



## PROFILE

### Wendy Fatin

She was an activist in the women's and peace movements of the 1970s, but today Wendy Fatin, as the Minister for Local Government and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women is an ambitious, hardworking and pragmatic member of the Hawke government.

Like many others in the women's movement, the 49-year-old Fatin has moved from street marches in the 1970s to participating in the system in the 1990s.

Of course this has meant compromises. Fatin, like most of her colleagues in the Left realised early in the Hawke government's first term that if they were to have any influence at all on the essentially conservative Labor government's direction, they would have to be pragmatic.

"You either stand on the outside and take a purist view or you get into it," says Fatin.

Because the Left has been prepared to be realistic, Fatin says it has had some influence on the government and that its most important role is to generate ideas to ginger the government as well as acting as a bridge between the government and groups outside Canberra.

One of the greatest dangers of the job is the inevitable isolation of Canberra. A founding member of the

Women's Electoral Lobby, Fatin is acutely aware of now losing touch and takes great pains to maintain contact with feminists, greens and other groups outside parliament.

Doorknocking during the 1990 election campaign, she was shocked at the level of voter disdain and cynicism with federal politics and she vowed there and then to try to improve relations with the grass roots.

Despite demands on her time, she also stays in touch with reading. Some of her formative influences in politics were Germaine Greer and Gough Whitlam and now she says she gets a lot of stimulation from reading women writers such as Mar-



garet Atwood and Elizabeth Jolley, as well as the writings of Judge Mary Gaudron. And she wants very much to make headway on issues like domestic violence which affect large numbers of women who are outside the women's movement. Other priorities are child care, equal pay, and women's education, training and health.

Despite the pressure for conformism, Fatin has somehow managed to keep an idealistic aura around her and she is an unfashionable optimist. One of her top priorities is for the feminist movement to redefine its agenda for the 1990s, to avoid what she calls the "yuppie pessimism" about the women's movement in the 1980s.

Instead of being bogged down in doubts about whether women really want a larger slice of the cake, she thinks the prevailing economic orthodoxy of the level playing field should be subjected to sophisticated feminist analysis.

Fair enough, but she is still somewhat theoretical about just what the new women's agenda should be.

Fatin has long been seen as one of the more promising female ministerial contenders and back in 1987 was pressed by her Left colleagues to throw in her hat for a position. Declining then for personal reasons, in 1990 Fatin beat her factional colleague Jeanette McHugh to get a junior ministerial spot.

She thinks that women now have the edge over men in electoral popularity because they are seen by voters as being less aggressive and gladiatorial than men.

Although she decries the still small number of women in federal politics, she says the ALP's affirmative action policy of the 1980s did change things as women gradually began to be more involved in the party organisation which controls pre-selections of candidates.

She joined the ALP in 1972 just before Whitlam was swept to power, mainly because of his promise to end the Vietnam war, against which she had been fighting for some time.

Since then she has been active in the party organisation, including a stint on the West Australian branch executive. She also worked for John Wheeldon, Minister for Repatriation in the Whitlam government, before winning the seat of Canning in 1983 with a huge swing. In 1984 she won the new seat of Brand.

And her future? Much obviously depends on the prospects for the government's and her re-election. But one thing is for sure: she will always be a gradual but persistent reformer—either in or out of government.

*Louise Dodson.*