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Doing local politics differently - doing it better.

Transforming the culture of local politics so that it better reflects the needs and hopes of women for themselves, their families and communities.

"It is not women against men, it is women and men; and not that the world will be a better place if women run it, but that the world will be a better place if women who bring their perspective share in running it."

Indira Patel (2002), British Women's National Commission, International Federation of Business and Professional Women quoted in The Age 4 Oct 2002

Alice Aird and Linda Bennett in partnership with Victorian women, November 2005

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Indigenous acknowledgement

You are likely to be reading this on land where Indigenous people have been in the past, are now, and will be in the future. We acknowledge and thank the traditional owners of the land, and their elders, for their custodianship.

Dedication

The paper is for the women who worked with the SCWP Project between 2001 and 2004, and others like them. It is to support anyone who wishes to explore, practice, and contribute to the evolution of a different political culture – one in which politicians and involved community members are able to be authentically their good human selves and can respectfully allow others to be so.

Thanks to the Victorian Women's Trust, and all past and present members of the WPILG Coalition. Special thanks to the Women in Local Leadership networks who developed action plans to achieve better representation of women in their communities, and some of whom were able to come to a study group which contributed to the development of this paper. The detailed and thoughtful comments made by many others who read drafts are much appreciated.

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Abstract

The Women's Participation in Local Government (WPILG) Coalition, a non-party political coalition made up of nine State-wide Local government, women's and community groups and committed individuals was formed in 1996. It continues to work towards two primary goals - first, equal representation in Victorian Local governments , and more recently, changing the culture of local politics so that it better reflects the hopes and concerns of women for themselves, their families and their communities.

In 2000, WPILG created the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) project, funded by the Victorian Government Community Support Fund between 2001 and 2004. The SCWP Project worked specifically towards the goals of increasing the numbers and the campaigning skills of women candidates for Victorian local governments, supporting women Councillors and creating innovative models to promote good governance in relation to gender.

Over time, a shared understanding emerged within the Coalition that simply having more elected women Councillors was not going to achieve fundamental changes in the balance of power in Local governments and communities. Working in partnership with women in the community, the SCWP Project's work evolved towards using power in a different kind of way from that traditionally seen in the local government and community spheres. As a result, the WPILG Coalition has broadened its focus from being only concerned with getting women into Local government, to addressing at the same time what frequently happens when women get into positions of formal political power.

Many women in Victoria are calling for a shift in the nature of our political culture, with politics defined in the broadest sense as "the way we use power". Here we are not talking about political parties, but about how politics is "done", with a particular focus on local community and Local government. The simpler term "doing politics differently" is used in preference to terms such as "alternative paradigm" and "transformative leadership".

Women are primary change agents in wanting and leading a transformation of our political culture, because of their strong presence in community endeavours and issues and their consciousness of the limits of traditional leadership practices.

The paper describes features of a different political culture, definitions which have emerged from the values and leadership practices of women around Victoria. Some implications of doing politics differently are explored in relation to ideas about power, citizenship, diversity, leadership, conflict and personal benefits of being "in politics".

A number of practical scenarios of a different, and better, political culture are presented, and their features and implications are explored.

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Introduction

The story of this paper begins with the response of concerned women and men to a decline in the numbers of women elected to Local Governments following the Council amalgamations in Victoria between 1995-1997. Their action to address concerns about inequities in women's representation in Victorian local government included the formation of the Women's Participation in Local Government (WPILG) Coalition in 1997. (*For more details about WPILG Coalition see footnote below* [1] *and Appendix 1.)*

One initiative created by the WPILGC in partnership with the Victorian State Government was the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) Project. The ideas expressed in this paper about women in local government and community leadership evolved between 2001 – 2004 through the work of the SCWP Project and have continued to develop through WPILGC's projects since then.

The SCWP Project, while working towards the goal of increasing the numbers of women candidates in Local Government elections, was able easily and naturally to form partnerships with women who wanted to see politics better reflect women's needs and interests. The articulation of these ideas was supported by earlier social and political change projects such as Purple Sage (1998) and Centenary of Federation Women's Petition (2001).

The women who attended SCWP's State-wide local workshops for women candidates and their supporters were generally well aware that women's actions in the sphere of local government were frequently limited and dictated by the culture of the environment in which they acted. This occurred despite the best of intentions. Frustration and disappointment was expressed both by elected women and by the women who hoped for more from them. The limitations of the political culture creates barriers of communication and understanding between women politicians, their supporters and their constituents which sometimes seems almost impenetrable.

The findings of *Moving On,* research exploring the reasons women Councillors retire from Local government (2003), describes the experiences of 19 of the 21 women Councillors who left Victorian office in the 2002 elections. While there were indeed many stimulating and positive aspects of

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[1]

The WPILGC was formed in 1996 in response to a decline in the number of women elected to local governments following council amalgamations in Victoria between 1995 and 1997. Its formation built on earlier work to encourage the participation of women in local government, described in Amanda Sinclair's work with Margaret Bowman and Lynne Strahan, *Getting the Numbers* (1987).

Coalition members include representatives of 9 State-wide local government, women's and other community organisations, and individual women Councillors and citizens. The current member organizations of the Coalition are: Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA) [Vic Branch], Local Government Professionals (LGPro), Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC), Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA), Victorian Women's Trust, Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) Victoria, Women's Planning Network Victoria, YWCA Victoria. In addition the Coalition has a support base of individual women, councillors, council officers and others who support its objectives. a number of women councillors, and a number of co-opted women.

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the role, these sat in contrast to the other side of life in politics. Their dis-satisfactions express well recognised aspects of the culture of Australian politics generally. There are stories of bad behaviour such as intimidation and bullying; failure of leadership to support behaviour consistent with good governance, strongly combative game play, a negative impact of Council life on other family members and general lack of support for those with carer responsibilities.

Sound familiar? These stories are also reflected in accounts from women in politics at both State and Federal government level, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja's decision to retire being the latest of many in this regard. The family unfriendly nature of politics has also been discussed by some prominent men in politics, including former Leader of the Opposition John Hewson and former leader of the Nationals, Tim Fischer.

For some women in local politics, and certainly for some who decide never to enter formal politics as a result, these issues have a deeper impact. Bad organisational and individual behaviour is often expressed towards women in a special way, for example, in jokes with a sexual edge or at the expense of personal appearance; or "blokey" behaviour which appears to deliberately exclude or put down women. These aspects can add up to a most unappealing environment in which to operate and achieve, and as a result politics misses out on some potentially excellent elected representatives.

These stories strengthen the case for different ways of being a politician. In education, business, and many other fields today, the ways we are asking adults and children to behave is based on values similar to those described in the following pages, as a vision for a different political culture. These values are also consistent with the principles of good local governance described in the Victorian *Good Governance Guide* 2004 (page 6), "Good governance is: participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, law abiding."

It seems that our politicians and the culture of the politics they operate in are removed from the experiences that most of us value highly. If that is the case, how can they truly respond to the needs and aspirations of the people?

This disconnect between the values ordinary people and politicians practice damages trust and good will in the community and exacerbates the growing cynicism and disillusionment with politicians in general.

This paper discusses the possibility of a transformed political culture which can be practiced in community and local government politics. Many of the women with whom the SCWP Project worked between 2001 and 2004 were, and are, seeking to be "political" in a way consistent with their behavioural aspirations in other spheres of their lives, including family, community and paid work. For them, a better way of being political and using power was grounded in a people-centred and power sharing culture.

Practices in formal politics in Australia are lagging behind much of 21st century thinking about the kinds of leadership needed to make our planet sustainable in its broadest sense. Thoughtful people all over the world are

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expressing their disillusionment with the established political processes even in the 'best' democracies. We believe that a new political culture which is more people centred, appreciative and power sharing is sought by many people, women and men, at least in Western democracies, and probably more widely in the world.

Yet, a way forward to something better is not clear. What is clear is that women can take a crucial leading role in articulating and practising another way of doing politics, one which better reflects the needs and hopes of women for themselves, their families and communities.

Political culture is established through deeply embedded sets of assumptions about how the world works. If part of the dominant culture, these assumptions are often hidden. They are deeply embedded in everyday practices which are simply unquestioned – "it's just how things are". This is what many people say about politics and politicians. Women are well placed to lead a change towards doing politics differently because of their strong presence in community endeavours and issues and their consciousness of the limits of traditional leadership practices, ironically most often through being excluded from them.

The warning bells ring when rhetoric is long and practice is short. An example close to home is the Victorian Local Government Women's Charter which describes three principles of good governance: gender equality, diversity and encouraging the active citizenship of women. Councils, and perhaps even community organisations and groups, may adopt the Charter relatively easily, but to translate the principles into effective local practices is, while clearly worthwhile, a challenging long term endeavour. (Examples of how this can be done are available on the WPILG webpage).

Additionally it is worth noting that, while the good local governance principles in the Good Governance Guide mentioned earlier are consistent with the "doing politics differently" principles described here, a further leap is required before these principles reflect the richness and complexity of effective practice.

Recognising that women may take roles as primary change agents in the enormous task of changing our political culture, does not infer that they automatically possess some kind of moral superiority. Some women operate in ways which fit the traditional way of doing politics, and some men are certainly doing politics differently. Although women in general appear to have a stronger interest in actively re-fashioning the way community leadership and politics is done, women cannot be burdened with the major responsibility to fix the difficult and unsolved issues of societal life, create peace, harmony and so on. The articulation of a different way to do politics can shed light on the pathways ahead, by defining the common features in what we are doing. It can lighten the load, by aligning the power of many in working towards a more clearly defined new culture of politics.

When women work with a set of values about community, and a consciousness of gender, the possibility exists for transforming the way power is used and politics is practiced (Rayner 2003). Broadly, "feminism" is consistent with the different political culture discussed in this paper. As

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Anne Oakley (p. 36) says, "(There is…) a moral obligation at the heart of feminism: to treat others as one would oneself wish to be treated".

The feminism we are talking about draws on women's experiences and perspectives. These include the fact of women's bodies, womsn as overwhelmingly the primary carers of the young and the old, and women as a group glaringly absent from the places where key decisions are made for society. While women frequently share these experiences, this kind of feminism does not assume that all women share the same attributes, experiences, circumstances or harms. It also pays attention to the effects of institutions, policies and ideas on women's well being and opportunities (Young 1990).

A different political culture combines ideas about politics and power with some new thinking about leadership. Whether you classify your self as a "leader" or "doing leadership" or as a "politician" or "engaging in politics", you are essentially talking about how and why you want to get, use and keep power for the goals you have in mind (Kirner and Rayner 1999).

> *"(Women) are forging a different way of doing politics – generally less hierarchical, more participatory and committed to democratic practices, more informal. Above all, they are trying to inject enjoyment and fun into the political process as a way of generating energy and harnessing enthusiasm".*
>
> (Ruth Lister 1997, p153)

A different political culture – guiding principles

Talking of a new or 'different' culture of politics is talking about how politics is "done" at community level, that is, not about political parties but about the current practice of politics. From the outside, current practices seem remarkably similar in all major political parties and at all levels of formal politics. This mainstream political culture is often reflected in community and local government politics.

Due to the all-encompassing nature of mainstream political culture, it is difficult to go against the grain. For example, the Greens Party aspires to practice politics in a different way (Rice 2004). However it also appears from real life stories, that in many cases the Greens have played the old game just as hard as the traditional political parties. This goal of doing politics differently can be extraordinarily difficult to achieve in mainstream political culture.

In this different political culture, the underlying principles include:

- the full range of leadership qualities of people are valued and fostered, rather than a narrow band of traditional leadership qualities being overvalued [2]

- [2] For example, the archetype of corporate leadership homogeneity described by Sinclair embodies heroism, physical and emotional toughness, self reliance, openness to extraordinarily long hours and

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- the contribution of women, moulded by their gendered life experiences (eg, as primary carers; child bearers, and having differing life opportunities due to gender) is assumed to be essential to good decision making
- there is creative collaboration and cooperation among diverse people and sub-cultures towards serving the common good
- politics is practiced as an appreciative, people centred and power sharing art
- the process of using power is valued as of equal importance to outcomes
- consultation and collaboration is genuinely practiced and supports people's belief in their transformative power
- community and political leadership is more about listening and learning than telling.

One approach to articulating the differences between the traditional and the "new" is shown in the following table

"Old" thinking about doing politics	"Emerging" thinking about doing politics
One path to the truth	Multiple pathways to understanding
Man as master of nature	Humans as part of nature
Individualism	Individualism and communitarianism
Reason	Reason and emotion
Masculine	Feminine and masculine
Humans as material beings	Humans as material and spiritual beings
Isolation	Interaction
Ends oriented	Process and ends oriented
Hierarchy	Balance
Strength is assertiveness and aggression	Strength is patience , tolerance and assertiveness
Linear thinking	Multi-faceted thinking
One way communication	Networking
Assimilation of difference by dominant culture	Co-operation among diverse cultures
Separation of the private and the public domains	Integration of the private and the public domains

Christa Daryl Slaton (1988):

Focus on local government and community leadership

Many people agree about the need for some kind of fundamental change in the way that politics is done at all levels of government. In this paper the focus is on a local political culture. Local Governments, as the most

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sacrifice of family and personal time, prowess or interest in sporting culture, and so on,,,(2005, p. 44-45). A similar list could be drawn up for political leadership.

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accessible level of formal political power, and communities are the "best chance" sites for practice and success in practising a different way of doing leadership and politics.

There exists in Local government and community politics a rich potential for changing the culture of politics. The closeness of the elected politicians to the community, the relative access of ordinary citizens to candidacy and potential office, the manageable size of the organisations, and the transformative potential inherent in local democracy offer many opportunities to influence a change.

A political culture for the 21st century

The political behaviours described in this paper are not new – they can be observed and are experienced in many successful community groups and organisations, and in some cases in formal politics. We face unique challenges in the 21st century, such as accelerating change, globalisation, environmental degradation and global warming, the gender revolution, ageing populations (Eckersley 2004, Mackay 2004, Whitney 2005). If we were able to mainstream co-operation, dialogue and respectful treatment of humans and the planet in politics we would be in a strong position to meet these challenges.

The guiding principles which we have listed above (page 8-9) are considered admirable, and in some cases operate strongly, in spheres of leadership outside formal politics. Some examples can be seen in neighbourhood and community organisations, in women's services (Weeks 1994), in some areas of political activism (Kirner and Rayner 1998, Nash 2005, Rayner 2003, Rice 2004, Victorian Women's Trust 2004), in the practice of community development (Ife 1995, Beilharz 2002), in education (Astin and Astin 2000, Australian Government 2005) in the business leadership field (Rhode 2003, Sinclair 2005), in leadership theory and practice (Rost 1991}, in some families (Biddulph 1995, Mellor and Mellor 2001). This way of operating, this culture, can be practised successfully in formal politics, and especially in local government and community politics.

At its most fundamental level, it is a culture which reflects how many of us would like to see our society encourage children to behave to others and be treated by others. It is a way which many of us would like to act in our parenting, caring and friendship roles. It consciously names and values successful ways of using power which many women and men aspire to in their intimate relationships, family and community endeavours, a way of using power which is collaborative, appreciative and expansive. This is a culture which has a strong link to our day-to-day lives – it is a politics fitting for a civil society (Cox 1995).

The following section explores in more detail the values and qualities aligned with a political culture fit for a civil society. Central concepts of power, citizenship, diversity, community strengthening, leadership, conflict and an examination of the personal benefits involved, offer different angles on the principles and practices of a better way of doing politics.

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Power

Having power is a core component of effective political citizenship. Citizens can only truly participate when they believe, and actually have, transformative influence or power. It is only in these conditions that citizenship is widely seen as a worthwhile pursuit. (Dr. Rosemary Kiss, December 2004).

This paper uses the word power in the sense that Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner use it in *The Women's Power Handbook (1998).* "Having power is about setting your own agenda. Not reacting to, responding to or resisting others…. Power is acting collectively, persuading, consulting and influencing – not bullying or bossing….. Looking for win-win outcomes, it is democratic – involves empowering others… power (is seen) as a verb not a noun, power is meant to be shared – power is not to be gained by taking away others' (power)." (p.6).

The language of power which describes purpose for the common good - participatory and transformational - is expressed by words like "empowering, co-operating, consensus building" (Jahan 2000). Another way of saying this is "power 'with' rather than power 'over". (Women in Local Leadership network meeting July 2005).

The shift in thinking is based on the simple idea that in a democracy "Everyone has power. If you don't use it yourself, others will take yours and use it themselves, so you may as well use your own share of it." (Joan Kirner, 2003). As Ambassador Gertrude Monghella of Tanzania (2003) expresses it: "Everyone in the world has a seat to sit upon. But many find that they are being sat upon as if invisible."

These powerful analogies can be applied to both personal and collective power. Effectively using collective power however, is far more complex and requires a good understanding of processes and structures which help and hinder the desired outcomes. In order to do politics better, a profound understanding of structural issues which favour some and exclude others is required. Simple examples of structural issues at the local level include what time of day meetings are held, business being done informally on men's day at the golf club, whether someone can afford to take time off work or carer responsibilities to attend to Council business.

As citizens in a democracy, we can give away our power to a varying extent to those in 'positions of power'. Alternatively, we can choose to use our power as fully as we are able, while respecting the power of others. As active citizens or elected representatives, we can choose to avoid reducing or commandeering the power of others, instead affording them the fullest possible power as citizens. This involves treating others with respect and providing ways to consult and collaborate, actively practicing listening and learning from others. It is about how we actually treat people as human beings.

Eva Cox (1995) in painting a vision of a different kind of society argues passionately and forcefully that "forces – (such as) trust, reciprocity and

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mutuality - survive in our everyday lives but are not reflected in public policy and therefore (we as human beings) are losing ground". (p.1)

In discussing the contribution of former Czechoslovakian President Vaclav Havel (1989-2003) to a new politics, Louise Morley and Jim Ife (2002) assert that Havel worked to construct a new mainstream politics linking the personal with the political. Havel says, "There is an apparent demarcation between life and politics, which deprives political discourse of substance. In relying too heavily on the rational discourse to provide answers to the meaning of our existence, we have become "over-rationalised" and our personal knowledge is either not valued or we lose faith in it. (Havel 1991).

Havel suggests that in losing the sense of "personal knowledge", we also lose a sense of responsibility that goes with this knowledge. Morley and Ife contend that Havel's new politics is different because his analysis is grounded in his lived experience.

While this paper is deliberately non-party political in its focus, it seems important to refer to elements of the Greens approach to politics. In one of the very few written accounts of practices in collaborative decision making in Australian local politics, Janet Rice (2004) describes her personal experiences of moving from a collaborative, consensus based decision making culture in the environmental movement and in her political party (the Greens) into the voting culture of local government as a Councillor. She asserts that: "particularly (in) the case where there has been community opposition... My background in consensus tells me that if we could .....get all the players together to hear from each other, understand where others are coming from and see if we could work out an alternative way of going forward..." then community outcomes would be better.

Our reflections on Rice's discussion lead us to conclude that consensus decision making as an element of a different way of doing politics needs further study, particularly to see how well it could actually work in Local government. As Rice notes, the big challenge is to skill and resource people to do consensus well, and this in itself requires a shift in thinking and resources.

Rounaq Jahan (2000) addressing Asian women in politics, explores the idea that women need to embrace the goal of transforming political institutions in order to promote common good, sustainable development and empowerment. She passionately argues for a transformation in politics and governance based on empowering rather than power, cooperating rather than competition, and consensus building rather than domination. "In such a paradigm, power can be an instrument of liberation, inclusion and equity, and inextricably linked to human rights." (Jahan, p.2).

Even for those who aspire to these high intentions, our habitual way of doing things is so deeply embedded we often fall short of our aspirations, especially under pressure. However, with a strong commitment to such intentions, with practice and useful support, anyone who aspires to use power in these ways can do so.

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> *"We want women to use power in their own way, and to be proud of it. We want women to use power to protect and promote what women care about, because we believe that when women have as much power as men, it will make the lives of all women, men and children better",*
>
> *(Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner 2003* p7)

Citizenship

Doing politics differently requires an inclusive approach to citizenship. Here, citizenship includes every human being, regardless of the right to vote, formal residency status or age. Children and young people, for example, have citizenship through their parents and other advocates and through mechanisms whereby their voices are heard directly and responded to.

Citizenship in this more inclusive and gendered approach has the following characteristics:

- recognises *social* citizenship as an important kind of citizenship, which is frequently practiced by women in their community roles, but is often unacknowledged and not valued by the dominant political culture (Lister 1997).
- views not only citizenship itself as a right, but also opportunities to *act* as a citizen.
- acknowledges women in general as already deeply involved in political participation in its broadest sense, which means they bring a particular kind of political competence to citizenship as a result.
- accepts evidence that women citizens expect women politicians to represent women in special ways (Cumberland 2000, Kirner and Rayner 1998, Summers 2003, VWT 2004).

In doing politics differently and better, women citizens and elected women can work in active partnership to address women's concerns.

The idea of women creating a new kind of political culture has an excellent intellectual basis, for example, the work of Ruth Lister about women and citizenship (Lister 1997), Anne Phillips (1996 and 2001) in relation to local democracy and women, and Meer and Sever (2004) in their discussion about gender and citizenship in development work around the world. Meer and Sever list a number of strategies for campaigning to improve the participation of women, such as paying attention to issues normally left out of citizenship discussion, e.g., safety in the home and childcare. Their work offers case studies from around the world which illustrate exactly the shift required in our political paradigm to encourage participation, deep democracy and rich governance for communities.

Moira Rayner (2003) presents her analysis of why and how some women politicians are able to "do it differently". One of her main contentions is that the women who been active in their local communities tend to find it more natural to "do politics differently". They take their experiences of

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friendships, trust and co-operation and "invest it in formal political structures".

Diversity

Diversity is central to the idea of a different political culture. In this context diversity means consciously working to create communication and action which seeks out and acknowledges diversity. An example of this mind-set might be:

- actively extending the hand of invitation to women who are "less likely" to think of local government as a place to make a difference. This means having diversity always in mind when planning events, campaigns, programs, policies. Asking questions such as: Who is missing? Who needs to know? What do we need to do to create invitation and welcome?
- providing learning opportunities, money, self-belief, mentors, training and coaching to compensate for traditional barriers created by exclusion or long standing absence from decision making tables.
- having a consciousness of excluded or absent groups and finding ways to build bridges.
- Having an approach which recognises that "looking for the truth of a story together requires compromise and consensus." (Women in community leadership study group 2005).

Ideas about how to act towards inclusion are central to the culture of politics discussed in this paper. Making the practice of diversity central to our way of operating presents a special challenge. The idea of choosing "unlike" goes against the grain of our predominant culture.

Some useful ideas and strategies from theory and practice include: the discussion by Simone De Beauvoir about the "other" [3] in the classic *The Second Sex* (1948); strategies for practice collected by Nira Yuval-Davis (1997). Dr Jacki Huggins, Aboriginal writer, activist and academic, in telling a character forming story from her own life identifies recognition and respect as the main ingredients of successful diversity practices (National Partnership for Equity Conference, QLD 2005). A very simple, respectful and public acknowledgment of her Indigenous heritage when she was very young by a white primary school teacher, gave a kick start to her journey as a proud and successful Indigenous woman.

Simple words- recognition, respect - but ones which have profound power if genuinely practiced at individual, group and organisational level.

Community strengthening

Community strengthening or development is a way of working which is entirely consistent with the new culture in that it involves

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[3] De Beauvoir in her book The Second Sex (1948) discusses the negative effects of gender on women's lives. She explores the relationship of Self to Other as a relationship of normality to marginality, a power relationship based on opposition and prone to violence in order to protect the norm. The concept of the Other and the Norm (the normal self) can used to describe problematical relationships where oppression is evident such as in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and religion. <http://www.adamranson.freeserve.co.uk/>

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- using processes which help communities identify their own solutions to their own needs and priorities
- contributing to the community's capacity to act on its concerns, rather than the group's actual achievements of particular outcomes
- a commitment to the principles of participation, empowerment, equity and social justice
- encouraging community groups to reflect on their organisational culture to ensure good governance in its richest sense
- working at all levels of organisations to create a multi-faceted and consistent good governance.

Jim Ife (1995) lists 22 principles of community development. Included are confronting social disadvantage, supporting human rights, sustainability, empowerment, the link between the personal and the political, community building, the relationship between process and outcome, non-violence, inclusiveness, consensus, co-operation and participation. All are integral to doing politics better.

Equity is better served when the perspectives of all sections of the community contribute to community decision making. All around the globe, social organisations (e.g., United Nations, World Health Organisation) are expressing the fundamental understanding that when the needs of women in their diversity are well met, communities are more likely to prosper.

Leadership

The following ideas about leadership match the political culture we describe:

- the concept of *leadership* rather than of the traditional, individual, heroic *leader*
- leadership is fluid and people move in and out of leadership roles according to circumstances and their own capacities. This is how many women "do" leadership in their family and community work.
- relational leadership, i.e. leadership which is not about "I" but the space between the "I's" in which we relate to each other (Whitney 2005)
- transformational leadership: leadership which aims to bring about fundamental change in the way things are done.
- leadership as a group practice: a group exercise of power and influence – a leadership group works together to change something (Rost1991).
- leadership undertaken with an awareness of gender so that the inner and outer barriers for women in leadership are acknowledged and addressed. Barriers include resistance and conflict from those with a stake in maintaining the status quo. They also include powerful unconscious forces - the fear of the feminine in the public domain - which are also related to the largely unconscious ambivalences about mothers and the feminine that both men and women feel (Sinclair 2005).

Doing political leadership differently is based on the idea that it is impossible for a leader to have all the answers. This goes against our prevailing political culture. Politicians and community leaders are used to taking pride in being the "fixers" and many citizens expect this as well. Yet we know that the best outcomes for local communities are when all who have a stake in the

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outcomes are involved in creating the solutions. The leadership we are describing is one where leaders work in a community development way.

> "In a field with such vast literature and pool of scholars, it is daunting, perhaps naive, to argue for a new concept of leadership. However, work in the areas of gender and sexualities has the capacity to give us new and radical ways of understanding patterns we have come to take for granted."
>
> (Amanda Sinclair 2001, p175)

While concepts of transformative and transformational leadership have been used since the 1980's, the 20th century industrial paradigm which equates leadership with management has hampered the full expression of leadership as a group or community process (Rost 1991).

Dianne Whitney (2005), a leading practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry, argues that we need leadership qualities and culture which will equip us to work better with the realities of the 21st century. The culture identified by Whitney as best able to respond to these challenges involves a significant change of paradigm. She suggests leadership practices of listening, dialogue, respecting, collaborating and non-aggressive communication are required.

Amanda Sinclair (2005) arguing that women do leadership differently, analyses the meeting between leadership, power, sexuality and gender. She concludes that executive leadership has been captured by one single construct of masculinity and this devalues or even excludes individuals and groups who are different in masculinity, sexuality or gender. The executive leaders with a different style, whether women or men, are self-reflective, authentic and able to express their full human-ness in the workplace.

Sinclair, like Rost (1991) and Astin and Astin (2000), sees leadership being exercised in most of our daily actions. Leadership is an "idea available for us to shape and re-form as the most important part of the work that we all do and the influence we have in our lives" (p. xi).

These statements of values match, in a compelling way, the concept of leadership and political culture that we are exploring while also raising questions about the practices which are going to support expression of these values.

Conflict

Community leadership, including in Local government, is generally undertaken within deeply conflicted environments. We may aspire to listen to diverse views, balance and make decisions to reach the best possible outcomes for the community. However, with passionate attachment to our opinions and ways of seeing the world, most of us have the capacity to come out fighting to protect what we see as our territory, attacking others to define our interests, struggling to become victors in the battle, shouting loudly to blank out opposing views, ignoring opinions which we don't respect, withdrawing in protest. We can be at our worst at these times.

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Seeing the world through a different leadership lens will enable more successful negotiation through conflict, the complex mix of personality, issue, needs, games and power struggles which is community politics. What's more, this pathway offers an authentic way for leadership to be rewarding for many women, and men, who are trying to hold fast to the values we have discussed in this paper.

However, it must be recognised that this path is neither easy nor clear. Individuals and groups who are seeking a different and better way of doing politics need to develop, and hold onto, a shared sense of what this new way of doing things is like. Learning to work through conflict in a new way requires conscious, self reflective and committed long term effort and the support of like-minded people to work with.

Personal benefits

For those practising "transformative" leadership described above, the personal benefits are potentially immense. Through consciously adopting and practicing this new way they are less likely to be caught in frustration with the current culture and more likely to maintain enthusiasm, clarity and sense of purpose. Their energies are less likely to be appropriated by the majority culture. There is great satisfaction in practicing leadership which is aligned with one's true values, as part of a greater endeavour.

Morley and Ife (2002. p.77) suggest for the field of social work, a perspective which is just as applicable to politics in our view. They label their approach as "a love of humanity" which offers no simple solutions but instead "revels in the complexity and wonder of human consciousness. It is a language that can and does make a difference because it is pleasing to our hearts. In doing so it creates a contagious energy that has the capacity to spread far and wide……it implies that there is meaning in working towards social transformation because humanity is more important than the inhuman systems that try to control and shape it."

One woman Councillor working from a 'different politics" approach said:

 'It's about doing things with no expectation of reward, without ego. Being focussed on being custodians, guiding, nurturing people's wellbeing. You can affect changes with *others, it's the diversity of people that actually brings about the best changes. Working with a diversity of values, with honesty, integrity, for the collective goodwill. Knowing where you draw the line. It's what a lot of people do when they run their families. It's cultural change from the bottom up. Fundamentally it's about love. It gives me self respect, endorphins, a sense of deep interest, authenticity, trust and friendship. "*

Women doing politics differently: practices in Local government and communities

We know that Australian women **want** their women leaders to ensure that decision making processes are more democratic and inclusive of women and community. Women expect their women politicians to understand

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women's needs better than men do. (Kirner and Rayner 1999; Summers 2003, VWT 2004).

Examples directly related to the local government sphere include the *Listening to Women's Voices* Survey (Women's Planning Network 2003) about how women wish to become involved in local planning issues; *Moving On* (2003), research about the reasons women choose to retire from their role as elected councillor; the findings of the *Women in Politics Survey* (Victorian Women's Trust 2004) and Anne Summers (2003) book *The End of Equality*.

In the management field, Amanda Sinclair's (2005) convincing research *Doing it Differently*, argues that there is a different, more collaborative and balanced style of leadership evident among women and some men. Rhodes, Meyerson and Ely (2003 p129-143) explore what stops women making a difference for other women within organisations. They offer an agenda for change to transform organisations. They advocate structural change to overcome barriers which have excluded women (but not all women) and many men as well; and using, as opposed to *adding*, different perspectives to transform organisational thinking and work practices.

The examples and scenarios sketched below are from real situations. Some were written by the women who experienced the events, others by us about stories we heard about. They are simply the beginning of collecting the numerous stories which we know are there.

Scenario 1: Elected women and women citizens in partnership

This is a story about how some women worked with their elected women Councillors in support of community child care services, at a time when there was a threat of a Council removing its support.

"The child care centres were under scrutiny by Council. At first there was not much panic until one parent circulated a letter indicating that we were in the line of fire. …Luckily for us, two female Councillors (were) very supportive of children's services." On reflecting on the success of their campaign to maintain Council commitment to child care services, the parents say, 'We found that our tactic of quiet, inquisitive caring about the problem (the Council were having) with making a decision worked really well. We made … a bit of a give and take game out of it… Our non-confrontational attitude was returned to us ten-fold… our approach was on the soft side to try to gain an inside leg and it worked for us. I don't think it would always be the way to go, but in this case it was certainly the right strategy." (*Community Child Care News Sheet* December 2004, p.6)

The approach as we see it was something like this:
"We're trying to get these things done, and we want to work with you to see where the overlaps are between how you and we see things. We are wanting to find out how and if you could help us get there. We want to understand and help you in doing your bit of this too. How can we work together on this? If we find that there is strong opposition from you so we can't work together, we will move on and find another door or window to get through …"

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The story illustrates ideas about cooperation between citizens and their elected leaders. The way of operating described places the Councillors and Council in a position of assumed cooperation and goodwill with engaged citizens rather than assumed opposition and resistance. It accepts difference and disagreement, while being able to identify a degree of alignment where it is there. It avoids putting the Councillors in a position similar to a parent with clamouring children tugging to get what they want. It believes in the possibility that everyone can get enough of what they want, that creative solutions can be found. It is strategic, because it is based on alert listening - you know pretty soon when you've met someone who is not going to support you in any of your goals and you can move on instead of battling with intransigency.

Scenario 2: Engaging in respectful dialogue about opposing views

In rural Victoria, a group of citizens was working in support of asylum seekers. Their local Member of Parliament was unsympathetic to their cause, but they had identified his support as one of key factors in making progress. They started off by inviting him to a public meeting which was highly charged, and emotional. They observed that he was annoyed and puzzled by their views and finally worried that he had underestimated the depth of community feeling on this issue. The next step was taken by him – he made efforts to find out more about the issue and (unbeknownst to the group) started to grapple with a fundamental clash between his personal values and the official line of his Party. He started to seek further discussion with the action group in small deputations, rather than via potentially hostile and unproductive public meetings. He became an important advocate for change in Federal policy from the inside.

The action group now works with him like this: "Any problems are put to him as things to be solved, not outrages that he must take the blame for. While still angered at so many aspects of this whole area of Government policy, we've learnt that it's better to bring about what small changes we can, in our own community, than simply berate our elected politician for the bigger picture items. You could say that his personal "road to Damascus" conversion was serendipity, but we quickly learnt to build on it, and regard him now as a friend."

In this story, again co-operation and respectful communication becomes the turning point in making progress. The community group is able to identify when a crack in the door opens, and moves quickly to take full advantage of it. Rather than retaining the initial confrontational stance, which was also important in setting the scene to create the change, they adapt to the preferred style of the person they seek to communicate with. They make progress for their issue.

Scenario 3: Dealing with conflict for a positive outcome

A new Councillor was elected. She had a very young baby and her circumstances made it imperative that she was able to get access to non-parental child care which suited her child's needs. The issue of how much she would be able to claim and in what circumstances was a focus for

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conflict among the Councillors and the potential for personal character attack on her was high. Councillors appeared to have a variety of apparently irreconcilable views. An external mediator was engaged and following a discussion which reached consensus, a vote was taken with unanimous agreement for the allowance to be paid. A workable policy for the future was laid down. Women and men Councillors participated equally in this process. The idea came from a male Councillor.

Features of this story which stand out include early recognition of the potentially conflictual issue (child care allowance for councillors); preparedness to use an external mediator to create the discussion on the issues; encouraging beliefs, views, and feelings to be aired in a closed meeting. As a result of the mediation process, consensus is reached. The scene is set for future strategy in similar situations where personal circumstances of Councillors and the way politics can be played make it very difficult to reach a fair decision able to be justified to the community.

Scenario 4: Consciously adopting a different political culture 1

A group of strongly motivated women with young families started a new environmental action group which focussed on environmental action in the home. The group lasted over a decade and had such success in its advocacy and awareness rasing on these issues that other environmental groups and governments took the issues up and major environmental and behavioural changes were achieved.

This group operated in a 'new paradigm' way in some formal and some informal senses. The central core, and the quite large volunteer group which came and went with special events, operated with a lot of trust and from strong common purpose. Decision making was by the core group of five. Consensus was the preferred option, but voting was used for major decisions when consensus could not be reached. Extensive discussion always occurred before a vote and in general little bitterness followed if some were outvoted. There was little faction forming or negativity over such issues. A charter defining the values and the practical goals of the group was written. The group acted by focussing on one clear simple goal issue which could be successfully achieved. Success translated into self-confidence and empowerment. This was seen to happen in many instances for members of the group. Some went on to paid employment as a result of their learning in this group, others moving on to initiate other social action.

All members of the original core group were partnered women with children who lived similar lives in the same suburb. They were passionate, active, committed, personally responsible, positive and appreciative women who inspirationally 'walked their talk'. The focus was on taking positive action rather than overemphasizing the problems, on helping people take responsible action rather than making them feel guilty. After a few years, the original core group invited one younger member who added a range of skills and attracted significant grant funds. This expanded the capacity of the group to communicate with its members and to advocate, through a newsletter and a website.

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Interestingly the group's success was also the beginning of its end. The main environmental goal became firmly established on government and NGO agendas. The group no longer stood out as an advocate on those issues. The last few years were tough going as the original women moved on to other things and only two members of the original core were left. The group attempted to 're-invent' itself with a new focus but the new members of the group were not as skilled and needed more guidance than was available to effectively take over the leadership roles. The unwritten rules of the group culture became open to challenge, and there was no clear mechanism for working through such potential conflict. An example of the challenges was when new committee members attempted to push the group to take on a particular idea rather than taking your own idea forward, as had been the unspoken rule. A culture based on trust alone did not hold up well under these challenges and unresolved conflicts were an added drain on the energy of the group.

An interesting comment from one core member about the ending is indicative of the culture of this very successful group. "It's time had come. It had become obsolete. We looked at the end too in positive light, as a part of a natural life cycle.'

We note that this group operated effectively for a long time with a culture which matched many features of doing politics differently. In this story, unresolved issues led to the demise of the group. If the core group had been able to embed the culture early on, consciously and strongly, the action group may have been able to continue on with renewed energy and vibrant goals.

Scenario 5: Consciously adopting a different political culture 2

The Women in Local Leadership networks (Appendix 1 p.36-37) consciously name and support opportunities for a different way of using power.

One outcome of the local WILL networks has been the idea of creating Local Women's Action Plans (LWAP) which aim to support women's participation in local leadership in a way consistent with doing politics differently.

The story of "Cardinia Women"

The seeds for the Cardinia Women network were created following a Council arranged forum held in 2002 to encourage women to run for the local government elections.

With minimal support from the SCWP Project, the network organised well attended local events related to women and community leadership with a core group of 4-6 women. The action plan devised by the network has been informed by several consultative forums organised by the network. The action plan includes running workshops leading up to the next council elections in 2008. Workshop topics proposed include:
    Leadership& networking
    Knowing your community and local government
    Support needs for women in local government

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Facilitation and meeting skills
Public speaking
Consensus decision making skills

The Story of "Shepparton Women in Community Leadership"

Following participation in the SCWP Project activities in 2002, a number of Shepparton women came together, with the idea of supporting women's participation in local government and community organisations generally. With minimal support of the SCWP Project, the Shepparton Women's Community Leadership group was formed in 2004. Its aims are to:

Increase women's participation in community leadership;

Build on and extend the leadership skills of women from diverse backgrounds, Indigenous, CALD and rural, in the City of Greater Shepparton and surrounding area with an emphasis on participation in local government;

Influence a change in the culture of politics where decision-making is informed by respectful practices and dialogue and is inclusive of all community members.

The core group has organised numerous well attended events, Its core group has varied from 5 to around 12 and has consistently represented a diversity of the Shepparton community across age, cultural background and political allegiances. Their action plan includes a media strategy highlighting local women in leadership; creation of an electronic database of women and women's groups; seminars/workshops on specific topics *(Icons, Saints & Divas: How women are represented in the media, Towards Equality of Representation on Local Government, Women Get Elected Workshop)*.

We want to highlight some stories from the local networks which illustrate different ways of using power and doing politics. For example, a candidate for the Council elections was having difficulty working out her public stand about a very controversial issue in the community. She could see why extreme opposing views were strongly held by different sectors of the community, but found it personally a very complex issue to make her own mind up on. She was therefore wary of attracting media attention and community exposure due to the risk of being pigeon holed in one camp or other, or being labelled as a candidate who was "wishy washy". The network offered to create an opportunity for informal exploration and research about the various aspects of the issue and help her develop an approach which would contribute to opening up constructive community dialogue rather than reinforcing intractable positions. The safeguards included the networks protocols about trust and confidentiality, and clear guidelines about the network's impartiality in relation to individual candidates.

Another story is how a local network dealt with discomfort in the network about how a network member, also a candidate in local elections, was using network activities to further her own personal campaign. After carefully analysing what the problem was, and with support of the protocols developed for the WILL networks, network members were able to have an honest discussion with her about the perceived conflict of interest. She was able to understand the issue and decided to withdraw from network activities until after the election.

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In describing their involvement in these small local groups, informally linked to each other through the WPILG Coalition, women said

"Its like handcrafted social change – crafting a new social construct, a piece of work you can pick up and put it down when you have to – its doesn't unravel and you can do it in bits and not have lost track when you come back to it."

"It's like having a bag of work which you can pull things out of when you have the time."

"Its like a cable tram which keeps on going around on the same route and you can hook on to it and off it when you feel like it."

"The meeting was like getting together to work on an interesting task that was well run."

"It gives me an inkling of what it might be like to have support when you are creating social change."

"There's a recognition that we do it from passion and philosophy and we have skills but very limited time and we know this new thing can't be hurried."

"It's not possible to make this change in a short time and it's not our work, we do it in our leisure time, we use local resources and we have to piece the bits together carefully."

"We need a way for it to be held and continued."

Scenario 6: A Councillor doing politics differently

Let's imagine a woman Councillor who is committed to and applying the new paradigm of leadership. How would she be acting? What would we like to see? This paints an idealised picture but one to which individuals could aspire.

- She would see her leadership as *relational* - i.e. the relationships she forms with the many the people she relates to as a councillor would be a major focus of her leadership style.
- She would be 'doing leadership' *with* as many active citizens as possible. In all her leadership relationships she would aim to develop a sense of mutual purpose through dialogue, using a collaborative approach which empowers each individual and engenders trust, according to the principles of mutual respect, acceptance of difference, and a learning environment approach.
- She would clearly state the above as her expectations of the ground rules of groups she interacted with and would have a clear and stated commitment to taking defined steps if these ground rules were abused. She would be consciously and openly setting expectations and limits for participation, with groups of community members and other

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stakeholders, involved in consultation and forming of strategic plans and other options.

- She would understand in her leadership relationships, that as the elected councillor she does have more positional power and therefore more influence. She would understand the importance of genuineness about the degree of power being offered to active citizens when consulting, and of clarity and integrity in maintaining a trusting relationship between citizens and Council.

- To the best of her ability, she would bring to her relational leadership the personal qualities of self-knowledge, authenticity, integrity, commitment, empathy, understanding of others and competence.

- She would relate to a local Women in Local Leadership (WILL) group (Aird and Bennett 2003) as a trusted support and guide in developing her transformative power of the leadership processes. She would see this group as a key leadership relationship and would use it to learn and grow as a transformative leader. The network would help her to lead in a 'new paradigm' way as far as possible, while working within the traditional paradigm of many colleagues and of statutory local government operations.

- The WILL group would support her in a range of ways, ideally including developing with the community a Local Women's Action Plan (LWAP). (See Appendices).Having the Local Women's Action Plan would support the woman councillor in taking action which reflects the mutual purposes of local women on key issues. In this way she would be in a leadership relationship with many active women citizens.

- This type of leadership relationship that she has with the WILL group, she would foster with many other active citizens in relation to a range of purposes.

- She would see herself as a transformative leader, part of many transformative leadership groups in the community. She might see her term on Council as a role that she and other transformative leaders would cycle through, to ensure a presence of the transformative type of leadership and a community focussed voice on Council. She and others would be holding the mutual purpose to ensure a flow of individuals into the elected positions. These individuals would be supported to practice using power in ht e new way by the transformative leadership group/relationships.

- She would be less focussed on herself as an individual leader. She would be more focussed on a succession planning for transformative leaders rather than on herself as the individual transformative leader carrying all the hope for change into the local government arena.

Scenario 7: Creating culture: The *Women Get Elected* workshops and the Women In Local Leadership networks

Feedback from women who have participated in the *Women Get Elected* workshop program offered since 2001 have confirmed that the different style of meeting designed by the SCWP Project suited a more diverse range of women. It was more engaging than the fact-focussed, emotionally distant style of pre-election information session usually offered. Put simply, the workshops, and the network meetings that grew from them, created a small

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experience of the type of culture that was to be envisioned as a different political culture. At the workshops a sense of hope and new possibility around the issue of the future of local politics emerged.

The ideas developed for the *Women Get Elected* workshops 2002 and the facilitators training became the first simple practices in this culture creating work. We needed organisational processes and communication styles which were traceable, rational, shared and conscious (Barwick 2003 [4]). Having them based on an appreciative inquiry model (Hammond 1996), that is, concentrating on what works rather than going over old mistakes and past failures, on appreciating the contributions of all who are involved assisted this process. Above all, we needed to encourage and practice a sophisticated and creative understanding of how women can get power, use it and keep it! (Kirner and Rayner 1999). We set about creating some tools and processes to encourage a transformative leadership culture within the networks (Aird and Bennett 2003).

Conclusion

The WPILG Coalition has journeyed from being primarily concerned with numbers of women elected to local governments, with getting women there, to one which is equally concerned with what happens when women get elected or move into other positions of community leadership. Even when a woman has expanded her sphere of influence, there is no guarantee that she will aspire to, or be able, to improve human rights and social agendas for the community. Despite the best of intentions, women's actions in the sphere of local government and community are often constrained and dictated by the culture of the political environment in which they act. This is a source of frustration to the women who exercise power and of disappointment and worse for the women who hoped for more.

There is a readiness among many women who think about how power is exercised in their communities to explore and lead action done in a different way. By beginning to articulate this new kind of leadership and practice of power, wider community discussion will be fostered and the ideas will spread and evolve. The resources and opportunities for women to have transforming dialogue with each other about women's power and community leadership need to be expanded. This paper is one small step towards giving these ideas a voice.

This paper suggests that a different way of doing politics has the potential to be not only more just, but also more effective. It supports the idea of people working together to create better solutions to the enormous challenges of the 21st century. We hope that this paper sparks interest and dialogue about a

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[4] Barwick, Neville (2003), The Barwick model (unpublished)
This involves using a series of planning frameworks which facilitate the inclusion of all stakeholders interests and concerns. They provide a range of tools which unpack complexity and avoid the cultural and emotional traps so often encountered. These frameworks were taught in a pro bono workshop offered by a management consultant company (Neville Barwick & Assoc.) It addresses a learning culture - i.e. "one which models its own principles into operations".

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different and better way of doing politics; a more people-centred, appreciative, political leadership.

Dreaming about how to make this happen leads us to think of a possible next step - groups of women taking diverse, purposeful, supported and resourced action to apply these ideas, transforming the way community leadership and the practice of power is undertaken within their local communities, so that it better reflects women's needs and interests.

In a spirit of curiosity about a future we could dream of, we end with a question. What would the saying by Mahatma Ghandi: "You must be the change you wish to create", mean in practice in politics?
END

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Recommendations

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No	Recommendation
1.	**Create an action plan towards a different way of doing politics:** Develop a three tiered strategy, building on Stage one project (the paper), towards the goal of influencing a change in the culture of local politics as described. Consider the following in developing the strategy: 1. Who are the target groups (eg, women Councillors? women interested in this project?, women and men in local government? community groups? which diversities of women? Women in political parties? WPILG Coalition organisation members? other?) 2. How could the project benefit from the identification of champions? Who might such champions be? 3. What is a realistic time-frame with targets? 4. What are the key events which could be linked to this strategy (eg, 2008 elections) ? 5. Identify measures of success, eg, numbers of women who discussed the ideas; a survey of attitudes at the beginning and end of the strategy; number of events flowing from this project; projects which developed as a result of this endeavour .
2.	**Resources**: Create a list of several types of resources to support women wishing to do politics differently and better, eg, print, web based and other media resources a compendium of practical hints and stories about how to do politics differently Identify how to create widest exposure to these resources.
3.	**Building partnerships**: Explore partnership approaches to creating interest about doing politics differently – eg, commencing discussions among WPILG Coalition partners, identify potential national and international partners ,eg, onlinewomeninpolitics.org
4.	**2008 election strategy**:

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	Commence discussion within WPILG Coalition to identify strategies leading to the historic 2008 elections which support women doing politics differently and build on existing resources and opportunities such as the *Women Get Elected* program and the Women in Local Leadership networks.
5.	**Identify champions:** Create a series of events or forums with speakers focussing on doing politics differently – speakers who can depict the current culture, discuss how to get power and remain effective while doing politics differently
6.	**Create community discussion and support**: Seek to discuss the ideas and practical approaches discussed in the paper with groups of women around the State – with a view to hearing the views of a defined number of women, eg 100 or 500 from targeted communities and diversities

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Appendix 1

Background

The authors of this paper

Alice Aird and Linda Bennett commenced working together in the Strengthening Communities though Women's Participation Project in 2001. This gave them the opportunity to work in partnership with women all around the State, who are passionately committed to making a positive difference for women and their communities as a whole. Together, Alice and Linda bring backgrounds in education, social work, local Councillor and local government officer experience.

The Women in Community leadership Study Group.

Made up of women from networks around Victoria, this group met once and offered critically useful feedback at a crucial stage of the development of this paper. Anne Jones, Lisa Innes and Noel Ridgway (Cardinia), Jo Beasley, Jan Bourne and Helen Page (Bass Coast), Councillor Joan Bennett (Hindmarsh), Fran Smullen and Barbara Brown (Greater Shepparton).

This paper was able to be written due to the passion and commitment of many.

Victorian Women's Trust

The Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust was established in 1985 in recognition of the role of women in shaping Victoria. The fully independent Trust exists to improve conditions for women in practical and lasting ways through a funding program to invest in women and affect social change, strategic alliances for major projects, advocacy, fostering networks for the exchange of skills, ideas and information.

The Trust is a member of the WPILGC and has provided the major funds for this paper.

At the celebration of 20 years of the Trust in April 2005, Dure Dara, speaking for the Trust Board, described its work as: "women leading men and children to the issues which concern them".

Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition

The WPILG Coalition was formed in 1996 in response to a decline in the number of women elected to local governments following council amalgamations in Victoria between 1995 and 1997. Its formation built on earlier work to encourage the participation of women in local government, described in Amanda Sinclair's work with Margaret Bowman and Lynne Strahan, *Getting the Numbers* (1987).

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Coalition members include representatives of nine State-wide local government and community organisations and a number of co-opted women. The current member organisations of the Coalition are: Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA) [Vic Branch], Local Government Professionals (LGPro), Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC), Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA), Victorian Women's Trust, Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) Victoria, Women's Planning Network Vic. Inc., YWCA Victoria. In addition the Coalition has a support base of individual women citizens, Councillors, Council officers and others who support its objectives.

It has a formal structure and is not a constituted body. It relies on partnerships with relevant local government peak and State-wide organisations. It relies on the goodwill and commitment of member organisations and individual activists.

WPILGC and its organisational members have been responsible for, or major partner in, numerous projects since 1997, including: *200x2000*, a campaign to encourage an increase on the number of elected women (ALGWA 1999); the Victorian Local Government Women's Charter (1998 and 2003); various publications (with Stegley Foundation and Victorian Women's Trust); the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation Project (2001-2004) with Victorian Community Support Fund. Most recent projects include: the *Women Get Elected* Project 2005 (with Victorian Department of Communities) and this paper (funded by the Victorian Women's Trust). The outcomes include a steady increase in numbers of women Councillors, a disproportionate increase in the percentages of women Mayors and a higher profile for women in local government and community leadership.

The Coalition's broad strategic directions up to 2008 include working towards equal numbers of women and men as elected Councillors, encouraging a different way of doing politics at the local level to reflect women's needs and hopes; and sustainability for the Coalition until its goals are achieved.

The Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) Project

In 2001, the WPILGC was successful in attracting major funding for 3 years from the Victorian Community Support Fund. The aim of the SCWP Project 2001-2004 was to encourage good governance within local government via equal participation and more effective democracy; sustain women Councillors; seek to identify and create best practice in encouraging increased participation; change public attitudes about women in public leadership positions; create partnerships to achieve the goals.

In 2001, as the SCWP project commenced, the Victorian community context was influenced by the Purple Sage Project (1998-1999) and the creation of the 2001 Centenary of Federation Women's Petition. Both these projects

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together engaged 8000 active participants and 41,000 signatories, thousands of Victorians, mostly women and some men, in the work of articulating a different set of values, priorities and outcomes for Victorian communities which involved a considerable degree of social change.

The outcomes of the SCWP Project have included the creation of the *Women Get Elected* program; development of and support for local women's networks; the creation of the Women in Local Leadership network concept; creation of the WPILG Coalition webpage; support for women councillors; creation of partnerships to achieve numerous project goals; revision and re-launch of the Women's Charter; the Women's Tally Room.

Appendix 2

The story of SCWP, the Women Get Elected Program and an emerging culture

As has been stated, the initial primary purpose of the WPILG Coalition, and therefore of the SCWP Project in the beginning was encouraging more women, and a more diverse range of women, to stand for Councils and to run effective election campaigns. The first glimmer that women were ready to go further and work towards a new political culture came through the project's *Women Get Elected* (*WGE*) workshops, held in 2001 in the lead up to the 2002 local government elections. The program was designed to introduce women to the tools and resources available to support women candidates in local government.

The *WGE* workshops were constructed with awareness that many women are alienated by the usual culture of politics and political meetings experienced at all levels of Australian political life. The workshop elements provided a relaxed, friendly atmosphere where women felt comfortable to share their ideas and viewpoints and to ask questions, knowing that they would be heard and appreciated (Aird and Bennett 2003).

Feedback from women who participated confirmed that a different style of meeting suited a more diverse range of women. It was more engaging than the fact-focussed, emotionally distant style of pre-election information session usually offered. Put simply, the workshops, and the network meetings that grew from them, created a small experience of the type of culture that was to be envisioned as a different political culture based on a new paradigm. At the workshops a sense of hope and new possibility around the issue of the future of local politics emerged.

The women in these workshops understood the reality that even when a woman has a position of influence such as elected to council, there is no guarantee that she will able to improve human rights and social agendas for the community.

The need for ongoing networks of support was repeatedly expressed, first in 2001 and again in 2002 preceding the 2003 elections. We started to explore a local and sustainable network model with the intention of supporting women community leaders, especially in local government, while encouraging others to step forward. We identified two municipalities in which to explore these ideas in partnership with women in the community – the Shire of Cardinia, a municipality on the edge of the metropolitan area, and the City of Greater Shepparton, a regional and rural municipality. In both these places, crucial links were made early with key women who were able to "open doors" to a diverse community network.

The Project worked with these small groups of women in partnerships which created real interest, hope and excitement about an emerging vision of a different kind of political culture. The vision of political culture which

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brought forth this positive response from many groups of women around Victoria was one where "the full range of qualities of leaders and citizens would be valued; and practised; where the contribution of women, and the qualities and experience they bring, would be seen as essential to good decision making; where women and men would be able to expand their capacities, and make real contributions of universal benefit, in an appreciative environment of trust and creative, collaborative action." (Bennett and Aird 2003)

The first actions were taken by these network groups in the lead up to the local government elections in 2003. The focus was campaign support for a number of women candidates in each area, attempting to facilitate the formation of campaign teams and communicating campaigning skills. A new level of cooperation between some women candidates was achieved with some sharing of know-how and collective use of media. The candidates involved offered feedback that their campaign had been a positive experience, whether or not they were elected.

However, we learned that in the highly charged environment of a local government election, stronger connections and trusting working relationships needed to be established well before the elections. This reinforced our understanding that resourced, sustained and long term development of local networks was needed to establish a culture of local skill and supportive teamwork for women's election campaigns.

Through working around the State with women seeking to enter local government office, and women who were interested in supporting other women, we identified a significant gap in the resources and opportunities for women. It became clear that there was room for a new non- traditional structure to support women who undertook positions of power in their communities, across a range of community organisations including local government, as distinct from business or professional life. We saw the opportunity and the value in creating a structure which would provide a suitable forum for dialogue with each other, learning about community leadership and specifically about how power could be exercised in a way consistent with the hope for a different political culture. This new structure would not cut across other support organisations but would complement and add an option for women interested in practising this way of doing politics.

Next steps - Women in Local Leadership (WILL) Networks

For the reasons outlined above we looked for a next step beyond the local networks and the idea of the *Women in Local Leadership (WILL)* network emerged. The *WILL* model was designed to provide:

- a non-traditional network structure within which to think and act politically in new ways.
- a State-wide framework of shared principles and values, purposes, roles and processes, which all local WILL groups in the State-wide network would share.

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a centrally resourced hub to ensure that WILL groups are empowered to work cohesively in a sustained way in a consistent direction.

structures and processes for local networks to have simple start up, expansion and contraction to match enthusiasm and need, and respect for volunteer time and learning.

In the WILL network, local network groups have a conscious, central focus on learning and dialogue about how to get, use and keep power for community benefit is. In the WILL model, power implies choice and the ability for individual members to have significant influence and transformative power within the local group and the State-wide network, a core component of effective political citizenship.

The idea of WILL groups developing Local Women's Action Plans (LWAP) with their communities emerged in 2004. Such action plans would define and influence change which is beneficial for women and for the whole community. Defined and agreed mutual purpose would give women greater power to influence decisions which affect women. LWAP's would support councillors and other community leaders in taking actions which reflect the mutual purposes of local women on key issues.

The idea of the WILL network is explained in detail in a paper (Aird and Bennet 2003) presented to the 12th International Women in Leadership Conference held in Perth November 2003. (Available on the webpage www.vlga.org.au/issues/women_gov.html)

Representatives of the early networks were and are partners in the development of this paper.

Change in WPILGC strategic directions

In 2003, recognising the discoveries of its SCWP project, the WPILG Coalition expanded its own focus beyond simply increasing the number of women elected. The Coalition's current strategy therefore includes the intention to refashion the way that politics is done in local communities so that it better reflects the needs and hopes of women for themselves, their families and their communities.

In developing this new strategic focus in late 2003 and early 2004, the concept of this discussion paper arose and funding was successfully sought from the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) (see Appendix *Who we are.*)

The WPILG Coalition views the writing of this paper as an early step in articulating what this strategic direction of "refashioning the way politics is done" might mean in practice.
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