

The vote that shook the nation

Karen Lee

'Will it be believed a hundred years hence that such a state of things existed?'

Louisa Lawson, 10 June 1891

The story of women's quest for suffrage is that of a women's movement with thousands of members revolutionising the way the State sees women. Simultaneously, the suffragists shifted the political focus away from power and vigorously advocated equality and a more just and healthy society. This historical DNA defines who we are as Australians today.

From a notion of justice necessarily re-defined, with women being classified as 'non persons' and having no rights, women's suffrage movements changed the legal, political, economic and social landscape. It was arguably the most important human rights event in our history, notwithstanding the struggle by indigenous women (like indigenous men) who were denied the franchise until race discrimination acts were amended or repealed.

This year is significant because 100 years have passed since women in Victoria won their 24-year political struggle, which in 1891 led to women's political membership in the tens of thousands.

Men feared women's suffrage. Their fears reveal the atmosphere of a male dominated society with total power. This fear of women's inclusion in the political process is gleaned from the words of a Victorian politician, Frank Madden MLA, who said in 1895: 'Woman Suffrage would abolish soldiers and war, also racing, hunting, football, cricket, and all such manly games... Women suffragists are the worst class of socialists. Their idea of freedom is polyandry, free love, lease marriages, and so on. Are these the qualifications for the franchise! Are we going to allow women who would sap the very foundations of a nation to have votes?'

It's interestingly how Madden then put soldiers and war in the same category as football and cricket and defined them as a game. Can there be an extrapolation to the

present day eagerness for war? Is this thinking the residue an outdated Frank Madden 'philosophy'?

Louisa Lawson, feminist suffragist, publisher and newspaper proprietor and Henry Lawson's mother, had a lot to say about men like Madden. Resolutely determined that women should get the vote, she set up the monthly journal named *The Dawn* with an all female workforce with this express purpose of getting women the vote. *The Dawn* was to be the voice of women 'their journal and mouth-piece' and ran from May 1888 to July 1905 in Sydney, with massive national and international distribution. It employed only women compositors, printers, and binders, with junior girls doing the clerical work.

Lawson wrote in the June 1890 edition of *The Dawn* under the title — Her Proper Sphere:

'...In Parliament such old phrases as these were used, viz. that "woman should be kept in her proper sphere" and "women have duties quite outside the political arena". One would think the political arena consisted of the parliamentary refreshment room; they are so sure it is not a desirable place for a woman to be seen in. In the minds of these objectors "politics" seem to consist of the petty animosities and personalities which the law-making business now gives rise to, but "politics" in reality cover nearly all questions which thinking men or women do now consider and form opinions upon. Laws are made upon divorce, the sale of liquor, factory regulations, the employment of children, gambling, education, hours of labor and scores of subjects upon which women do think...'

The Dawn was unreservedly feminist and political, its banner proclaiming: 'A day, an hour of virtuous liberty is worth a whole eternity in bondage.' *The Dawn* educated, informed and engaged women and men from across the social and political spectrum.

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The year Vida Goldstein, the future first Australian woman politician, turned 21, Lawson wrote in the September 1890 edition of *The Dawn*: 'Many people who feel shocked beyond measure at the idea of women speaking in public will go nightly or travel long distances to hear a woman sing. Where is the difference? Will someone please write and explain...' In writing this, she prepared the way for Goldstein who travelled throughout Victoria speaking to packed halls about politics, women's suffrage and her determination to stand for parliament.

The Dawn mixed politics with dress patterns, health advice with articles about successful women in trades and professions and children's literature prizes with academic scholarships for girls who managed to sign up 20 subscribers.

And, as is sadly so often the case, the newspaper's successful owner Louisa Lawson, died unrecognised and largely forgotten. Gladesville psychiatric hospital in Sydney was the scene of her death on 10 August 1920.

Federally, women achieved the vote in 1902 when Federal Parliament passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act enabling Australian women to vote at a federal level and making this the second country in the world to give women adult suffrage. England and the United States were to follow. And while Lawson was invited on stage to accept applause for her pioneering work for suffrage, Goldstein was on another stage in the U.S. being honoured for her contribution to that nation.

Upon her return she assumed that the state vote would follow. But it did not, although every state except Victoria was to enfranchise women.

Victoria was the last state despite being the first to begin the movement in 1884 with the formation of The Victorian Women's Suffrage Society. This long and bitter fight culminated in 1907 with Goldstein, frustrated by defeat of 18 private members' bills, setting out to 'shame' the men in power by writing to all male members of State and Federal parliaments that had already passed women's suffrage bills.

Goldstein was the first Australian woman to stand for parliament (in 1903), the first Australian to meet President Roosevelt in America (in 1902) and an advocate on behalf of American women's suffrage. She was even asked by the Victorian government to report on the American treatment of child delinquents during her 1902 tour. Notwithstanding all her political experience, she and thousands of other women were barred from voting in State parliament. The men had dug their heels in. Premier Tommy Bent continually went back on his word. A movement which had begun in the mid-1880s, women's suffrage emerged as a powerful political faction that threatened men's power base. At the core of the opposition, though, were money, power and plain misogyny.

Militancy was on the rise in both Britain and America and there was fear that it would spread to Victoria. Goldstein's booklet, *Women's Suffrage in Australia*, written in 1907, reveals the frustration and determination of a woman furious at injustice and intransigence. Addressed to every man in power around Australia, it sought an endorsement for the vote. Her aim was the humiliation of Premier Bent. A deputation of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage made successive calls on the Premier. Eventually he came around and when on 18 November 1908 the bill passed the second reading in the Victorian Legislative Council, Goldstein was ecstatic. Victoriously women suffragists gathered in the Botanic Gardens to celebrate their enfranchisement with a photograph. It had been a long hard battle.

Echoes of this historical period are many, but one thread that links this to the present is the value that women place on education and health. Women's exclusion from medical school at universities in Australia meant that women such as the pioneer doctors Dr Dagmar Berne and Dr Constance Stone had to attain their qualifications overseas. It is heart-rending today to read of the blatant discrimination meted out to these highly intelligent women. For instance, Professor Anderson Stuart, Dean of Sydney University Medical

School openly stated in 1885 that 'I think that the proper place for a woman is in the home; the proper function for a woman is to be a man's wife...' He determinedly failed women because of their sex.

Berne and Stone returned to Australia to run hospitals for women, paid for primarily by women's donations to campaigns run by suffragists. Money was raised via the 'Shilling Fund' for the Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne, which had been established in 1896. This hospital was staffed by women, run by women and for women no matter what their economic situation. This vital social historical legacy is the basis of our 21st century universal health and hospital system.

Thousands of women donated a shilling to build the hospital. Many saved for several years to reach the two shilling mark. Yet the contribution made by women who skimmed and saved for the good of the society, is now considered unimportant, forgettable. But women, one might argue, contributed more for the good of the nation than men did killing other men in far-off countries.

Women demanded that parliament pass laws that redefined fundamental philosophical notions of equality which challenged familial rights of men over women. Vida Goldstein and her family were not exempt from a profound philosophical transformation, which reverberated throughout the nation. This Australian *Pygmalion* story is one that is captivating. It tells of a much loved daughter, Vida Goldstein, taught to think independently by her beloved father Jacob Goldstein, who had emigrated from Ireland at 19. His gift of two shillings to his ten-year-old daughter for writing her biography shows us that he clearly valued his education. Yet the money he gave was likely his wife's, who in

1868 had no access or rights over her money once she married.

Goldstein was forthright, intelligent and determined. Inevitably she split from her father because of opposing political views. They are seen seated together in Parliament on 25 September in 1900 watching the suffrage bill once again being debated, he for the anti's and she for suffrage. He actively campaigned against the vote and Vida. Ultimately, he lost loses out, estranged from both his activist wife and his highly political daughter.

'That government of the People, by the People and for the People should mean all the People, not half', rings as true today as it did in 1891 when 30,000 signatures were presented in the Monster Petition demanding the right to vote. The vote for women shook the nation to the heart, changing the country for the good of all; everyone in Australia today is a beneficiary of this struggle, a struggle that is part of our important historical heritage. ▲

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*Queen Victoria
Hospital ...
was staffed by
women, run
by women and
for women no
matter what
their economic
situation.*

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