

Challenging the Agenda: the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association and the Open Sub-Committee On Women, 1974

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Ruth Fowler, an early convenor of the Open Sub-Committee on Women (OSCW), expressed the following view in the preface to a booklet written by Claire Kelly in 1986 entitled *Women in the VSTA*:

The formation of the OSCW represented a watershed period in the union. It provided a supportive forum within the male cultural ambience characteristic of all trade unions, where women could discuss the issues which affected them as unionists and teachers and decide on possible policy. Whilst women were lone voices their concerns could be and were largely ignored. The OSCW, an officially recognised body within the VSTA, meant that could not happen so easily. But as with all change which attempts to alter the status quo, its functioning was far from easy. Women learned very quickly what it meant to intrude upon the established corridors of power.

An analysis of the establishment of the Open Sub-Committee on Women raises questions about the role of a union, the culture of its leadership and the extent to which it represents all its members. Related to those issues is the question of the control of the union's agenda and the tactics those in power employed to maintain their control in the face of a generational, political and feminist challenge. It allows, also, some insights into the factional politics of the union.

Investigation of this issue forms part of my thesis which is a study of the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association (VSTA), a white collar union, from a feminist perspective. I am using gender as a key concept of analysis, and focussing upon issues which affected women members in an attempt to investigate how sexual difference was constructed to ensure that men maintained their dominance in the Victorian Teaching Service and in the VSTA. I am investigating how the construction of masculinity and femininity in relation to trade unionism, the culture of teaching and the sexual division of labour within it, have changed or been maintained over time to ensure that women's interests were marginalised or dismissed as irrelevant.

The matters I am addressing in some sort of chronological order are: the establishment of the VSTA, which involved the admission of women to the Victorian Secondary Masters' Professional Association in 1953; Permanency after Marriage 1956; Equal Pay 1967; the Common Roll 1970; Teachers' Rights 1972-75; establishment of the Open Sub-Committee on Women 1974; Affirmative Action 1986. By focussing on such issues within the union context, I can expose the gendered nature of the state teaching service which is replicated in the VSTA. I can also interrogate the language of universality, which supposedly encompasses the feminine, but in fact refers only to the masculine, thereby relegating the feminine to the margins as different and by inference inferior.

Joan Scott (1988) has argued that by using gender as a category of analysis, we can change the sort of history we write. 'The story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed.' Yet Penny Summerfield (*Labour History Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 1998) has argued that there must be a relationship between discourse and experience and refers to the tension between historical approaches which prioritise discourse, and those which emphasise experience. She accepts the approach of scholars who make a special study of subjectivity who seek to unite understandings of discourse with

understandings of individual consciousness. Such an approach is useful when attempting to make sense of oral interviews within the framework of different discourses.

A gendered analysis of unions positions them as masculine institutions arising out of a crisis in masculinity in Great Britain in the nineteenth century. Marilyn Lake (1986) has argued that they represented a dignified means for the working man to reach an accommodation with capitalism. Carmel Shute (1994) has described the union movement 'as a men's movement which has excluded women'. Barbara Pocock (1997) believes that male advantage has shaped union policies for a long period in Australia and that the culture of unionism has been hidden from public view, rarely mentioned as men's practices, belonging to a men's movement. In discourses of unionism, 'worker' means 'male worker', 'member' means 'male member' and 'shop steward' is saturated with masculinity. Male union officials trip over their egos in hanging on to positions at the cost of recruitment gains and membership satisfaction. There is the persistent story of conscious and unconscious trading off of women's interests in favour of men and sometimes their families. Women unionists, especially teachers and academic workers are often labelled as middle-class, even opportunistic fellow travellers whose politics is unreliable. The story is similar for both white and blue collar unions and the VSTA was not an exception.

The sexual division of labour in Australia, a result of successful union attempts to restrict paid work options for women, meant that women and men rarely worked together in the same occupation. Teaching was one in which both men and women worked, yet there was a division of labour within it, with women working in subordinate positions to men and paid salaries twenty per cent lower than men. This patriarchal model was put in place in 1883 with the Public Service Act. Clause 62 stated that 'every vacancy in the head teachership of a school at which the average attendance exceeds fifty pupils... shall be filled by the appointment of a male head teacher' (Theobald 1996). The removal of the married woman teacher in 1889 confirmed her status as a dependent of her spouse. The state retained the right to employ her in a temporary capacity when required, which meant a lower salary and no opportunity for promotion or transfer. The married woman teacher became a source of cheap labour for the state. Desley Deacon (1989) has pointed to the state's role in developing policy to entrench the ideology of the dependent wife. This policy remained in place until 1956. In an occupation where women were accepted, the state had to entice men by guaranteeing them preferential treatment in the Teaching Service. In the secondary division women were eligible to be principals of girls' secondary and high schools. They could not be principals of co-educational high schools until 1970. Male teachers therefore had access to a wider range of promotion positions than their female colleagues; they were the professionals for whom the system was designed to cater. Male privilege was built into the system. The discourse of the man as breadwinner was the justification for the continuation of this advantage and the fact that a woman's designated career was that of wife and mother.

The construction of masculinity and femininity within teaching determined that men were physically and

psychologically stronger, more rational and worldly with an understanding of politics and an aptitude for administration. Witnesses at the Rogers Templeton Commission of 1881 which was established to enquire into and report on the administration, organisation and general condition of public instruction, agreed that women lacked the physical and psychological stamina needed to teach older boys, but being more emotional and intuitive, they were especially suited to teaching the younger children (Theobald 1996.) It was important for men to teach the older boys to instill in them appropriate standards of masculine behaviour. The VSTA, reflecting the male dominated structure of the teaching service and the 'blokey' image of unions, had few women serving on the Central Committee from its establishment in 1953 until the mid 1980s, when women still did not comprise half the numbers on the Council. In 1954 there were four women on a committee of fifteen (VSTA Central Committee minutes). Two Vice-President positions were created, one of which was designated for a female member. This provision was eliminated after 1970. During the 1960s there were never any more than four women on an expanded committee of twenty-four. By 1973, women comprised forty-five per cent of VSTA membership (Secondary Teacher). This percentage was not reflected in the composition of the Central Committee at that time, with still only four women on it and none on the Executive (VSTA Central Committee minutes). The men in the VSTA leadership expected to control the agenda and had become increasingly militant during the 1960s in attempts to gain official recognition from the Teachers' Tribunal, which was regarded as primary influenced and government dominated. The VSTA had fought some fierce campaigns with the state government on such issues as tribunal reform, teachers' qualifications, inspection, and working conditions during the late 1960s and early 1970s with some success. (Bassett 1995). By 1974, many men had served on the Central Committee for more than ten years and in interviews with younger female members of the VSTA, they described some of them as catholic bachelor types, who wore grey cardigans, lived with their mothers and were ill at ease with women. Others described them as arrogant men who thought they were omniscient and had developed a taste for confrontation in their approach to industrial relations.

Yet there was another aspect to the male domination of the union's decision making body. While unions were regarded as bastions of masculinity, most women who described themselves as middle class and who wished to maintain their socially constructed femininity, did not consider union activism to be a priority, particularly when it had such an exclusionary tradition. Nonetheless, there were always the exceptions. The women members of the Central Committee during the 1960s had fought energetically for equal pay, and more positions for senior women, but not always with the wholehearted support of their female colleagues. Jean Mee and Margot Green were two such women. In an interview with Jean Mee in November 1997, she was critical of some senior women who expected their battles to be fought for them. Hilary Gill, a former member of the Central Committee in the late 1950s and subsequently a Principal and Nancy Russell, an active VSTA member who also became a principal, in an interview in August 1998, expressed the view that some women teachers regarded union activism as 'unfeminine' and were reluctant to enter a male domain. As Ryan and Prendergast (1982) expressed it: 'Women in white-collar jobs ... particularly cherished the idea of being ladylike. This assumption of gentility caused some workers to regard trade unions as at best an unfortunate necessity, the activities of which should not be allowed to intrude into the more important aspects of the profession or occupation.'

Nevertheless the status quo was challenged during the 1960s through the development of the civil rights movement

in the United States of America and the resurgence of feminism. I argue that the establishment of the OSCW indicated that young feminists on the Central Committee and in the branches, alerted to the structural and systemic disadvantage under which women teachers worked, were prepared to challenge the entrenched male leadership to broaden the union's agenda to include such issues as family leave, childcare, permanent part-time work, sexism in schools and the inclusive curriculum. In addition, they exposed the masculine culture of the union leadership. With women supporting each other combined with assistance from the men of the 'left' faction, these women succeeded, but not without resistance from the male leadership who viewed these assertive women with suspicion and as an affront to their masculinity; women were not expected to set the agenda.

This new generation of young female union members, informed by a left feminist perspective looked at the VSTA critically and recognised that women's interests were not being represented. Kay Hargreaves (1980) expressed the view that the women's movement made women active in the trade unions aware that the situation of women in the workforce was inseparable from that of women in the home and in the community in general with the result that they began to insist on rights and policies that link those areas of women's lives. These women recognised that their concerns were valid and if the union was to represent all its members, it had to act on issues such as childcare, permanent part-time work, family leave, and superannuation anomalies.

By 1973, articles appeared in the *Secondary Teacher*, the journal of the VSTA, asking where were the women in the VSTA? Women comprised fifty-three per cent of the teaching service, yet only forty-five per cent of the VSTA. Twenty-six per cent were branch representatives, while only eight per cent were members of the Central Committee (Zangalis 1973). Women members of the VSTA had not taken advantage of the open situation of election to the Central Committee, wrote Mary Bluer (1973). Cavel Zangalis, a teacher at Collingwood High School attempted to explain their lack of representation at the senior level of the union in structural, social and cultural terms. The discriminatory regulations and lack of concern for the rights of women by the Education Department combined with the pressures of family commitments, made many women see that there was little future for them in their work as teachers. Issues such as Tribunal reform, reclassification and promotion policies may not have been seen as relevant to their concerns. She felt that many men / husbands actively discouraged their women's involvement in matters which took them away from the home-based world.

Ruth Fowler, an active VSTA member and teacher since 1967, believed such an imbalance was unacceptable and stood for election to the Central Committee on the platform of representing women at the end of 1973 and was successful. She had completed her tertiary education at Monash University and in an interview with her in January 1998, she confirmed that she developed a feminist consciousness within a left ideology.

Mine was a vaguely left ideology ... I didn't belong to the Trotskyites or the Maoists or any of the groups ... I just saw an issue of women being represented and the range of things that we needed to work on and I'd gone in and got elected ... I didn't quite know what had struck me in a way ... I found the machinations of the VSTA very difficult to deal with and personally difficult ... I wasn't hardened in the political battlefield.

Ruth Fowler stated that the proposal to establish a women's sub-committee was met with derision by those who had been in power for a long period. They considered it to be 'lightweight'. The opposition was couched in terms of there being no need for a separate sub-committee as existing sub-committees such as Teachers' Rights could deal with the issues the women wanted

raised. The men on the Executive believed that the issues that the women wanted on the union's agenda were not the prime focus of union activity, 'not the real nuts and bolts of industrial stuff' and did not want a formal structure which was dedicated to pursuing issues of interest and concern to women members. Shelley Lavender, the first woman employed by the VSTA as a membership liaison officer in 1974, remembered in an interview with her in March 1999, that the Executive 'fought tooth and nail against it'. In an interview with Claire Kelly, a student member of the Central Committee in 1975, later a Convenor of the OSCW in 1977 and a VSTA Vice-President in 1981, in February 1998, she expressed the view that senior men believed that an open sub-committee had the potential to undermine union structures as it might not be representative of members' views. In an interview with Mary Bluett, a VSTA member from 1973 and subsequently a member of the Central Committee from 1975 and later VSTA President, in March 1997, she recalled the argument that a separate group would divide women and men further rather than make them more equal. The women argued, nonetheless, that those issues had not been discussed by existing committees, although they had been raised.

The proposal to form an open women's sub-committee challenged the way the VSTA operated. Sub-Committee membership was open only to Central Committee members; rank-and-file members did not qualify for membership. All members of the Central Committee participated in one of the VSTA's sub-committees. The establishment of open sub-committees was part of the 'left's' agenda to make the union more democratic according to Tess Lee Ack, a member of that grouping within the VSTA and student member of the Central Committee in 1974. From my investigations to date, 'left' members were those who supported greater democracy within the VSTA decision making bodies and a broader policy agenda to incorporate the concerns of all members. Some were members of Maoist or Trotsky groups. Supporters of the open sub-committee system believed that it would provide the opportunity for a wider participation by all members, particularly women, in the policy making process.

Mary Bluer (1974) reported in the Secondary Teacher that the resolution for the VSTA Central Committee to establish an open sub-committee 'to develop detailed policy in areas where women were disadvantaged', was passed at the 1974 Annual General Meeting, but not before arguments against its establishment were advanced. Noel McBurney, a member of the Executive and a former VSTA President, argued that there were enough sub-committees and that people were already overworked. The fact that it was passed at the AGM, obviously without the support of the Executive of the union, meant that the membership accepted the need for such a sub-committee within the union structure, but that the male leadership was not necessarily going to support it. They did, however, have to implement union policy.

The significance of the existence of such a sub-committee was that it sent a report of its meetings to the Central Committee. Any policy proposals had to be discussed by the Central Committee; they could no longer be brushed aside. It put issues which affected women members on the agenda, making the point that they were union issues, not just women's issues and the union was supposed to represent the interests of all its members. In her report Mary Bluer expressed the view that 'hopefully this will mean women members will actively participate in a policy area which has either been neglected or dealt with in a disjointed way by the variety of closed sub-committees of the Central Committee'.

It was evident that the position of Convenor of this new sub-committee was not eagerly sought. Tess Lee Ack became the inaugural convenor of the OSCW in October 1974, because,

as she explained in an interview in April 1999, nobody else wanted the job. She vacated the position at the end of the year to take up a teaching appointment in February 1975. Although the sub-committee was an open one, its convenor had to be a member of the Central Committee and Tess Lee Ack no longer qualified as a student member. Thirteen people attended its first meeting on 10 October 1974 and their major concerns were discussed. The underrepresentation of women on the Central Committee was raised, also the fact that few women spoke at union meetings. They intended to investigate reasons for this situation and seek to make changes so that women could participate in the life of the union. Action had been taken to study VSTA branches with respect to women's participation in them and a similar investigation into the role of women on the Central Committee and sub-committees was to occur. They set themselves the task to collate all VSTA policy relating to women and to assess the extent to which it was being implemented to ascertain the commitment of the VSTA to its women members. Sexism within the Victorian Education Department was identified and areas to be targeted were superannuation, childcare/creche facilities, parental leave, pay in lieu of long service leave and temporary teachers (Minutes, OSCW, 10 Oct 1974).

Denise Vegting was elected Convenor in February 1975, with Ruth Fowler nominating as well, but not before an attempt was made to eliminate the OSCW before it really began. At the February 1975 Central Committee meeting, Bernie Blood, a VSTA Vice President, supported a motion to have the OSCW merged with the Teachers' Rights sub-committee. The motion was lost (Minutes, Central Committee, February 1975). By the end of 1975, Ruth Fowler had become the OSCW Convenor. She was a member of the 'left' and was supported by the men of that group who assisted her in the negotiation of the Central Committee process. In an interview with her in January 1998, Ruth stated that if she raised an issue she could generally rely on a 'left' member such as Roger Holdsworth or Phil. Noyce to speak in support of it. She was opposed relentlessly by the leadership group:

I used to joke and say that if I got up and proposed a tea break with cream puffs, Bernie Blood would've gotten up and opposed it. Every single time I said anything on Committee, Bernie Blood would jump to his feet and oppose it. And so it got to be hilariously funny, you know, I took myself very seriously and it was a problem taking yourself a bit seriously in that sort of forum.

Part of the basis of the opposition, she believed, was because she was aligned with the 'left' faction; the leadership regarded her as captive to the 'left' rather than a fully committed member. At this stage the 'left' was a very small faction of the Central Committee. Jan Bassett (1995) described the 'left' as the 'youth and beards' faction opposed to the 'houndstooth and ties'.

Personal innuendo was a strategy used to attempt to isolate members of the OSCW; they were rumoured to be lesbians and described jokingly as 'the monstrous regiment of women'. Claire Kelly believed that Ruth Fowler posed a threat to those in power because of her articulate presentation of the issues and the fact that she refused to be intimidated. Shelley Lavender referred to 'quite extremist personality politics' being involved as the women who put up the policies had to resist the automatic knee-jerk responses to the issues raised. She witnessed the lack of co-operation of the Leadership with the OSCW. The women's issues were either scoffed at in meetings and rejected or treated as irrelevant. The women were not to be defeated; proposals for new policy were then taken to an AGM where they would be passed, with women members of the Central Committee, who were supposed to be bound by Central Committee decisions, voting in support of the motion. These female Central Committee members would then be

admonished for not adhering to the rules.

Despite the resistance from the entrenched leadership group, the OSCW organised a successful women's conference to celebrate International Women's Year in 1975. More than 300 women attended. According to Ruth Fowler, the senior men of the VSTA thought the conference would be a failure; 'they thought we would attract two men and a dog'. The OSCW managed, also, to get policy adopted at the 1975 AGM on such matters as human sexuality education and childcare. It was evident, therefore, that the women of the OSCW were able to marshal branch members support for their policies. The male Executive appeared to be out of step with membership opinion.

Ruth Fowler found the way the Central Committee operated alienating, with its combative style. Tim Maher, a member of the 'left', helped with reports so she could have her proposals accepted, rather than being dismissed for not observing the correct format. This was another tactic used by the leadership group in an attempt to prevent women's issues from gaining Committee support. She had to learn how to word proposals that managed the factions and did not scare them. 'I can remember being shot down in flames on those initial reports'. Her commitment to the OSCW, combined with her full-time teaching responsibilities, exhausted her. She resigned from the Central Committee at the end of 1976. Her experience on the Central Committee of the VSTA was a personally difficult one. Writing in the publication, *Women in the VSTA*, (1986) she said:

However as with all trade unions, the VSTA is still regarded by many women as an alien mode in which to operate. Those women who are very committed to involvement in the union, often do so at great personal cost and must be supported by other women. The trade union movement, and the VSTA is no exception, has yet to undergo the profound changes in style and operation which would permit working patterns more consonant with women's experience and culture. Indeed it is a question as to whether it can survive as a dynamic force for industrial protection and educational change unless it does so.

Not surprisingly, the OSCW had no Convenor for part of 1977. Graham Willett (unpub. 1998) has stated that it was floundering at this point. John Lewis co-convened both the Open Sub-Committee on Homosexuality which had been established at the 1976 AGM for part of that year, and the OSCW, as there were no nominees for convenor of either sub-committee at the February 1977 Central Committee meeting. John Lewis believed that many of the most active women in the union, (but there still were not many), did not want to be sidelined into women's issues. Claire Kelly did not fit that category. On her election to the Central Committee in 1977, she assumed the position of Convenor of the OSCW.

With Claire Kelly as Convenor, the OSCW had a large number of policies, such as permanent part-time work, equal superannuation rights and family leave adopted by 1982, before a new VSTA leadership team, 'the youth and beards', was elected. Claire Kelly was a strategic planner. These policies were achieved by women and men in the branches sending in policy resolutions which had to be examined by sub-committees before they came to Central Committee, later called Council. As branches started to call for family leave, the Leadership had to respond. It could not be dismissed as just another OSCW initiative. Members of the OSCW worked in the branches to ensure that pressure was applied from the grass roots to the leadership. Each high school was a branch and OSCW members were also full-time teachers. Claire Kelly learned how to write clear policy proposals that could not be defeated on technicalities. She was convinced that although the Executive recognised her ability and used her skills in certain instances, they really did not want her and the women's issues around. As Vice-President of the VSTA in 1981, she knew that she was excluded from

Executive discussions held informally at pubs.

In conclusion, I maintain that the reaction of the male leadership of the VSTA to the establishment and function of the OSCW was a reflection of the general attitude towards issues that affected women workers at the time; the masculine paradigm, assumed to be universal, prevailed. The issues that affected male workers were the priorities of unions. If women benefitted that was all right, if it did not affect male advantage, but the leadership was reluctant to pursue issues which they considered to be outside the union policy arena. Matters such as childcare, permanent part-time employment, family leave were not the priorities of men who in some cases were unmarried and were uncomfortable in the presence of women. Union leadership was a masculine domain, which they enjoyed; feminine invasions were to be resisted strenuously. It was clear that these men found it confronting to have to accept women as serious contenders for power in the union. The women who sought the broadened agenda defined themselves as feminists and represented a challenge to the stereotypical view of women and their capabilities. Ultimately it was the power to determine the direction of the union that was at stake and the bearers of the new agenda had to be repelled. Yet if the leadership wished to retain power, it had to be sensitive to the demands of all members, a point which was grudgingly accepted.

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