

PROGRAM FOR CHANGE

Program for Change, ed. Marian Sawyer (Allen and Unwin, 1986).
Reviewed by LOUISE CONNOR.

At a recent gathering of my extended family, two issues seemed to find particular disfavour among my typical "Aussie" relatives: affirmative action and land rights. On both issues, people complained that it wasn't fair that some people were favoured over others on the grounds of their (Aboriginal) race or (female) sex. ON both issues, it seems, the right's misinformation campaign and the media's support for such bigotry are forming the population's opinions.

Program for Change, a series of eleven essays on affirmative action in Australia, edited by Marian Sawyer, has arrived with perfect timing to challenge the media myths and the distortions from the right. It details the myriad of programs, legislative reforms and changes taking place under the rather broad banner of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity. And, though it will come as a surprise to equality's critics, not one of those changes involves giving up jobs to "disadvantaged" people if they are not the most suitable person for the job. Competent Anglo-Saxon males can breathe easy; incompetent ones can always continue to blame "discrimination" or "feminists" for missing out on the promotion.

"Affirmative action is a systematic approach to the identification and elimination of the institutional barriers that women and minority-group members encounter in employment. It is not an end in itself; it is rather the action taken to achieve equal employment opportunity", is the definition given in one of the essays. Though there are variations in definitions from author to author, they all concur on the basics: affirmative action is about removing the barriers so that all people may have

an equal chance in the competition for jobs. So, already, it doesn't sound quite so threatening.

For those of us who think of affirmative action as a 1980s issue, Marian Sawyer's essay outlines the real origins in a strife-torn America in the 1960s and earlier. Governments acted then to secure some jobs for black people in the face of misery, militancy and, in some cases, near-revolution. Other essays provide details of early affirmative action measures in Australia — before the concept was named — which are useful in siting recent legislation within a longer time frame, as a response to movement and group pressures for more equitable treatment.

Gail Radford's essay, "Equal employment opportunity programs in the Australian Public Service", for example, places the first initiative towards providing equal employment for women as early as 1949, when women were admitted for the first time to the Third Division in the Federal Public Service. The "marriage bar" was repealed in 1966, allowing married women to continue in work after marriage, and providing a limited form of maternity leave.

Radford's essay is also valuable in reminding us that affirmative action is not just a "women's issue", but is important to many groups of workers who have borne the brunt of discrimination. People with disabilities were, in fact, the first group to receive particular attention from the Public Service Board when, in 1971, it assigned Special Placement Officers to help test and place disabled applicants and to act as points of contact for them. The essay shows the incredible number of ways in which discrimination operates — from language used in selection tests to the absence of hard data on who are employed where or,

more particularly, who are not getting jobs.

A common theme in Radford's and other essays is that voluntary schemes just don't deliver results. Both the federal and South Australian public services have had programs for over ten years (there was affirmative action before Peter Wilenski!) but, in both cases, their effects were way short of desirable. Radford puts the problem clearly: "Overall, it could be seen that the results of the board's strategy of encouraging a voluntary approach to EEO had been disappointing. Although action by the board had clearly resulted in an increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, the issue of EEO for women and disadvantaged groups in the service, the number of staff allocated to EEO duties was clearly inadequate" Reliance on enlightened managers or assertive disadvantaged people can't redress discrimination, particularly when much of it stems from the very structures themselves.

Program for Change includes essays on affirmative action or equal employment opportunity legislation in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, which shows that no two approaches are the same, and tackles some of the thorny problems involved in legislative attempts at social change.

Mary Draper's essay on affirmative action in Victoria, reminding us that it was indeed the Liberal government which first introduced legislation, needs to say little more than that to dispel the paranoia that this is all a socialist/feminist plot. In fact, a popular argument is that affirmative action is good business sense and a wise use of "resources".

The far-reaching potential for affirmative action can't be doubted. Whether or not it is realised is another matter of which most essayists in this book are obviously aware. There is a reluctance on the part of some writers, however, to admit that such legislation and programs could assist in real changes to work patterns and revalue certain skills required for, for example, secretarial work. Perhaps this is a reaction to the hysteria of the right so that some practitioners are feeling under pressure to limit affirmative action to sound management techniques.

Perhaps it is my bias, but I prefer the highly centralised model for equal opportunity programs and affirmative action adopted by the Victorian Labor government, which includes a review of all occupational classifications in the public service and, even better, a keyboard review which will include the impact of new technology, the benefits of job redesigning to take account of mixed functions of many keyboard operators, and the impact of occupational health and safety issues on workers. It warmed the cockles of my heart to learn that bonus payments of senior executives in the Victorian public service are now linked to their performance on equal employment opportunity issues.

Other essays in *Program for Change* deal specifically with affirmative action in tertiary institutions, the Labor Party and a thought-provoking piece titled "Secretaries and power" in which Ros Byrne argues that the systematic downgrading of secretarial work has led to an "office leper" syndrome where management, and secretaries themselves, cannot accept

any extension of secretaries' roles to include them in decision making.

Program for Change is a useful account of where Australia is at on this issue but, like most books, it has its shortcomings. The lack of a specifically trade union response is a serious omission. In only a few essays do unions even rate a mention. Along with this is a silence on the role of the women's and trade union movements of providing ideas upon which bureaucracies can act. Bureaucracies and legislators operate in response to pressure from outside, more than to internal demands, and affirmative action, campaigns for women to enter non-traditional occupations, and equal pay are all ideas and issues within the women's movement. Feminist and labour movement theorists and activists have contributed substantially to the debates on these concerns. Likewise, other movements such as Aboriginal and self-help movements, advocates for rights for people with disabilities and migrant organisations have also

contributed ideas and support for affirmative action.

Unfortunately, much of the statistical data in this book is already outdated, and there have been changes to some legislation. This is, of course, unavoidable when writing on current issues. But there appears to be quite a considerable time lag between the writing of some essays in the book and publication (1985).

Affirmative action is a very elastic concept, but *Program for Change* shows it in a positive enough light to make it worth while fighting for effective, broad application of the ideas and legislation. As has been said in many places before, reforms like affirmative action, when combined with a desire to challenge radically the inequalities of working life in Australia, and when not seen in isolation, are worthy of the women's and labour movements' support.

Cartoons by Christine Roche, from the book *I'm Not A Feminist, But ...* (Virago Press Ltd, 1985)

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The program has been developed by Anne Gorman, Managing Director of SOCIAL IMPACTS

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