indifference of many women.

The 1961 *Australia Unlimited* appeared one year after the demise of the Australian Women’s Movement Against Socialisation (AWMAS), a women’s organisation formed in Sydney in September 1947 in response to the Federal Labor government’s decision to nationalise the private banks. Although the AWMAS was not mentioned in the supplement, many former members featured in or contributed to it. For example, included under ‘Professions’ was Dame Constance D’Arcy, the noted obstetrician and gynaecologist, who was an AWMAS council member from September 1947 until her death in April 1950 (Radi 1981, 205–6; Biographical files compiled by the author). Articles were contributed by Thelma Bate, then state president of the Country Women’s Association of NSW, who had been an AWMAS member and office bearer from late 1947 until 1950, a supporter throughout the 1950s, and who was poised to return to the general secretaryship in 1958 before she married Henry Jefferson Bate (Biographical files), by Eleanor Donaldson, Advertising Manager with David Jones Limited and regarded by the *Australian Women’s Weekly* from early 1947 as a leading Sydney business women, who was an AWMAS council member until at least 1952 (26 July 1947, 21) and by Dame Mabel Brookes, who, along with Millicent Preston Stanley Vaughan, the leader of the AWMAS from 1947 to 1955, was instrumental in the formation of an AWMAS branch in Melbourne, and was a supporter of the AWMAS for some years afterwards (Poynter 1993, 265–7; Argus (Melbourne) 27 November 1947, 6).

The failure to mention the activities of the AWMAS was not unusual in itself; it had been a reactionary right-wing organisation which was part of history by 1961. But the omission was part of a wider neglect; the omission of women from the political story at this time. Except for the odd illustration, there was no reference in the supplement to women’s political activity be it in the mainstream parties, in right-wing or left-wing organisations, or in the mainstream women’s organisations that had been campaigning for some 50 years within the then dominant discourse of motherhood. The omission of Preston Stanley Vaughan from the page of illustrations seems a glaring oversight; she was the first women elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly in 1925.

Little had changed by the mid-1970s. In 1975, Baiba Irving wrote on at least two occasions that most political histories made ‘little mention of the involvement of women in parliamentary politics’ (1974–5, 27–8; 1975, 69–77). Three years later, Marian Simms labelled this omission as the ‘lopsided androcentric world view dominating Australian historiography’ (1978, 9). Women had been omitted from historical writing, not because they were passive participants but because women’s
activities were considered secondary and, therefore, of lesser importance. This in turn led writers to ‘ignore most activities in which women played a central role’. Women became ‘almost by definition . . . apolitical and invisible’, and the ‘efforts of women’s organisations [were] ‘written out’ ‘of history’ (Sawer & Simms 1984, 25). In the mid to late 1970s, feminist historians such as Anne Summers (1977), Patricia Grimshaw (1978) and Marilyn Lake (1976) challenged this omission: women had been participants in a wide range of political activities within political parties, pressure groups and political organisations, and these activities had been hidden from history. Moreover, Jill Julius Matthews, among others, argued that the whole historical discourse needed to change to accommodate the gender discourse (1986, 147–53). All this early work was followed by a host of new research in the 1980s that covered such organisations as the Australian Women’s National League, the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the United Associations of Women, and the Council of Action for Equal Pay; individual feminists such as Jessie Street, Bessie Rischbieth and Muriel Heagney; the activities of women in the mainstream political parties including Preston Stanley Vaughan, Ivy Weber, May Holman, Annabelle Rankin and Dame Enid Lyons; and the work of women in the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the mainstream non-Labor parties and on the political left (Bevege et al. 1982; Sawer 1984; Radi 1990; Ranald 1986; Wright 1986; Damousi 1994; Stevens 1987; Johnson 1990; Lyons 1972; Lake 1994). This bank of research concentrated on social history, but, as Lake has emphasised, it illustrates that ‘the post suffrage era was in many ways, the hey day of feminism in Australia and the interwar years the golden age of the woman citizen’ (1996, 166). The culmination of this research has been the book Creating A Nation by Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath & Marian Quartly (1994). Despite its critics, this is a significant publication that has, as Ann Curthoys stated in her review of it, signalled a ‘shift from ‘women’s history’ to ‘a general Australian history foregrounding the relations between men and women’ (1995, 196).

Such research has emphasised the fact that women have been active and successful in a wide range of activities since the beginning of first wave feminism. In 1984 Marian Sawer and Marian Simms wrote that feminists initially believed that after women had attained the vote there was a lull in activity before a revival of activity in the 1960s, the beginning of the second wave. This view increasingly came under scrutiny. Sawer and Simms argued that in Australia:

researchers now view women’s political activity between the two waves not as absent but as taking different forms. It was subterranean in two senses. Firstly, women’s organisations existed but lacked an immediate common goal and a consciously expressed shared ideology. Secondly, political involvement was confined to two main areas: matters concerning legal change and issues relating to two main problems, particularly child and mental health. A factor in the removal of women’s activity from the public eye is society’s understanding of what constituted politics and political behaviour. (1985, 25–6)

Going beyond these limited roles, Meredith Foley (1985), in her study of women’s organisations in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria between 1918 and 1938, argued that there was a continuation of activity. Politically, women in a host of organisations, such as the Housewives’ Association and the National Council of
Women, strove to ‘overturn the designation of women’s own interests as “non-political” and thus marginal to the mainstream concerns of political life’. This entailed various forms of political activity both inside and outside parliaments, within universities and other training centres, and on the streets. Moreover, as Lake (1996, 156–7) has pointed out, ‘[t]here is a long tradition of feminists appropriating the nationalist discourse on motherhood to promote women’s political interests’. Entering parliaments was not an overriding concern, although some successful attempts were made, but women ‘exercised a powerful influence’ nonetheless (Lake 1988, 163). Women’s involvement in a variety of political action during this period dispels the ‘public mythology, that women’s political history has been a history of failure’ (Lake 1996, 159; Matthews 1984, 86–9).

The activities of the AWMAS also dispel this myth, and show that the activity of many women on the political right in the 1940s and 1950s transcended the conclusions reached in earlier studies. They also emphasise how the AWMAS coupled the discourse of motherhood to other forms of action. The family and the woman’s role in it were still regarded as vitally important, but the woman had another equally important task. This was the role of political agitator: the AWMAS leadership continually emphasised that women had the ability and power to alter the political make-up of the country. To this end, the AWMAS’s history also highlights how a highly motivated group of conservative women, many of whom had no previous political experience, moulded themselves into an active and aggressive organisation, and achieved tangible results, especially in the movement’s early years. In addition, political activity was not restricted to certain health related issues, as claimed by Sawer and Simms, but traversed a host of issues that ranged from nationalisation to welfare provision.

It is not my intention to provide a detailed history of the AWMAS. This is provided elsewhere (Eather, forthcoming a & b). However, what is more central to this discussion are the activities of members of the AWMAS before, during and after their involvement in the movement. The next section is a summary of the ideology advocated by the AWMAS and what it did during its thirteen years. Following this, the activities of three women, Millicent Preston Stanley Vaughan, Thelma Bate and Errella Heard, are analysed in some detail. These biographies concentrate on each woman’s activities in the AWMAS, but also tie in their other political activities. Some of this information is already well known, but much of it is not, and it demonstrates the diversity of political activity undertaken by women on the right throughout the twentieth century.

THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AGAINST SOCIALISATION

The AWMAS was formed on 26 September 1947 following a women-only rally that attracted between 3,000 and 3,500 women to the Sydney Town Hall. This
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AGAINST SOCIALISATION

rally had been organised by Preston Stanley Vaughan and 60 other women, many of whom were leading feminists of the day, to protest against the Chifley Labor government’s bank nationalisation proposals. A second rally, this time held in Canberra on 22 October 1947, attracted 623 women, mainly from NSW but with at least two representatives from each state in attendance. From this date, AWMAS branches were formed throughout NSW, and in Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth (in conjunction with the Women’s Committee of the Citizens Rights Association). By 1950 there were reportedly 97 branches in NSW alone, with approximately 7,000 members. Branch sizes in this state ranged from 55 in the rural hamlet of Coolamon, to 362 at Wagga Wagga and ‘more than 700 members’ at Turramurra. Branch creation did not occur along similar lines in other states and political activity was muted in comparison to that of NSW, because of the lack of financial support and the absence of dynamic leadership elsewhere.

The women who rushed to join the AWMAS came from a variety of backgrounds, although there is no evidence that any of them would have classified themselves as members of the working class. The Sydney Sun reported on 28 July 1949 that ‘hundreds of housewives, religious workers, business persons, clerks, actresses, ex-service women and members of various clubs and associations joined the organisation’. In the four years to 1951, women who held executive and council positions in the NSW branch reflected the list published by the Sun. Those who would have described themselves as professionals were Katie Ardill Brice, Constance D’Arcy, Lucy McMahon and Edna Nelson who were all doctors, Mary Coleman, an accountant, Muriel Doherty and Evelyn Paget Evans who were nurses, Florence Taylor, Australia’s first woman architect and engineer, Eleanor Donaldson and Phyllis Parkinson, both of whom were business women, and the noted aviatrix, Nancy Bird Walton. From the arts community came Doris Fitton (theatre), Ethel Gabriel (actor), Evelyn Gardiner (opera), Portia Geach (painter) and Strella Wilson (vocalist). The religious contingent was led by Iris Tory and Elsie Rayward, whose husbands were respectively the minister of St Stephen’s Presbyterian Church, Sydney and superintendent of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission. Many of these women were also very active in a range of community and women’s organisations. Also active in these groups were Beulah Bolton (Victoria League in NSW and the Bush Book Club), Ruby Duncan (League of Women Voters of NSW and the Women’s Independent Party), Eleanor Glencross (Housewives Association of NSW), Constance Harding and Christina Margaret Johnson (Young Women’s Christian Association), Erna Keighley (United Associations of Women), Florence Kenna (Town Planning Association), and Annis Burton, Jane Crain, Lorna Cupit, Joyce Grant, Prudence Vickery and Frances Worboys (all members of the Feminist Club of NSW). The ages of these women when the AWMAS was formed in 1947 ranged from 37 years of age (Walton) to 74 years (Geach). The average age of the women who have been identified was 57 years (Biographical files).

More importantly, many of these women had a history of anti-communist, anti-union and anti-ALP activity. As will be seen in the short biography of Preston
Stanley Vaughan included in a later section of this paper, she was a strident opponent of communism and the ALP for most of her life. Moreover, she was the leading figure in a host of right wing women's organisations. In addition, many other AWMAS members had been active in these organisations and other similar ones. For example, Prudence Vickery and Eleanor Glencross were active in the Feminist Club of NSW/Sane Democracy League merger in the early 1930s, Ruby Duncan was active in the Australian Women’s Guild of Empire during the 1930s, while Grace Munro was involved with the Women’s Loyal Service Bureau in 1917 and later was a patroness of the Women’s Guild of Empire. As well, Florence Taylor, Evelyn Gardiner and Stella Wilson assisted or worked on People’s Union of NSW campaigns or functions from at least 1947 (biographical files). These associations reinforce the view that there was a history of right-wing activity among women that stretches back to at least 1917, and that the AWMAS was the post-war descendent of these earlier organisations.

In rural areas members, logically, came from a range of different backgrounds. Many were on the land helping run family farms or working in small family businesses, while also pursuing their traditional familial roles. In many of the smaller centres, branch leaders and activists were more commonly wives of bank managers or bank employees, or active members of the non-Labor parties. A number were practising teachers, some of whom had left the profession to raise a family before returning during the 1950s. Nearly all the women who have been identified in the Wagga Wagga, Coolamon, Cootamundra and Gundagai branches were also involved in at least two other organisations in their respective towns and cities. In Coolamon, for example, members were also active in the Country Women’s Association, the Red Cross, the local churches and various local political and community organisations. In other centres, further committees would have included the Returned Services League’s Women’s Auxiliary, the local hospital committee and local charities. Hence, their involvement with the AWMAS was generally on top of an already hectic workload (Biographical files).

The rapid growth of the AWMAS can be attributed to a number of factors. First, it was a women’s movement, formed by women and run by women. Moreover, the leadership repeatedly stated that women had to become involved in political matters to protect democracy and freedom in Australia. Numerically just over half the total Australian population, women could be a force if they organised; the destiny of the country was in their hands. This did not, however, mean substituting a ‘man controlled world’ with a ‘world controlled by women’; there had to be co-operation between the sexes (SMH 19 January 1949, 2; Daily Advertiser (DA) 27 February 1948, 2). Second, many conservatively-minded women believed that the mainstream non-Labor parties were not doing enough to involve women in the political process. The Liberal Party of Australia (LPA), for example, was constantly criticised by women in the party between at least 1947 and 1951, for its lack of concern for women’s issues and for its failure to involve women in more than ‘housekeeping’ roles. Consequently, many AWMAS members in the capital cities and larger regional centres were once members of the Liberal Party, and
while many maintained dual membership they did little work for the Liberals (Eather, forthcoming b).

Third, members believed that life as they knew it was under threat from a host of subversive elements. The bank nationalisation proposals were the overriding factor that compelled Preston Stanley Vaughan and her supporters to form the AWMAS, but the industrial turmoil of the late 1940s, the fears of creeping socialism via government legislation, hysteria surrounding communism and communist control of the trade unions all played a part as well. The leadership and members feared the loss of personal freedom, liberty and democracy in Australia, as the preamble to the movement’s constitution emphasises:

In post-war Australia there is a powerful undertow dragging us down, threatening to submerge the faith of freedom ... Our crucial concern is to help our Country to realise that a Commonwealth framed in liberty, pulsing with the free-play of individualism, will be a heritage priceless beyond any ‘Plan’ whether the planners be Bureaucrats—Socialists—Communists—or exponents of any other untried ideology ... It is felt that by uniting the efforts of women who treasure freedom, this organisation can launch a women’s Crusade for Liberty, the effect of which will be felt throughout the Commonwealth. (AWMAS [1948a], 2)

In ensuring the maintenance of these ideals, the objectives of the ‘Crusade for Liberty’ ‘consisted of the following:

1. To promote loyalty to the Crown—the Empire—and the Commonwealth of Australia.
2. To oppose subversive and anti-British activities.
3. To fight for those fundamental rights secured to us by [the] Magna Carta and other great title deeds of British liberty.
4. To fight against the introduction of all measures which have full socialisation as their final aim.
5. To uphold the right of individuals to exercise their own initiative and enterprise.
6. To maintain the structure of representative government.
7. To conduct an Australian campaign amongst women for the preservation of freedom and democracy.
8. To co-operate with other organisations having similar aims.
9. To take such other steps as may be necessary to achieve these objectives. (AWMAS [1948a], 2–3)

This list shows that the AWMAS in many ways reflected the political ideals of the mainstream conservative parties but the economic and political ideology advanced by the AWMAS indicates that it stood to the right of these parties. With regard to economics, the AWMAS supported unfettered laissez faire. Slogans such as ‘competition is the life blood of successful enterprise’ and ‘Whatever the dead hand of the state touches withers under it’ reflected this viewpoint (AWMAS [1948b] ). Any form of regulation stifled competition and therefore retarded economic activity and growth. The Chifley government was constantly criticised for restricting or strangling the market via either regulation or nationalisation of industry. The government’s initiatives in the airlines, health and shipping sectors
were condemned for these reasons. Despite being regarded as a ‘free enterprise government’, the Menzies government was also criticised for not ‘de-socialising’ Trans-Australian Airlines in 1951, even though this decision stimulated competition (Preston Stanley Vaughan 1951).

The AWMAS’s political ideology flowed from the economic line it espoused and had two related themes. First, the Chifley Labor government was socialist and had as its sole aim the establishment of a totalitarian state. Bank nationalisation was the first step in this direction. If any further evidence of the government’s intent was needed, the 1948 Powers Referendum and the pledge ALP politicians took to support the party platform that called for ‘socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange’ provided it. To ram home this point, the AWMAS continually likened the Chifley government to the totalitarian regimes headed by Stalin in Russia, and previously by Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. The excesses of these regimes were repeatedly advanced by the AWMAS leadership to highlight what was in store for Australia if the Chifley government, and the ALP generally, was allowed to continue in power. They believed that regimentation and control would, as a matter of course, replace the liberty and freedom enjoyed by Australians if such a scenario came to pass (AWMAS [1948c], [1948d]).

Second, the AWMAS leadership in New South Wales and much of the membership based in Sydney fervently believed that the ALP, federally and in NSW, was communist controlled or acting as a front for the Communist Party of Australia. As well as ALP governments using parliament to introduce socialist measures, the unions were fermenting unrest to usher in a communist takeover. What made this nightmare so real for many in the AWMAS was the high level of industrial disputation that characterised the years from 1944 to 1949 in particular, and the apparent inability of government to stem the flow. Despite the ludicrousness of this belief, it was continually advanced in speeches and was a common theme in most AWMAS literature (See AWMAS [1948b, c, & d]; Cootamundra Daily Herald 9 December 1947, 6; The Times 13 May 1948, 3).

Antipathy towards the ALP among AWMAS rural members in NSW was far less strident as they made more of a distinction between the state and federal parties. Although these women considered that the Chifley government had gone off the rails and was no longer the ‘old fashioned’ ALP (whatever that was), the state branch was regarded as still doing some good work. This dichotomy is explained partly by the popularity of many local members. For example, in the state seats of Wagga Wagga and Burringjuck, held respectively by Edgar ‘Eddie’ Graham and William ‘Billy’ Sheahan for the ALP, the local members were highly respected by their local communities, good pork barrellers, stridently anti-communist and continually re-elected throughout the years of the anti-communist frenzy (DA 1941–1957; Gundagai Independent 1947–1952).

Throughout the thirteen years of its existence, the AWMAS steadfastly opposed
the ALP and campaigned in support of the non-Labor parties. Though opposition to bank nationalisation was the initial driving force, in NSW the AWMAS campaigned in every state and federal election between 1948 and 1959, state by-elections in 1948, 1949 and 1950, and the referendums on prices (1948) and communism (1951). Public rallies were held, house-to-house canvassing and house meetings were carried out in marginal seats and ALP strongholds, radio and newspaper advertisements were placed, countless speeches were made, and propaganda leaflets and pamphlets were written, published and distributed during each campaign. As well, campaigns opposed to the burden of taxation and industrial disputation especially in the mining industry were undertaken during the four years to the end of 1951. Many of these campaigns, especially the by-elections, produced exciting, tangible results that demonstrated that the AWMAS, in NSW at least, was an active and aggressive organisation.

An example of AWMAS activity and its successful result is evident in the Kogarah by-election in NSW. William Curry won the seat of Kogarah for the ALP in 1941 and held it at the 1947 election with a majority of 3,732, nearly 7.5 per cent of the total vote. He died on 30 April 1948 and the by-election, a contest between H. Oxford (ALP) and Douglas Cross (LPA), was set for 17 August. AWMAS members moved into Ramsgate, a sub-division of Kogarah and an ALP stronghold, shortly after the 1948 Prices Referendum. With the aim of reducing Labor’s majority in Ramsgate from 2,008 to 1,000, they secured as a committee room a builder’s hut on a vacant allotment, erected a large sign advertising their presence, hoisted the Union Jack and set to work. In early June, Preston Stanley Vaughan had discussions with W.H. Spooner, president of the LPA, NSW Division, about helping the Liberal campaign, and although it was referred to the Kogarah Campaign Committee the offer does not seem to have been taken up. The women, many from North Shore branches, were unperturbed and systematically canvassed each house in Ramsgate, an area where 10,000 electors were enrolled. They also held house and street meetings, and distributed copies of a leaflet and a six page open letter to the women of Kogarah signed by Preston Stanley Vaughan. This propaganda, ‘drawn up in [the AWMAS] office with a very small staff of four officers’, cast the ALP and its candidate, Oxford, as dangerous, disease-ridden socialists, with the open letter declaring:

That thing, which is creeping through the veins of Australia injecting paralysis, gangrene and Death whenever it touches, is Communism and Socialism ... Both move inexorably towards the one goal—a servile State in which you and I become slaves, just dumb, driven cattle—bound, gagged and manacled to a depersonalised mechanism called the Socialist State ... Is this what you want for your children? (Emphasis in original.)

The bank nationalisation proposals, the prices referendum, high levels of taxation and the wave of industrial disputes, especially in the mining sector, were advanced as moves towards this ‘servile state’. Moreover, the disputes had led to severe power rationing which was causing hardship for women. The campaign clearly had some impact on the result; the ALP majority in Ramsgate was reduced by 1,520, and the seat was won by the LPA by 822 votes. However, although the
AWMAS contributed greatly to this turnaround, one should not ignore the contributions made by the bank employees and LPA workers who also campaigned against the ALP, as well as the effects on electors of power rationing, the coal dispute and the fact that the election was held on the coldest day in 76 years. Nevertheless, the AWMAS regarded the Kogarah result as another major victory for the organised power of women.¹

From around 1952, the story was somewhat different. The interstate branches campaigned up to the 1949 federal election, but seem to have done very little thereafter. In fact, many of these branches, and many in rural NSW, had disbanded by 1952. The Sydney branches maintained the rage somewhat longer, but the AWMAS was a shadow of its former self by the late 1950s. From this time onwards, members continued their political activities in the Feminist Club of NSW (FCNSW) or the Women’s Independent Party; the FCNSW was led by AWMAS members from 1953 to at least the mid 1960s, while the Women’s Independent Party was formed by AWMAS members in April 1959.

MILLICENT PRESTON STANLEY VAUGHAN

Much has been written on Millicent Preston Stanley Vaughan, which reflects her many achievements and the multitude of roles she pursued in a host of feminist and political organisations (Smith 1977; Radi 1988, 58–66; Foley 1985, 332–6). Central here is her political involvement in the mainstream non-Labor parties and on the far right. With regard to the former activities, she was involved in mainstream non-Labor politics from 1906 until the second world war and, between 1925–1927, as Millicent Preston Stanley, she was one of the members for the Eastern Suburbs seat in the NSW Legislative Assembly, the first woman member of this house and the third to be elected to any parliament in Australia. As well, she was a strident anti-communist and very active in right-wing organisations. During the 1917 General Strike in NSW she ‘helped run a Loyal Service Bureau for women volunteers to release men for the strike-bound industries’ (Radi 1988, 285). Eight years later, while she was campaigning for the Eastern Suburbs seat she attacked ‘Bolshevisim and the ‘red virus’ ‘causing industrial unrest’ (Sawer & Simms 1984, 60). In fact, Meredith Foley singles out Millicent as one of the key figures in the women’s non-Labor political league’s propaganda war against communism during the 1920s. At this time, she was also president of the FCNSW and in November 1930 she succeeded in having the Club become the women’s section of the Sane Democracy League, an extreme right-wing organisation, of which she became the salaried organiser (Foley 1985, 332–3).

From this point until 1942, Millicent was involved in a range of other activities, and in 1934 she married Crawford Vaughan, the former ALP premier of South
Australia who had been expelled from the party for supporting conscription in 1916. She withdrew from all activities in 1942 to care for her ailing husband, who died in 1947 after a long illness.

The impetus for her return to public life in 1947 was the Chifley government’s determination to nationalise the private banks, a move she believed to be ‘the key to totalitarian organisation of society’ (SMH September 1947, 2). As with all her earlier activities, she was the major driving force behind the formation and growth of the AWMAS. She essentially co-ordinated and organised the September rally in Sydney and, along with Phyllis Parkinson, spent nearly three weeks contacting women around Australia to make sure the Canberra rally in October was a success. From late October 1947 the AWMAS snowballed. In the space of seven weeks, the two women flew 5,000 miles to attend meetings and set up branches, and further tours were completed during 1948-49. Branches were established in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and throughout NSW. At hundreds of meetings, the dangers of bank nationalisation, socialism, communism and the ALP were always emphasised. At a meeting of 300 supporters in Wagga Wagga on 2 December 1947, for example, Millicent was quoted as saying:

    Australia was facing a Government composed of relentless views, who were determined to force socialisation on the country ... The Communist Party was the strongest political party in Australia...strongest in men, money and power...[it] has reduced the Australian working man to a marionette who moves when the strings are pulled. The Communists are not preparing for a wild revolution—they are preparing to obtain constitutional power while the people are asleep. (DA 3 Dec. 1947, 1)

Another theme advanced at all these meetings was that women could be a force to be reckoned with in the political arena if they wanted to be. At a meeting at Gundagai on 5 November 1947, Millicent is reported to have said:

    that women generally drew their skirts away from politics, and in an appeal for women to be more interested in national affairs she explained that their lives from the cradle to the grave were regulated by politics. It was not intelligent to say that politics was not the business or interest of women ... Now is the time to fight. The Government must yield to the demands of the people. The secret of liberty is courage and we have to fight now, for our own survival and for those who come after us ... We have served notice on the Government that the women of Australia are in this fight. (Gundagai Independent 6 Nov. 1947, 4)

Millicent was also the AWMAS’s link with other organisations from which the AWMAS derived support. The two major organisations were the private banks in Sydney, particularly the Bank of New South Wales and the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney, and the People’s Union of NSW. The banks ‘subscribed’ nearly 16,000 pounds to the AWMAS between 1947 and 1958. Without these funds the AWMAS would not have been so effective, especially in the period to 1952 (Eather, forthcoming a). Links with the right-wing People’s Union were forged from late 1947. From this time, Millicent worked with Tony McGillick, the
PUNSW’s most prominent public speaker and J.H. Catts, president, Kings Cross District Association of the PUNSW during 1948–49 and owner/editor of The Times (Kings Cross). This co-operation resulted in numerous speaking tours and the publication in The Times of AWMAS propaganda during the four years to late 1951.2

Links with the LPA – NSW Division were never so cordial. The male leadership regarded the AWMAS to be of no lasting consequence which dismayed Preston Stanley Vaughan, as well as many AWMAS members and leaders of the anti-ALP campaigns in the private banks and the Institute of Public Affairs (NSW). Women activists in the LPA had another opinion: the AWMAS was a threat because many Liberal women had left the LPA to support and work for the AWMAS. These ex-Liberal women encouraged Millicent to again seek nomination on the LPA’s 1949 senate team. As with her response to a similar request in 1940 she was reluctant to stand, but nominated after 5,000 signatures were obtained on a petition. She did so along with a field of 37 others that included three other women. Her application listed her many achievements in politics, and her work for the conservative parties and women’s organisations since the 1920s. Nevertheless, the ten men and one woman who made up the Senate Selection Committee saw fit to by-pass her in each of the three ballots; she did not receive a single vote, or as Mrs Rae, one of her supporters put it, ‘she did not even get a memorable mention’.3

From 1952, funding for and interest in the AWMAS started to decline. Nevertheless, Millicent, led the AWMAS in campaigns against compulsory unionism and the welfare state, and was instrumental in the AWMAS’s attempted takeover of the FCNSW during 1952–54. During these two years, she tried, unsuccessfully, to steer the FCNSW into supporting the AWMAS, as she had done in the early 1930s with the Sane Democracy League (Smith 1977, 71; FCNSW minutes 1952–4). Unperturbed by this failure, she organised and led the AWMAS’s campaign during the 1954 federal election. This proved to be her last campaign; thirteen months later, on 23 June 1955, she died of cerebro-vascular disease.

THELMA BATE

Thelma was born in Woollahra, Sydney, on 13 August 1904, the first child of Carl Gustaf and Edith Sundstrom. Carl, a wealthy manufacturer, established the Federal Match Company. He also insisted that his daughters had a thorough education and Thelma attended Fort Street Girls High School and the University of Sydney, where she graduated in 1928 with a Bachelor of Arts specialising in child psychology. She then taught for two years and was also honorary secretary of one of Sydney’s Free Kindergartens, before embarking on an extended overseas
tour with her family. Following her return to Australia, she met and married Richard Harvey, a member of a landowning family near Trangie, in the central west of NSW. By 1934, they were working a sprawling 200,000 acre property 'that was almost right in the centre of a triangle pointed by Cobar, Wilcannia and Ivanhoe' (de Berg 1975; Mayer & Rydon 1954, 58; Gibbney & Smith n.d., 289).

It was while working this property that Thelma became interested in politics. The hardship confronting country people was an initial factor in her growing interest. The Harveys were essentially isolated on their property. They lacked a telephone and had no mail service, the nearest phone being 30 miles away at the property where their mail was delivered. Roads were non-existent; the return journey to Cobar, approximately 98 miles, took two days and it took two weeks to drive sheep to the nearest railhead. However, the gazetting by the NSW coalition government of the Western Lands (Amendment) Act in 1934 provided the major catalyst for Thelma’s political interest. Under the Act, the Harveys had to surrender one-quarter of their property for soldier settlement. They decided to fight against the provisions of the Act and in so doing Thelma became 'conversant' with the workings of it. At a public meeting at Cobar attended by Ernest Buttenshaw, the Minister for Lands, she was the only women present and the only person to put a coherent argument. Throughout this time she was also active in the local branch of the Country Women's Association (de Berg 1975).

Following her husband's death in 1946, Thelma became more involved in political activities. After selling their property, she was approached by members of the Australian Country Party to contest the state seat of Dubbo in the 1947 general election. She agreed and was the first women to be selected by the Party to contest a parliamentary seat. Her campaign was based around a host of local and national issues that included problems in the wool and wheat industries, and those associated with implementation of the Land Act. But she repeatedly emphasised that women needed to become more interested in politics. Despite strong support from the party machine, she failed to win the seat, polling 47 per cent of the two party preferred vote (SMH 16 April 1947 p. 6 and 21 Feb. 1947 p. 8).

Six months after this defeat, she joined the AWMAS. She was immediately elected onto the executive and by mid-1949 she had succeeded Phyllis Parkinson as Honorary Secretary-General, a position she held until early 1950. As with Millicent Preston Stanley Vaughan, she travelled extensively throughout the state during 1948–49 reporting on developments and establishing branches. During the last week of April 1948, for example, she visited and/or addressed eight branches in a large area of southern NSW and one in Sydney. At all these meetings, the message was the same: the ALP was socialist, the trade unions were communist controlled and dangerous, the Chifley government was hell bent on establishing a totalitarian state in Australia, and women had the power to stop this if they organised and became more involved in politics. These arguments were put succinctly in an article she wrote for Hard Comment in early 1949:
REMEmBER when the Socialist Government promised us a ‘Golden Age?’ It’s some time ago ... The achievements of the socialist government, when lined up for analysis, are certainly not suffused with any golden glow ... Actually the only colour ... is black—black superimposed on red ... Every phase of our lives has been rendered drab by the persistence of black—black markets, black bans and black-outs. And all of this blackness is silhouetted against the red of a Communist backdrop ... The women won’t be taken in by any more golden promises Mr Chifley, so I repeat—beware! (Emphasis in original.) (April 1949, 11)

Thelma’s involvement with the Australian Country Party continued in tandem with her work for the AWMAS. During 1949 she addressed the Wagga Wagga Country Party Women’s Campaign Committee on the ‘red objectives’ of the miners’ strike, which were ‘to produce conditions favourable for bringing about the revolution they have been working for so long’ (DA 30 June 1949, 2). As well, in parallel with Millicent Preston Stanley Vaughan’s nomination for a place on the LPA’s senate team in 1949, she unsuccessfully sought Country Party endorsement (The Sunday Herald 1 April 1951, 14). At this time, she announced her engagement to Kenneth Kirkby, a member of the Country Party’s Central Council, vice-president of the New England New State Movement and a farmer from Bellata in the central west of the state. They were married in December 1949, and Thelma Kirkby resigned from the AWMAS and took up residence in Bellata early in the new year (SMH 8 September 1949, 7; DA 18 April 1951, 5).

Her second marriage did not inhibit her desire to take a more active role in politics. During the early 1950s, Thelma pursued her dream of entering federal parliament as a representative of the Country Party, and stood as a candidate at elections and by-elections in 1951 and 1953 (twice). She was unsuccessful on each occasion, but with the assistance of individual AWMAS members and supporters, including Nancy Bird Walton, Florence Taylor and Muriel Doherty, and numerous AWMAS country branches, she polled extremely well (Mayer & Rydon 1954; Border Morning Mail 26 April 1951). Her links with the AWMAS were also highlighted by the Country Party; advertisements in many rural newspapers emphasised her anti-communist stance and the fact that she was Thelma Harvey who had spread the anti-communist message in the period to 1949 (see, for example, Adelong and Tumut Express April 1951). More importantly though, her interest in and support for the AWMAS never wavered during the 1950s. In August 1958, when the AWMAS was struggling to remain alive and the Australian Bankers’ Association replaced the Sydney banks as the movement’s financial backer, contributing 9,000 pounds between 1958 and 1960, Thelma was mentioned as the ideal person to resurrect the AWMAS (Prowse 1958). Instead of taking up this highly paid position (20 pounds a week), she married her third husband, Henry Jefferson Bate, the Liberal MHR for Macarthur, and moved away from Sydney. In addition to these activities, Thelma was heavily involved in the Country Women’s Association (a member from the 1930s, president of the local Bellata branch throughout the early 1950s, honorary state secretary from 1957 to 1959 and state president from 1959 to 1962); the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (1952–1960s); and a member of the LPA for a period in the 1960s (Country Women’s Association 1972; SMH 10 July 1965, 6;
Biographical files). In her later years, she was a member of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, a member of the University of Sydney’s Consultative Committee for the Education of Aboriginals, and state ‘chairman’ of the United Nations Status of Women Executive. Her work in the community was recognised with the awarding of a CBE in 1969. She died on 26 July 1984.4

ERRELLA ‘SMOKE’ HEARD

Errella was born at Junee on 7 March 1904, the only child of Evelyne and Edward Garland. Edward was a bank employee and later, a bank manager. Errella’s childhood was not a happy one; Edward was an alcoholic which impacted on her home life, her schooling was minimal and she ran away to Western Australia in 1918. She caused a minor controversy in Wagga Wagga in the 1920s, by walking down the town’s main street in her swimmers. After the death of her father, Errella, her mother and stepfather, Allan Howard Smith, a wealthy local landowner, would regularly spend weekends entertaining in one of Wagga Wagga’s more prestigious hotels. During 1942 she went to Sydney, against the wishes of her mother, and married Bernard Heard, a farmer and later a used car salesman. While in Sydney, she drove taxis and worked in a number of factories. While in the factories, she claimed some years later, she ‘realised how communism was infiltrating industry and politics in Australia’.5

After the war she returned to Wagga Wagga and, in October 1947, joined the AWMAS, the first time she had been involved in a political movement. Along with Marie Cormack, she was instrumental in forming the Wagga Wagga branch on 5 November 1947, and from February 1948 she had the added responsibility of regional organisation, as branches in the electorates of Hume, Riverina and Eden-Monaro took over more of the responsibility of day-to-day operations. An articulate public speaker, Errella toured the region establishing new branches and addressing countless meetings. She was also in demand at the state level; she was a regular speaker at the AWMAS’s Sydney rallies from 1949 to 1951. From 1952 onwards she retained an interest in AWMAS affairs, and worked tirelessly for the movement during the 1958 federal and 1959 state elections. In 1959, she addressed the FCNSW on ‘women’s place in local politics’.6

Alongside her work in the AWMAS, she joined and became a leading figure in the local branches of the LPA. Between 1949 and 1954, she regularly held official positions within the LPA’s Women’s branch, being president for a short time during 1951–52. Determined that the ALP should be defeated at every opportunity, she worked tirelessly in election campaigns; during the 1949 election, for example, she toured parts of the Farrer electorate with the federal president of the LPA, R.G. Casey, who described her as ‘a vigorous women’. It seems that she retained her membership in the LPA until she died.7
In 1959 she stood as a candidate in the Wagga Wagga City Council elections. Sponsored by the Business and Professional Women's Club, she became the second woman elected to the Council, and the first in thirteen years. She remained a councillor until 1974, with a short break in service from 1968–71 following the death of her husband, and was a member of the committees responsible for health, the library, the city hall building, secondary industry development, the cemetery and parks. Having to support herself from the late 1960s, she took up paid employment at the Daily Advertiser and the local tourist bureau. She left Wagga Wagga in 1977 to undergo medical treatment and eventually settled permanently in Sydney. She died on 25 December 1991 (Mary Pyke interview 17 November 1994; Morris & Winterbottom, forthcoming).

CONCLUSION

The case studies of Preston Stanley Vaughan, Bate and Heard, and the activities of other AWMAS members, illustrate that political activity among women on the political right has a history dating back to at least 1917. From 1947 to 1960, the AWMAS was the major manifestation of this activity. During the four years to 1951, the AWMAS was regarded by many women, and some men, as a vigorous and successful organisation. This was one reason why large numbers of women joined and campaigned in support of the ideals advanced by the AWMAS, especially in NSW. Another reason for its initial success was that the AWMAS encouraged women to become more involved in politics. To this end, women like Thelma Bate and Errella Heard took on a variety of political roles that influenced the remainder of their lives. Although the AWMAS folded in 1960, members continued the political fight in a number of other women's organisations, one of which they had formed in 1959. This illustrates the continuity of activity that has characterised right-wing women's politics; organisations come and go but the political activity is carried on. Clearly, the SMH in its 1961 Australia Unlimited supplement had ignored this rich tapestry of political action. Since that year, this neglect has been largely rectified for women active in left-wing and mainstream parties, but the history of those women who followed the 'right road' throughout the twentieth century is yet to be written.

NOTES

1 Preston Stanley Vaughan, 'An open letter to the women of Kogarah', n.d. and to The Manager, Alpha Laboratories, Woollahra 30 Aug. 1948, LPA, NSW, ML MSS 2385/ Y4646 (9); LPA, NSW, minutes of the State executive, 7 June 1948, ML MSS 2385/ Y4625 (1); AWMAS, 'Every member of the Labour (sic) Party Federal or State is Pledged


3 Preston Stanley Vaughan’s nomination forms dated 29 April 1949, LPA, NSWD, ML MSS 2385/Y4640 (3); ‘Count sheet for the selection of candidate to represent the Party in the Senate and ballot papers’ for each of the three counts, ML MSS 2385/Y4649 (9–11); Mrs D.M. Rae to Dame Enid Lyons 12 December 1949, Lyons Papers, NLA MS 4852, 1948 Correspondence—Appointment to Cabinet.


7 DA 9 April 1949, 2; R.G. Casey Diaries 1 December 1949, Casey Papers NLA MS 6150; ‘Record of country branch office bearers elected for the years 1951–54’, LPA, NSWD, ML MSS 2385/YV1173.

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