



**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT
COALITION**
**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION**

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Centenary of Federation Women's Petition 2001 – Women Shaping the Nation

Petition Project Report

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Summary and background to the Petition

The Women's Petition 2001 draws its inspiration from the Great Petition of 1891. Instrumental in gaining Victorian women the right to vote, the Great Petition secured more than 30,000 signatures and has both historical and political significance for women and the nation. In the spirit of the 1891 Petition, Victorian women have embraced the opportunity to constructively discuss major issues of concern in public forums, via the consultation process for the Women's Petition 2001.

Remarkably, the issues from across the State were very similar. • Achieving true equality for women was the key theme with a variety of other issues identified by various groups. For example, most workshops gave emphasis to environmental issues, in the rural areas specific issues were concern for water quality and quantity.

How the issues were identified – the consultation process

More than 2,000 Victorian women participated in workshops held around the State to identify the issues that form the Women's Petition 2001. The response from the workshops was outstanding - 73 councils participated and 128 workshops were held state-wide with the size of workshops varying according to the size and strength of the community.

The Petition and the workshops have attracted significant interest from all sectors of the community. The rural community was vocal in its support with strong attendance at local workshops and those held in major provincial cities. Indigenous women-attended workshops held across the state and also at the specially convened workshop held at the Centenary of Federation office in Melbourne. The ethnic community responded enthusiastically and the background paper on the project was translated into 8 community languages and made available to Councils by the Women Shaping- the Nation Project Committee. Young women also participated in the process through the involvement of Victorian secondary schools from both rural and metropolitan areas.

Signing the Petition

The Petition was available for signature at local government offices, community libraries and facilities, as well as through all peak, community and women's organisations. It was downloadable from www.federation.vic.gov.au/40 (now defunct). Victorian women had until 24 April 2001 to sign the Petition, after which time it was collated and presented to the Women Shaping the Nation event at Parliament House on May 7 and subsequently formally tabled in Parliament.

2. Petition Project Report

Introduction

As part of Centenary of Federation Victoria, the Women Shaping the Nation Event was to celebrate 100 years of achievement by and for women; and to re-affirm the opportunity for women to shape the nation for the future. The event held on Monday, 7 May 2001 had two key purposes, to acknowledge those women who were instrumental in achieving the right to vote and to stand for Parliament, and to honour those women who have been pioneers in their chosen fields during the past 100 years.

Objectives of the WSTN Event

To create awareness and understanding of the achievements and contributions of women to Victorian society over the past 100 years.

To acknowledge the on-going struggle by women for equity.

To ensure a sense of confidence in the future and affirmation of the role of women in the continuing development of our nation.

Background and Description

In Australia, the movement for Federation was paralleled by the movement for the right of women to vote. Because of this parallel movement, Australia in 1902 became the second nation in the world to grant white women the right to vote and sit in the Parliament.

In 1891, two women suffragist organisations combined to collect a petition after the Premier of Victoria had said that he would introduce a Bill for Women's suffrage if it were demonstrated that ordinary women wanted the vote. Within 6 weeks, 30,000 signatures were gathered from across Victoria. Throughout the colony, women knocked on doors and wrote to the newspapers thus gaining support for women's suffrage. Quite a remarkable achievement given the developing conditions in the colony and the lack of modern communications.

The petition was called the Monster Petition, as it was the largest ever collected in Australia, and remains one of the largest. When presented to Parliament it needed several attendants to carry it in.

To celebrate this great achievement and to put forward the issues that concern women today, the concept of gathering a new petition was devised. The concept was developed within the 2001 Steering Committee and drawn from the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition. It involved working with local Councils in Victoria to engage the women of Victoria in the process. A Council Kit was produced to assist Council's involvement. Seventy two out of 78 Councils registered to participate in the project. Those not participating were Monash, Moira, Pyrenees, Murrindindi, Wangaratta and Strathbogie.

Issues Workshops

The process for gaining the petition was in two stages.

The first stage was to hold workshops with local women in Victorian municipalities. In 3 weeks in February and early March 2001, 128 workshops were held across Victoria for women to identify their major issues for the next century. Over 2000 women participated in the workshops.

The number of women participants in each workshop varied from small groups to large gatherings. Many women commented on the fact that it was a constructive and compelling exercise. An article from Mildura captures many of the comments received

The 128 workshops identified the 5 major issues for each particular area. These were then put into a database and the most prominent issues formed the basis of the petition.

The formation of the substance of the Petition took place over 3 days. The Committee found it hard to encapsulate all the issues and the emotion generated by the workshops but in the end managed to include all the major issues and indicate the breadth and depth generated by the workshops. A preamble and 8 issues formed the petition

Petition Signing

The petition was then returned to each municipality and made available for signing at local community centres such as libraries, recreation centres, Maternal and Child Health Centres and Senior Citizen Centres. It is also available through women's organisations, tertiary education campuses and other community groups.

The petition was in the community for sign up period of 4 weeks, although the date was extended a further week to allow time for signing of copies of the petition printed in the Age and some suburban newspapers. In the end over 41,000 signatures were collected. The City of Greater Dandenong had an active group of women who went into shopping centres and markets collecting signatures

Presentation at the Event

A visually stunning event culminated in the presentation of the petition to the Premier of Victoria, Mr Steve Bracks. After a few practice runs on a crisp Melbourne morning, the event started at 8.30am. On the Parliament House steps were gathered 1000 schoolgirls from Melbourne Girls College, 500 each side.

A utility drove up with a trailer carrying the collated petitions in 50 boxes painted in the feminist colours purple, green and white. A group of tap dancers in blue overalls and wearing miners hard hats, tapped their way down the steps, they unloaded the boxes to some women in Driza-bone coats with Akubra hats. Then they were passed up the chain of women on the steps to the tune of a women's military band. The women box passers included many women mayors and councillors, different ethnic women, indigenous women, heads of organisations, sheep farmers, and unionists.

As a petition was presented to the Premier, the stilt walkers of the Women's Circus in black ballooning gowns, hats and gloves moved in to tower above the official party. There were a few short speeches and the schoolgirls released a sky of green, purple and white balloons. A great fun event! The petition boxes then went inside for formal presentation to 800 women in both Houses of the Parliament.

The official tabling of the petition in the Parliament took place on May 31 " 2001.

Comment on and Issues of the Process

Participation by Local Government Councils

The timelines for the project were very tight. This was compounded by the Christmas and Easter holiday breaks. In particular, the notification of the Councils took place over the Christmas recess. For a project such as this, most officers will report to the elected representatives before proceeding. This mostly occurred and therefore the responses to participate took some time to come in.

Three letters were initially sent to the Councils about the project. Separate letters to the Mayor and councillors, to the CEOs, and also to all women councillors. The women councillors were often instrumental in gaining Council participation. Gaining the participation of 72 Councils with such tight timelines was marvellous. The only parts of Victoria not covered were some of upper Central Victoria. And Monash was the only metro Council not participating although it did collect signatures for the petition.

Council Briefings and Kit

The three workshops held to brief the Councils were well attended and successful. The Councils that participated at briefings were generally more committed and knowledgeable about the process. Putting the Kit on the web site was also successful. It meant that Councils could get the information quickly and information was not lost as it filtered its way through the organisation.

The Kit was also adapted and went out to 1000 schools thus raising awareness and gaining some direct involvement by schools. Members of the community were able to access the Kit, gain background information, and become more aware of the process. The web site meant that the Councils could easily access further information as it became available.

Local Workshops

One of the major benefits of the Kit was that it indicated to Councils the steps in process and, with the provision of draft media releases and advertisements, busy officers felt they could manage the process. The effort put in by many rural Councils was remarkable. Workshops were held in small townships thus giving them a sense of involvement. Some townships are still smarting over Council amalgamations and often the women Councillors went out to conduct the workshops themselves.

Once the project was underway an e-mail list was developed to facilitate quick two-way communication. Many officers expressed appreciation of this facility. It meant they were not left out there to run the project in isolation, as often occurs. They were connected to a big group of people and were an active part of the wider process.

Overall, the workshops were a resounding success. Some Councils reported it was the best community development exercise they had held in a long time and they are planning to follow through with further action.

Forming the Petition

Analysis of the workshop results took longer than expected as we initially thought we would be dealing with the results from about 50 workshops not 128! Some workshop returns managed to include a multitude of issues in a single sentence. It indicates the concern of women that important matters should not be left out.

The breadth and depth of the issues raised also made it difficult to frame the wording of the petition. However, the petition did arrive back to the Councils on time. Feedback on the wording of the petition was sometimes slow in coming back, but is crucial in understanding the thinking of many women.

Comment on Petition Content

The most consistent concern was that it was too feminist. Many Australian women are not comfortable in pushing for themselves and they are often modest. This is admirable in many

respects but it can lead to stark neglect of women. Comment was made about the emphasis on health and education services for girls and women. Women wanted these for the sons and husbands too. This is natural, women are very inclusive generally, and men were certainly not excluded by the statements. The issue is that what is good for women is usually good for all; unfortunately the reverse does not apply. However, many men recognised these issues and were supportive of the petition.

A minority were hostile and made comments that women had too much already and if they had the intelligence they would be in positions of power. There was sometimes the threat that if women became too pushy the men would take away what women had achieved! Power is not given away easily.

The issue of equal representation in decision making was sometimes seen as the government introducing a quota system. Attention was drawn to the careful wording 'that this was government delivering for and with women and communities'. Any action to be taken needs broad community acceptance.

A further frequent comment was that women have achieved all that was on the petition. This is amazing especially in light of the workshop issues from across Victoria. There seemed to be an age group around "30 something" which were more inclined to this opinion. The comments from a Women's Officer at Deakin University epitomised these comments. She was against feminism and when asked what she did in her role gave the example of organising self-defence classes for women!

The issue of safety for women and children was mentioned in many workshops, particularly the issue of enforcement of legislation. This was a major issue 100 years ago and it was concerning to see it so prominent today. Schoolgirls saw this as an issue also. Therefore, we seem to have the "30 something" age group seeing things a bit differently. There seems to be an attitude that if the individual cannot make it then that is their fault. Also in this age group, it is clear that some are so busy surviving with family, work and debts that they cannot concentrate on broader issues. This was highlighted in some responses from the growth corridors of Melbourne.

A final issue with the wording of the petition concerns the statement on reconciliation. There was anger expressed as this being included in parts of upper central Victoria and along the Murray, particularly Gannawarra Shire. There were a few individual comments from Melbourne [what about white women!]. On the other hand most were very supportive of the inclusion of the statement.

Signing the Petition

The combination of these issues meant that the sign up was less spontaneous than expected. The passive approach of getting it out into the community and relying on individuals signing worked to a certain extent but there are lessons to be learned.

Firstly, putting the petition on the web site and expecting women to download it, sign and send off, did not work. The web site was great for working with the Councils and referring the community to further information, but it was not for petition signing.

The signatures collected by Councils were by far the greatest success, and it is not surprising as they were involved from the outset, their publicity had been good and there was a sense of ownership. The women's organisations, unions, universities, and work organisations found it harder. It would have been good to have teams of women organised and prepared to spend some time at gatherings or in shopping centres gaining signatures. The councils that were organised in this way did best. Greater Dandenong was an outstanding example collecting 6729 signatures.

I had a table outside Melbourne Town Hall for a few days a week for 3 weeks, and with some enthusiastic helpers we collected over 2000 signatures. This exercise also gave great insight into what people thought of the concept and content of the petition.

A final comment on the petition wording -Many commented on the antiquated wording and objected to being 'humble petitioners', lick-spittle fawning is not an Australian characteristic.

In comparison with the 1891 petition sign-up the following comments are made. The women of the colony had been agitating for the vote for over 30 years, and they had a single focus. When the Premier said he would respond to ordinary women's wishes, a well established network sprang into action and they had a passion driving them. In 2001 the passion is there for some, but this petition bit the majority of women without them being aware of the process and content. In this context, many were happy to sign when approached but would not have gone out of their way to sign up. It is also interesting to note that in the last 10 years the average size of Victorian petitions has been 1,400.

Publicity

The publicity for the petition was good and bad. Most Councils were very successful in gaining good local press cover. Metropolitan Melbourne was much harder and more use could have been made of radio and talk-back. Eventually, advertising space was bought in the Age and Leader suburban newspapers. This was very successful in gaining awareness and signing. About 10-15% of signatures were gained this way. The interesting feature was how many returns had multiple signatures. The newspaper petition had clearly been passed around workplaces and groups for signing. However, a much better defined and committed communication strategy would have resulted not only in greater awareness but also in discussion of the issues thus taking us into the future

In the end over 40,000 signatures were collected in a short space of time, mainly over 4 weeks. This is an achievement especially considering that the average petition size in the past 10 years was 1,400. The Women Shaping the Nation Event was a great success and did achieve the aim of honouring the past and taking us forward. The final issue is how to take us forward.

Future Action

There is need of an organisation to drive the petition forward. The Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition has formed the steering committee for the petition and should be asked whether they can play a role. Of course their main focus is on getting women elected to Council so they may look for further alliances to assist. They have Local Government peak bodies on their Committee and this is an important link.

One idea would be to conduct an Annual Audit of progress made on petition issues. This could involve community feedback on perceived progress and relevance of the issues with time and any suggested changes. Local women could be surveyed to ascertain their commitment to the issues and to report on their actions to gain change. Councils might develop their own plan of action to follow up on the issues raised in their workshops. They might wish to establish regional or state-wide links to push for change.

Clearly, there is much to be achieved and the fresh momentum gained from this project should not be lost.

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