

# Social Movements and the Limits of Strategy

## How Australian Feminists Formed Positions on Work and Care

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy of The Australian National University

September 2008

# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own independent research and that all authorities and sources used are duly acknowledged.

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26 September 2008

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the excellent guidance and supervision I have received from Marian Sawyer, my principal supervisor. I am also grateful to Ann Curthoys, my other supervisor, for her insightful attention to the project. I thank the women's movement participants I interviewed, all of whom also offered useful suggestions about other sources and ideas. I was inspired to undertake this research by my involvement in community organisations and social movement groups. I record my appreciation and thanks to all those with whom I have worked.

Marilyn Lake was a member of my supervisory panel for a time and I appreciate the support and advice she gave me. Julie Stephens provided thoughtful comments and encouragement and Lorraine Hayden shared some useful reflections. I received helpful feedback on seminar presentations at the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Canberra. I appreciate the assistance of librarians and archivists at all the libraries I used, especially Grant Stone at Murdoch University Library and Shelly Grant at the National Library of Australia (NLA). I thank 2xx Canberra Community Radio for making available recordings of on-air interviews, and all involved in the NLA's Oral History project for creating such a useful resource. Generous practical help was provided by Helen Felton, Alastair Greig and Carol Lilley in the ANU Faculty of Arts.

Throughout the PhD, my family and friends have shown me care and given me much-needed opportunities for fun. I am very grateful to Ivan Gavazov, Jane Gudde, Scott Brenton and Masha Somi for proofreading chapters of the thesis. Encouragement and understanding about the PhD process were provided by a number of friends and family members who are themselves "seasoned campaigners": Rose Andrew; Daniel Ebert; Rob Andrew; Sharon Thomas; Masha Somi; Sandra Lilburn; and Damian O'Leary. I also benefited greatly from the friendship and ideas of fellow PhD candidates at the ANU, especially Scott Brenton, Ida Nursoo and my excellent office-mate Norm Kelly.

Most of all, I thank Ivan Gavazov, my partner, who has supported me in more ways than I knew existed.

This thesis incorporates material that has been published in the following sole-authored papers:

‘Strategies and Constraints in Movements for Women’s Economic Independence: The 1920s Campaign for Motherhood Endowment in Australia’, paper to the Australasian Political Studies Association conference, Newcastle, 25–27 September 2006.

‘Campaigning on Work, Care and Income: Learning from Histories of Australian Women’s Activism’, paper to the Our Work Our Lives National Conference on Women and Industrial Relations, Adelaide, 20–21 Sept. 2007.

‘Questioning Women’s Movement “Strategies”: Australian Activism on Work and Care’, *Social Politics*, vol. 15 no. 3, 2008, pp. 369–395.

“‘This Degrading State of Affairs’”: The Campaign for Women’s Economic Independence in 1920s Australia,’ *Agora*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2008, pp. 9–13.

# Abstract

Feminism is often blamed for having made the “wrong decisions” on issues such as work and care. This thesis argues that such judgements are based on a misperception of how social movements exercise collective agency. While feminist historiography and social movement studies offer some insights, neither directly address the question of to what extent the directions taken by social movements can be shaped by high level strategic decision-making. In answering this question, the research was informed by philosophical pragmatism and by feminist theories of responsibility and reason. The prevailing “movement CEO” image of decision-making was rejected in favour of an approach directed to interpreting the past actions of the women’s movement without neglecting its decentralised and collective nature.

I began by investigating the degree of strategy in Australian women’s movement activism on work and care issues in two periods: the interwar years (1919–1938) and in the 1970s and 1980s. These periods were chosen because they are often taken to illustrate failures in feminist decision-making. The second-wave movement is said to have failed women by over-emphasising access to paid work at the expense of women’s caring roles while the feminists of the early twentieth century are said to have locked women into mothering roles by relying on maternalist arguments. The historical research drew on primary sources including the records created by organisations and individuals involved in the movement, together with oral history interviews. The historical studies found little evidence of capacity for, or orientation towards, high level strategic decision-making in terms of the political and discursive risks identified in later criticisms of feminism. The studies supplement existing historical accounts by illuminating the nature of organisational processes within the movement and the reasoning used by participants.

I then developed a positive alternative to existing rational actor models of decision-making, which avoids the assumption that movements as such engage in strategic decision-making but still allows for the possibility of purposive collective action. This “organisation-direction” model proposes that collective intentions may be formed in the more densely-organised nodes of a movement field and may pull the

movement in certain directions without imposing high-level strategic decisions. Non-instrumental elements such as emotion and movement knowledge are irreducible parts of reasoned action, which only sometimes involves assessing risks and opportunities. Movement goals and means are generated in the course of practical engagement rather than through a linear process of decision-making. The thesis contributes to the social movement literature that emphasises the constitutive role of non-instrumental elements of action by showing how these are linked to goal-oriented organisation. The thesis responds to the growing emphasis on strategic choices in social movements by exploring the nature and limits of strategy instead of assuming its usefulness as an interpretive device.

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# Abbreviations

AFWV	Australian Federation of Women Voters
AGPS	Australian Government Printing Service
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANAC	Australian National Advisory Council for International Women's Year
ANU	Australian National University
AWAP	Australian Women's Archives Project
AWNL	Australian Women's National League
BL SLWA	Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia
CAEP	Council of Action for Equal Pay
CAR	Commonwealth Arbitration Report
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DPMC	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
IAW	International Alliance of Women
ICW	International Council of Women

IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
IWY	International Women's Year
ML SLNSW	Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
MU	Mothers' Union
NCW	National Council(s) of Women
NFAW	National Foundation for Australian Women
NGO	Non-government organisation
NLA	National Library of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
Qld	Queensland
RCBW	Royal Commission on the Basic Wage
RCCE	Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances
SA	South Australia
SMO	social movement organisation
SLV	State Library of Victoria
UA	United Associations of Women
Vic.	Victoria

WA	Western Australia
WCTU	Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australasia
WEL	Women's Electoral Lobby
WSG	Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association