

## **The Sydney Women's Liberation Movement 1970 - 1975**

### **Journey through some of the highlights of the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement as recalled by Nola Cooper**

**(January, 1970)**

#### **SYDNEY WOMEN'S LIBERATION HOLDS IT'S FIRST MEETING**

The Inaugural Meeting of Sydney Women's Liberation marked an important stage in the history of feminism in Australia. It signaled the emergence of a new wave of feminism that was to grip the country in the 1970's bringing profound changes in social structures and the lives of countless women.

In the early seventies, before feminists carried their banners emblazoned with the women's symbol and the inscription "WOMEN'S LIBERATION", there was:

- A luxury tax on the contraceptive pill, the advertising of contraceptives and family planning services were forbidden and chemists hid sanitary pads under the counter.
- Restrictive rules about who could or could not have an abortion – a woman needed to demonstrate that she was mentally unsound to have an abortion performed with proper medical attention.
- A belief that Doctor knows "best" – medical practices and procedures were a mystery to most women, while normal events such as pregnancy and childbirth were treated as illnesses.
- A wall of SILENCE around marital violence, rape and incest. The victims did not speak of their experiences; they lived in fear and shame. There were no Refuges or Sexual Assault Services for women or children.
- Discrimination of women in the workforce. Women were paid 75% of the male wage and were precluded from many jobs and industries.

Statements such as, "A woman's place is in the home", "Women aren't men", "Education is wasted on girls", "Men don't like clever women" were commonplace and indicative of the attitudes of the day.

**(May, 1970)**  
**NATIONAL ABORTION CAMPAIGN**

A national campaign on abortion linked to other demands was the outcome of the first Women's Liberation National Conference held at Melbourne University on the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> May. A week later Sydney University was the venue for the first public meeting of coalition groups formed to change abortion laws in Australia.

**SOME OF THE PUBLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION  
MOVEMENT (WLM)  
LAUNCHED BETWEEN 1970 AND 1975**

From its earliest days, the Women's Liberation Movement spawned a range of written material expressing, debating and informing women about feminist ideas and analysis of woman's position in modern society. This material came in the form of articles, newsletters and magazines. Below is a list of some of the early publications of the WLM in this country.

- *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* - first issue July 1970, last issue July 1999
- *MeJane* the first newspaper of the WLM – first issue March 1971, last issue April 1974
- *Vashti's Voice* (later *Vashti*) – first issue March 1972 produced in Melbourne
- All woman production of newspaper *Nation Review* – October 1972
- *Refractory Girl* – first issue Summer 1972/3
- *Words for Women*, publication of local and overseas articles informing women about the aims and ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement – January 1973

- *Right to Choose*, produced by Women's Abortion Action Campaign – first issue May/June 1973
- *Cauldron* – first issue September 1974
- *Womanspeak*, a women's liberation magazine – first issue October 1974
- *Mabel*, produced as a broadsheet for the national election following the sacking of the Whitlam government in December 1975 later developed into a national Women's Liberation paper

**(Early 1971)**

**“THE FEMALE EUNUCH” HITS AUSTRALIA**

When Germaine Greer's book “the Female Eunuch” was released in Australia it caused a sensation, not simply because of its feminist message but more for its graphic sexual references and images. Greer's book whilst one of a growing number of books about women's liberation, was quite individualistic in its approach. Although she saw her work as a part of the second wave of feminism, Greer came from a libertarian tradition rather than the women's liberation movement. Her arguments were essentially about sex. Her concept of the castrated woman – the female eunuch – who must succumb to male appropriation of all energy and power was indeed powerful and illuminating. Her description of the female condition was one that opened eyes and changed lives. The book received enormous media attention which no doubt helped to sell thousands of copies to Australian women who might not otherwise have readily been exposed to her ideas.

**(July, 1971)**

**“INDECENT - OBSCENE”**

**“ POLICE TO INQUIRE INTO SEX LEAFLET ”**

These were the newspaper headlines in October 1971 after the booklet “What Every Woman Should Know” was distributed at several Sydney high schools. Abortion Squad detectives actually questioned the principals of Strathfield Girls, Kogarah Girls and Hunters Hill High Schools over the booklet's distribution even though it had the approval of the Parents & Citizens Association and the Department of Education had not objected.

The booklet, first printed in July 1971, was reprinted five times. It was inspired by “*What Every Girl Should Know About Contraception*”, produced earlier that year by Adelaide Women’s Liberation. The Sydney Working Women’s Group adapted their idea rewriting and extending the content. The aim of the booklet was to inform young women about how to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy and recognise venereal diseases.

Much of the commotion was instigated by conservative MLA Jackett through attacks in state parliament. No charges were laid.

More than 18,000 copies of the booklet were distributed in Sydney.

**(October, 1971)**

**“LANDMARK DECISION IN HEATHERBRAE CLINIC ABORTION CASE”**

On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1970, police raided the Heatherbrae Clinic at Bondi. Doctors and nurses were arrested and women patients were taken for questioning and medical examinations. Five members of the Clinic’s staff were charged in relation to performing illegal abortions.

The case was conducted at Sydney’s Central Court. During the course of the trial members of the pro-abortion coalition demonstrated regularly outside the court in support of the Heatherbrae staff.

On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1971, the jury found the five clinic staff not guilty.

The presiding Judge Levine’s ruling provided a more liberal interpretation of the abortion laws thereby making abortions far more accessible to women in NSW.

It opened the way to the establishment of specialised day clinics offering medically safe abortions and effectively ended the era of backyard abortions.

**(November, 1971)**

**ABORTION MARCH AND RALLY**

In Sydney on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> November, an *Abortion March* from Town Hall to Hyde Park organised by a coalition of groups (Women's Liberation, the Campaign for Children by Choice and Abortion on Request) took place. The British actress Honor Blackman addressed the rally that followed at Hyde Park.

**(March, 1972)**

### **INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY MARCH**

On Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March 1972 the first major Sydney International Women's Day March was held. The march, which started at Town Hall and ended at Hyde Park with a concert, was organised by a group of women's liberationists who formed what they called the "March Action Campaign for IWD". They issued a sticker, badge, broadsheet, small leaflets and a colourful poster inspired by the image of Angela Davis. Angela Davis was a black revolutionary in the USA who had been imprisoned facing a possible death sentence, but who was later released after an extensive international campaign.

Estimates of the numbers who marched in Sydney varied from 2,000 to 5,000. The organisers put the figure at 4,000. The issues /demands promoted by the March Action Campaign included "the Right to Work", "Equal Pay", "Equal Opportunity for Work and Education", "Free Childcare", "Free, Safe Contraceptives", and "Safe, Legal Abortion on Request". Germaine Greer, who happened to be in Sydney at the time, walked in the body of the march. The march ended with a picnic and concert, which included a street theatre performance called "the Stages of a Woman's Life" that drew great delight from the audience.

**(May, 1972)**

### **WOMEN'S LIBERATION HOUSE OPENS**

In the early 70's the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement was growing rapidly. By the end of 1971 around 16 Women's Liberation Groups had formed in Sydney. It soon became apparent that premises were needed to cater for the Movement's expanding activities. An old two-story property located a short distance from the southern end of Hyde Park at 25 Alberta

Street Sydney, was rented. Profits from the Sydney IWD March held only two months earlier, paid for the initial rental costs on the premises.

Women's Liberation House, or simply Women's House as it was often called, quickly became a hub of activity. Meetings, discussions, work-bees, etc took place here. The Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter was produced on the premises using an old Gestetner machine.

Women's House was also an important point of contact for new women wanting to find out about the Movement. Later in its herstory it housed an abortion referral service and provided a range of information on women's affairs, women's services and activities.

In July 1976, the SWLM purchased a property in Redfern Street, Chippendale for Women's House. The property was sold in the late 1980's and thereafter Women's House operated out of rented premises.

**(July, 1972)**

### **WOMEN'S ELECTORAL LOBBY (WEL) IS FOUNDED**

In July 1972 there was a meeting of WEL at Women's Liberation House Sydney following the women's political lobby group's formation in Melbourne. One week later, WEL NSW was formed at a public meeting in Mosman.

WEL's first successful venture occurred in the latter part of 1972 when it ran a survey on candidates for the then forthcoming Federal elections, canvassing opinions on issues of special interest to women. A personal approach was made to *every* candidate in *every* electorate throughout the country. A curious media, attracted by an approach to assessing political candidates which was radical and very newsworthy, published the survey results.

*The Age* in Melbourne printed a special liftout with the candidates' WEL scores for each Victorian electorate, and the group's election message of "***Think WEL before you vote***" reached many thousands of Australians.

ALP candidates generally scored much better than the conservatives and feminists everywhere felt a surge of hope when the December election brought in the Whitlam Government.

Since those early days, WEL has had many successes in bringing about change for women and continues to be an acknowledged political force, regularly invited by government and non-government bodies to participate in a wide range of community affairs.

**(August, 1972)**  
**WOMEN'S ABORTION ACTION CAMPAIGN (WAAC) IS  
FOUNDED**

In the late 60's and early 70's the demand for the repeal of the clauses in the Crimes Act relating to abortion became a "hot" political issue. Protest marches, public debates through the media and political lobbying on the issue were commonplace. The repeal of all abortion laws and the provision of free, safe abortions for women on request became one of the primary calls of the early Women's Liberation Movement.

Some of the oft-chanted slogans on many an Abortion March/Demonstration included:

*'What do we want?*  
**Free abortion on demand.**  
*When do we want it?*  
**NOW**

*'Not the Church, not the State,*  
**WOMEN MUST DECIDE THEIR FATE '**

***'IT'S A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CONTROL HER BODY'***

In August 1972 the Women's Abortion Action Campaign was formed. Its primary aim at this time was to effect the repeal of the Abortion Laws. Members of WAAC regularly organised marches, rallies and lobbied

politicians in support of their cause. In May 1973 the first edition of their magazine "Right to Choose" was published.

**(2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1972)**

## **THE WHITLAM LABOR GOVERNMENT ELECTED TO FEDERAL PARLIAMENT**

The election of the Whitlam government presented both a challenge and an opportunity to the WLM. While many in the movement had reservations about working with governments for fear of being compromised, the new government proved very sympathetic to many of the movement's concerns and demands. Regrettably the new Labor Government did not have a single female member, however it did have many more progressive-minded men than the Coalition as Women's Electoral Lobby's survey of candidates had shown prior to the election.

Some of the welcome changes for women brought about in the life of the Whitlam government included:

- Reconvening the Full Bench of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to reopen the Equal Pay Case. The outcome was the adoption of the principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value' replacing the 1969 decision of 'equal pay for the same job';
- Lifting the 27.5% 'luxury' sales tax on the contraceptive pill and revoking the ban on advertising contraceptives in the ACT;
- Supporting family planning services in community health centres;
- Establishing a new position on the Prime Minister's personal staff, namely, a Special Advisor to the PM on women's issues. Elizabeth Reid was appointed to the position in April 1973;
- Passing Attorney-General Lionel Murphy's Family Law Act which introduced no-fault divorce;
- Legislating for maternity leave for women employed by the Commonwealth public service and an adult minimum wage for women.



## ***CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING – A TOOL FOR CHANGE***

Late 1972 to early 1973, Women's House began distributing information to WL groups about *Consciousness Raising (CR)* based on publications from the United States.

Quite simply, consciousness raising is women talking together about the facts of their lives as women in a male dominated society. Through this process each woman beginning to understand that, in spite of vastly different backgrounds, other women in fact share their assumptions about themselves, their fears, their experiences and their very personal problems.

Then the revelation! It's not just me that feels abnormal in the face of society's definition of a "real woman", who feels like someone twisted and cramped by being forced (by what appears to be a consensus decision of the rest of the world) to be passive, supportive and a sexual commodity for others to enjoy. The rest of the group does too. Could it be that the definition and the role, *not me*, are wrong? So, if what I thought was my personal problem turns out to be a general condition – **WOW!** The phrase that describes this process and became part of standard feminist vocabulary was "**MAKING THE PERSONAL POLITICAL**".

While this was the central function of the CR group, it was not the only one. Women had also been conditioned to believe that men are superior, that we need the love, support and approval of men to have worth. Other women were seen as competitors for male attention. Women's praise, women's esteem, women's love means nothing. This was our internalised oppression. The CR group challenged these beliefs and promoted a bonding of women that proved to be very powerful indeed. The expression "**SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL**" also became part of feminists' vocabulary.

The *personal is political* and *sisterhood is powerful* proved to be important and effective sources of motivation and energy for change in the 1970s.

**(March, 1973)**

**THE SYDNEY WOMEN'S COMMISSION ATTRACTS**

## **OVER FOUR HUNDRED WOMEN**

The Sydney Women's Commission organised by Sydney Women's Liberation and WEL, was one of several events staged for International Women's Day in 1973.

The Commission brought together some four to five hundred women enabling them to speak out in a public yet supportive forum about Women as Mothers, Women as Workers, Women and Marriage, Women as Sex Objects and other forms of Discrimination.

They spoke of humiliating experiences with doctors, their frustrations at not being given information about their health problems and treatments, their despair and isolation arising from domestic violence or incest, their discrimination in the workplace.

The Commission, an exercise in mass consciousness raising, had a major impact on the shape and direction of the Women's Movement in the decade to follow. Issues previously regarded as personal and private were put out into the political and public arenas. The concern and energy generated by the Commission was *dynamic*.

At a follow-up meeting of around one hundred women, groups formed which later (1974) established Elsie Women's Refuge and Leichhardt Women's Health Centre - the first of their kind in Australia. A forum on violence against women the following year led to the establishment of the first Rape Crisis Centre.

**(August, 1973)**

### **CONTROL - ABORTION REFERRAL SERVICE OPENS AT WOMEN'S LIBERATION HOUSE**

Following the Women's Commission in March a group of fifteen women came together to work around issues raised at the commission concerning health services for women.

Their goal was to establish an abortion referral service and a self-help clinic for women. It was agreed that the group would initially work on the

abortion referral service whilst pursuing the possibility of obtaining Federal Government funding for a women's centre.

Eventually the group adopted the name **CONTROL**, suggesting women's right to control their own bodies and fertility.

Early in August, Control began an abortion referral service at Women's House located in Alberta Street, Sydney. The service was run by women volunteers and offered information about options, pregnancy testing, contraceptive advice and support. In the first year 335 women sought assistance from the service.

In December 1973, Control received formal approval from the Federal Minister for Health, Dr Doug Everingham, for the establishment of a women's health centre as part of the Community Health Program.

**(November, 1973)**

### **A SMALL BUT HISTORIC MEETING**

On 10<sup>th</sup> November 1973 Anne Summers and Jennifer Dakers called a meeting at Women's House to discuss the setting up of a 'refuge' to provide one or two nights free accommodation for women in various distress situations. Only four other women turned up to the meeting. Amongst them was Bessie Guthrie a passionate crusader for the rights of young women incarcerated in girls' "homes" on EMD charges – that is, being exposed to moral danger. Although unaware of it at the time, these six women were about to initiate the women's refuge movement in Australia.

**(1974)**

### **THE FIRST FEMINIST WOMEN'S SERVICES OPEN IN SYDNEY**

- Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre became the first feminist women's health centre in Australia, when it officially opened on 8<sup>th</sup> March (International Women's Day).
- Elsie Women's Refuge, the first of its kind, opened in the Sydney suburb of Glebe (16<sup>th</sup> March) after a group of feminist squatted in two adjacent

vacant houses at 73-75 Westmoreland Street. The houses were the property of the Church of England.

- The first Rape Crisis Centre commenced operation on 28<sup>th</sup> October from Women's House in Sydney.
- In December, CONTROL set up a company known as The Women's Health and Resources Foundation, so as to receive recurrent government funding for Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre. The Foundation soon became an umbrella organisation for a number of newly established women's services receiving government funding.

### (1975) INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

1975 was designated International Women's Year by the United Nations General Assembly to focus attention on the current status of women in the world. With a theme of "EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE", IWY sought to stimulate change in women's rights, political participation and efforts for peace. A peace dove incorporating an equals sign and the female sign, became the official logo for IWY.

The Australian Federal Government under Gough Whitlam sponsored a number of special activities for IWY. In addition, the Australian government established a grant scheme to which community and non-government organisations could apply for funds to promote a range of women's projects, activities and events throughout 1975. A National Women's Advisory Committee was established to oversee the IWY Grants Scheme.

Some of the activities to receive funding included:

- A series of suburban women's commissions – these took place at Hurstville (Southern Sydney), Willoughby (North Sydney), Bankstown (South Western Sydney) and Parramatta (Western Sydney);
- The Hurstville Women's Art and Craft Show;
- The Hurstville Women's Film Festival;
- Campbelltown Women's Activities Workshop;

- Sydney Women's Commission on *Has International Women's Year Changed Women's Lives?*
- WAAC National Conference on Abortion and Contraception. Gisele Halimi, a French abortion activist attended and launched the English translation of her book "The Bodigny Affair"

Government sponsored and organised events included the Brisbane Conference "*Women's Health in a Changing Society*" and the "*Women and Politics*" Conference held in Canberra.

### **INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY – Sat. 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1975**

Possibly the largest Sydney event of the year was the IWD March and Festival held on 8<sup>th</sup> March. On the day an estimated 5-10,000 people marched from the Domain to the Town Hall where a women's festival and concert packed the upper and lower Town Hall. For the event the organising collective produced and distributed leaflets, programs, press releases, two badges with the inscription "Women's March for Liberation", a poster and two broadsheets with a common inside section. The second broadsheet was distributed in the city on the day of the march and later at a feminist stall at the Royal Easter Show.

While the event required a huge amount of organising, it also generated an enormous amount of energy from the many women who designed badges and posters, screen painted flags and T-shirts, painted signs, prepared for the concert and exhibitions, and helped to publicise it all.

Some suburban women's groups organised their own convoy of decorated vehicles to drive to the Domain and join the march.

Issues raised in the broadsheet included free 24-hour childcare, free and freely available safe contraceptives, free abortion on demand, repeal of all abortion laws, free community health centres for women, stop violence against women – free women's refuges, an end to discrimination against lesbians, an end to homosexual oppression, employment for all, the right to work, equal pay – one rate for the job, no discrimination in education, training or employment.

The concert included Chilean and other Latin American artists as well as white Australian and Aboriginal women. A book of poems by Kate Jennings and Marjorie Pizer and an anthology of women's verse compiled by Kate Jennings, were launched.

The concert opened to the now famous words of Joyce Stevens written for the front page of the second IWD broadsheet:

***BECAUSE our work is never done and underpaid or unpaid or boring or repetitious and we're the first to get the sack and what we look like is more important than what we do and if we get raped it's our fault and if we get bashed we must have provoked it and if we raise our voices we're nagging bitches and if we enjoy sex we're nymphos and if we don't we're frigid and if we love women it's because we can't get a 'real' man and if we ask our doctors many questions we're neurotic and/or pushy and if we expect community care for children we're selfish and if we stand up for our rights we're aggressive and 'unfeminine' and if we don't we're typical weak females and if we want to get married we're out to trap a man and if we don't we're unnatural and BECAUSE we still can't get an adequate, safe contraceptive but men can walk on the moon and if we can't cope or don't want a pregnancy we're made to feel guilty about abortion and for lots and lots of other reasons we are here and we have marched thousands strong.***

On the same day women at the ABC put to air the first "Coming Out Ready or Not Show", later renamed the "The Coming Out Show".

### **LIVERPOOL WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE OPENS TO THE PUBLIC IN APRIL**

Liverpool Women's Health Centre was the second feminist women's health centre to open in NSW. Together with its sister centre at Leichhardt, this centre saw its role as one of developing new concepts and practices in the provision of health care services for women. Its feminist approach made strong links between women's health problems and the social context of their lives and emphasized prevention through the provision of information, skills and resources. The aim was to enable women to take more effective control over factors that adversely affected their health.

The Centre offered an integrated medical/counselling service in which each woman was treated as a whole person connecting her presenting problem (as appropriate) with the rest of her life. Providing adequate time for women to talk about their concerns and be heard in an informal, supportive, safe environment were the primary tenets of the service.

While seeing women individually was considered important, we on the staff (of which I had the privilege of being a member) believed it wasn't enough. This was what we termed "bandaiding" and *we wanted to change society*. For us this meant moving into new areas of health advocacy, community education and social action – areas certainly not pursued by traditional health services.

Our approach to work structures and practices was also unconventional. While those of us first employed at the Centre began with specific job titles, we soon made the decision to work as a collective. In practice this meant no structured power hierarchy (no boss), equal rates of pay for all and consensus decision-making. We dropped our original titles and called ourselves "women's health workers".

All staff participated directly in the delivery of the medical/counselling service which included working on reception. Other areas of work – administration, community education, group work, community action/development, etc were undertaken by those staff who had the experience and skills or had an interest in developing these. The staff was encouraged to share their skills and knowledge with other collective members. We had lots to learn from each other and great fun doing it.

## **THE FUNDING GAME BEGINS...**

### **GOVERNMENT FUNDING – TO ACCEPT OR NOT TO ACCEPT, THAT WAS THE QUESTION?**

Many a debate was had from around 1973-74 on this issue. Sections of the Movement saw dangers in receiving government funds. They believed there would be strings attached, if not initially then later on, that would see us co-opted by the government. They feared a loss of independence and autonomy, of becoming essentially "public servants" who could be stopped from speaking out for fear of losing the funding. In addition funding for

services would divert women's attentions and energies into various service areas and weaken the movement's ability to be a "critical watchdog" for women's rights more broadly.

On the other hand others saw funding as a means of enabling groups within the movement to make some real practical changes in women's lives **NOW**. The Women's Commissions held in 1973 and 1974 clearly pointed to urgent needs regarding women's health and the effects of violence against women. Ultimately, whilst mindful of the possible pitfalls, groups within the movement decided to **GO FOR IT**.

Leichhardt Women's Health Centre was the first feminist centre to receive funding in the 1970s. Initially funding was provided by the Federal Health Department (through the Health and Hospital Services Commission) under its new Community Health Program, set up under the Whitlam Government.

In 1975, Liverpool Women's Health Centre, Newcastle Working Women's Centre and the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre were funded under the same program. By the end of 1975 Elsie Women's Refuge was also receiving recurrent funding after some twelve hard months of operating with donations and voluntary workers.

For a few short years the new wave of feminism and the initiatives it heralded in the affairs of women coincided with the election of a sympathetic, radical, federal government, headed by Gough Whitlam.

During the "Whitlam years", major structural changes occurred in the areas of health, welfare and community development. Universal health cover, known as Medibank, was introduced and the concept of preventative health was developed. Community based women's services were consistent with the stated policy of the Federal Government.

But these halcyon days were short-lived! The Whitlam Government was sacked from office on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1975, Remembrance Day, by the then Governor General Sir John Kerr.

Although the incoming Fraser Government did not immediately disband the new programs introduced by the previous government, over the next few years it did apply "the razor" to the funding of most of the Whitlam initiatives. Fraser's notorious "Razor Gang" was a disaster for women's



services. Many of the services outside NSW closed for lack of financial support. Fortunately for NSW, June 1976 saw the election of the Wran Labor Government. Through strong links with feminists in the Labor Party, women's services in NSW survived, albeit with some difficulty.

**(October 1975)**

### **POLICE CHARGE WORKERS AT WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE**

On 30<sup>TH</sup> October 1975 Liverpool Police entered the premises of the Liverpool Women's Health Centre and charged a doctor with using an instrument to procure an illegal abortion. Four days later on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1975, one of the Centre's health workers was charged with counselling, aiding and abetting the performance of an illegal act.

The charges arose from a complaint made to the Liverpool Police, by the parents of a 15-year-old girl. They claimed that on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1975, their daughter had obtained an abortion at the Liverpool Women's Health Centre without their permission.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1976, committal proceedings were held in Liverpool Courthouse against the two workers from Liverpool Women's Health Centre. After the prosecution had presented its case, the magistrate ruled that a prima facie case had been established and therefore the matter would be taken to trial before a judge and jury, sometime later in 1976.

In September 1976, the workers' legal advisors made an application to the NSW Attorney General for a "No Bill". This was granted in December that year and the case was duly dropped.

### **ABORTION & THE LAW**

The legal situation regarding abortion in 1975 (and now) was as follows: The Crimes Act says that anyone using an instrument to procure an illegal abortion is liable to a penalty of up to 10 years imprisonment. However, the Crimes Act does not spell out what constitutes a legal abortion. So what constitutes a legal abortion has been arrived at by case law.

*The 1971 'Levine' ruling stated that for an abortion to be legal, a doctor must be convinced that there is greater risk to the woman's mental or physical health if she continues with the pregnancy than if it were terminated. He also ruled that in determining what constitutes a risk to the woman's mental health, social and economic circumstances may be taken into account.*

The second legal act with relevance to this case was the 'Minor's Enforcement of Contracts Act'. This Act states that people over the age of 14 years can enter into a legal contract with a doctor for medical or dental health services which is confidential and may not be disclosed to anyone without the permission of the patient.

*The two workers from the Centre charged over the abortion were doing no more than was being done every day in public hospitals and private clinics. They were charged with giving a woman a medically safe, free, legal abortion.*

**(November, 1975)**

### **"DAMNED WHORES AND GOD'S POLICE" LAUNCHED**

Anne Summers now classic book "Damned Whores and God's Police" was launched on 4<sup>th</sup> November. Like Germaine Greer's book, it brought new insights into the workings of Australian society and in particular women's roles. It was distinctly Australian. The book became a publishing sensation. Since its first publication the book has been continually in print. The first edition was reprinted twice within a year, and eight times in all. A second edition published in 1994 with several added chapters and a new cover has been reprinted twice since.

**(11<sup>th</sup> November, 1975)**

### **GOVERNOR GENERAL SACKS WHITLAM GOVERNMENT**

The nation was stunned when the news of Sir John Kerr's actions became public. It was an act unprecedented in Australian history and one that not many would have conceived possible. After the initial shock came ANGER from many sections of the community. The Sydney Women's Liberation Movement held an emergency meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> November followed by a

larger meeting one week later. While increasing numbers of women within the movement had become disillusioned with the Whitlam Government there was never the less great concern over the “undemocratic” actions of the Governor General and even greater concern about the future of women’s rights and the recently established women’s services under a Fraser led government. One of the decisions taken at this time was to start a new national Women’s Liberation newspaper. The first edition of ‘*MABEL*’ as the paper was called, was produced as a broadsheet on the national election.

In spite of the vocal outrage over the Whitlam government’s sacking and the efforts of many to have the labor government re-elected it was Fraser who became the new Prime Minister thereby ushering in a new era for the Women’s Movement.

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#### **Acknowledgements:**

**In putting this journey through 1970 to 1975 to paper I have drawn on old documents in my possession – newspapers, magazines, newsletters, leaflets, badges, posters, etc. In addition I have used information/excerpts contained in the following publications:**

**“The First Ten Years” – a collection of Sydney Women’s Liberation Movement archival material compiled and collated by Joyce Stevens and Dr Sue Wills**

**“A HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY – in words and images by Joyce Stevens, published 1985**

**“Healing Women – A History of Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre” by Joyce Stevens, published 1995**

**“Ducks on the Pond”, an autobiography by Anne Summers published 2000.**