

**Betty Pybus Memorial Lecture: Hobart Tuesday 18 October 2005**

**‘Two Feisty Women: Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan: path breaking feminists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’**

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**I would like to acknowledge that we are in the country of the Mouheneener people of the South East tribe of Aboriginal Tasmania and pay respects to their custodians.**

**Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to present the Inaugural Betty Pybus Memorial Lecture. It is indeed a great honour to reflect upon the life of a woman who had a significant impact on my own life.

I first met Betty Pybus in Women’s Liberation in Sydney in 1973, and we established an immediate rapport. Despite our differences in age and experience, we shared a commitment to improve abortion services for women. Thirty years later, in January 2004, I had the good fortune to be in Hobart when Betty was awarded an Order of Australia and could share this wonderful moment with her at an afternoon tea party in her honour. She was as feisty as ever, cracking jokes and telling us all what we had to do next. When she died nine months later at the age of 81, I mourned the passing of another of that remarkable generation of women who in mid life set out to change the world.

In my lecture tonight I would like to focus on the lives of two extraordinary women, Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan, who in mid life, both caught the tide of second wave feminism and used it as a platform to change the world. In comparing their lives as second wave feminists, I would like to explore their significance to a movement usually associated with Baby Boomer generation women like Betty's daughter Cassandra and myself. And I would also like to explore how second wave feminism changed their lives in relation to their Baby Boomer daughters. While Cassandra and I had the world in front of us, our mothers had to make up for lost time. I would argue that they gave second wave feminism a clear purpose and a sense of urgency that we daughters often lacked.

So let's start with Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan. How in mid life did they become second wave feminists? How did they achieve so much? I will begin at the moment they heard about second wave feminism by comparing their initial responses to it. Then I will show how they used second wave feminism as a platform to press for change and assess their legacy. I will conclude by speculating about how they might address major issues facing women today.

### **How Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan caught the tide of second wave feminism.**

Historians have long debated about how Australian women caught the tide of second wave feminism. Ann Curthoys for example argues that it was spawned and led by young women university graduates infected by the ideas of liberation gained from the anti-Vietnam war movement. Marian Sawyer and Marian Simms argue that it was the end point of a century long campaign for women's equality while Marilyn Lake argues that it represented an epistemological break from first wave feminism. None takes account of the small army of mid age women like Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan and their experiences of second wave feminism. They did not represent a connecting thread from the first wave. Rather it was their own experiences in the workforce from the 1950s and of society's expectations of the 'good woman', which provided the pre-conditions for Betty Pybus and Edna Ryan to plunge into second wave feminism.

How did they each catch the wave?

Our story starts in Sydney in the year 1969. Edna was then 63 and a widow with three grown up children. Betty was 45 and married with two grown up children. Both were in full time white collar employment. Edna was a clerk in a local government authority and Betty was an accountant in a small private firm. On the surface the eighteen year age gap signalled immense differences in their experiences. But they shared interesting similarities. First, they resided in the city rather than the suburbs. Edna lived in a bachelor apartment on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of the Park Regis, then the newest and tallest building in the city and Betty lived with her husband in a small apartment in the Blues Point Tower, then the most stylish apartment block in Sydney. Their access to the life of the city was important.

Second, like so many women in mid life in full time paid work at that time, they had reduced their ages, in Edna's case, at least ten years, to keep their jobs. They knew how to dress younger and look younger than they really were. Indeed as bottle blondes they looked remarkably similar in age and appearance. They also considered themselves as working class women who had missed out on higher education. Betty had left school at 13, while Edna had left at 16. They had improved their skills in the workforce.

Thirdly, they were seething with rage about the unfairness of life for women and desperate to do something about it. Betty was constantly aware that as a mid age woman she was treated negatively by a wide range of professionals, while Edna seethed with the injustice of the sex discrimination of the wages system. When the tide of second wave feminism arrived however, it was their daughters, Cassandra and me, who, sensing their frustration encouraged them to take the plunge.

Betty Pybus was the first to catch the wave.

According to Betty, sometime in 1968, [I think it was probably 1969] she and her husband were at dinner to welcome home their 22 year old daughter, Cassandra who had recently returned from study in the USA. Cassandra remarked on the young women she had seen on the university campuses. 'These young women' she said 'are something to behold. They dress in what looks like workingmen's clothes, they wear

no make-up, they boast about their hairy legs and underarms, they are forever protesting about their rights and they call themselves Women's Liberationists. They are not a pretty sight.' Betty's husband was horrified: 'they are probably too ugly to attract a man', he said. Betty then surprised herself and every one else at the table by saying 'if this is for real, lead me to it.' (Vivian 2003: 71)

Betty later wrote: 'I have no idea what caused that remark or why I made it so vehemently. I can only surmise that running below my conscious thought there had always been a pervading sense that women had to always pretend to be something they weren't.' (Vivian 2003: 72) Betty knew something was missing from her life. Let me quote her again: 'Nothing was providing me with an answer to the contradictions by which my life as a woman was being experienced. I had no one with whom to share my feelings of disillusionment with married life or life in general.' (Vivian 2003:74)

A few months later Cassandra called Betty about a group of women in Sydney who called themselves Women's Liberationists. Was she interested? Betty said: 'Oh, dear no, all this is too late for me. I'm just envious.' Cassandra called again. There was to be a weekend meeting of all women interested in Women's Liberation. Did she want to go? Betty in a mother daughter role reversal replied: 'Only if you come with me.' (Vivian 2003: 72)

The weekend was a turning point in Betty's life. As she later explained: 'I had never imagined there were women who thought as I did, were so passionate in their commitment to fighting for a world in which women held equal place with men, where poverty was eliminated, where justice for all was enshrined in legislation.' 'Listening to these passionate women, whose ages ranged from seventeen to seventy, was like standing at a doorway, looking into a vision of a future I had never thought possible.' 'There was no way back for me.' (Vivian 2003:73)

The first public meeting of Women's Liberation that Betty missed, was attended by Edna. I had joined Women's Liberation a few months before and was convinced that my mother, a long standing campaigner for equal pay, would relish the energy and

excitement of this new movement. So I took her along to the first public meeting. She wrote of her reactions in her diary:

It was heartening to see about fifty intelligent young women and perhaps a dozen or so elderly women like myself, cheered by the young generation. They [the young women] delivered 5 short but good addresses. I find myself quite in tune with the remarks and attitudes generally for the world is waiting for women – the modern capitalist society is, at any rate.... Women are as free as men now that they have the means of safe birth control. I know there is still plenty of prejudice and discrimination but these are best met by entering the arena, in engaging with competition at all levels, gaining positions of power wherever possible. (Edna Ryan Diaries 14 January 1970, Book 6, pp. 12-13)

In contrast to Betty, Edna had been a political activist all her life and since she had returned to the paid workforce in the mid 1950s, had been immersed in local government politics, the Labor Party and her trade union, in the latter case promoting strategies for equal pay. She was an experienced political operator, who could feel the winds of change opening up new possibilities for women yet she could not warm to the message of Women's Liberation – the personal is political. Nevertheless she kept a watching brief on its development, through my involvement and that of my sister, Julia, and my sister -in-law, Margaret.

While Edna remained on the outside, Betty Pybus, to all outward purposes, a respectable middle class woman became a member of Women's Liberation, whose adherents largely comprised university students. Despite the apparent contradictions, Betty battled her way in through her membership of a consciousness raising group. As she wrote later:

The need for women to *come out* and speak the truth about their lives was a motivating force behind the early Women's Liberation Movement. Women were encouraged to join a group, preferably with women they did not know, decide which were the issues they wished to understand, then using their own life experience as it related to the issue as means of understanding, informing and learning.... Through the process of speaking and listening, women found they

came to better understand the cultural constraints that had conditioned their experience. Instead of blaming themselves when their lives did not measure up to the expectations society had conditioned them to, they discovered the universality of female experience. ... they began to challenge the stereotypical view of womanhood, marriage, women's work, sexuality.... Consciousness raising was essential to understanding the cultural processes which govern our lives and a powerful strategy toward direct action. (Vivian 2003:79-80)

Edna's chance came in 1972. During the federal election campaign of that year, a new second wave women's organisation, Women's Electoral Lobby, appeared. It was reformist in purpose and intent and attracted middle class rather than working class women to its ranks. When Edna attended a public meeting they organised to question the political candidates about their attitudes to women's issues like equal pay, childcare and abortion, she felt that a door had opened. This was just the kind of feminist organisation she was looking for. When the Whitlam government was elected at the end of 1972, and a major decision about equal pay followed, Edna suddenly realised she was in the right place at the right time. Early the following year, she retired from her office job and became a full-time activist in WEL.

By 1973 Betty and Edna had not only dived into the wake of second wave feminism, they were ready to change the world. Over the next two years, their parallel lives bore a remarkable similarity. They each achieved a long held dream. Unlike their daughters who were more interested in the process of change, Betty and Edna were more interested in outcomes. They also knew that the tide of second wave would eventually recede. They had no time to waste.

Betty's interest lay in what she called 'the appalling lack of empathy to women's health problems within the medical profession.' She had fallen pregnant on her wedding night even though she used contraception. From that experience she knew that women's fertility was not always controllable. She had also once lived near a Salvation Army home for unwed pregnant girls and had been dismayed by the way the staff and the general public labelled them as *fallen women*. From her consciousness raising group she had gained insights into her own health problems which had been exacerbated by the negative treatment she received from the medical

profession. She considered that both informed contraceptive advice and abortion should form part of women's health and believed her experience could help other women regain self esteem and take control of their lives.

She was encouraged by the fact that the year before, when two doctors in Sydney had been charged with procuring illegal abortions, in the case that followed in the District Court, Judge Levine ruled that it was not unlawful to perform an abortion if the doctor believed that the woman's life was at serious physical or mental risk or in serious economic and social stress and placed the onus on the Crown to establish that the operation was unlawful. (Siedlecky and Wyndham 1990:85) This opened the door to better abortion service provision in Sydney. A few months later the luxury tax was removed from the sale of contraceptive pills.

In this more open environment Betty joined the 'Control' collective of Women's Liberation which had been formed in April 1973 to provide an abortion referral service to a network of sympathetic doctors who were prepared to carry out terminations at a reasonable cost. The collective also hoped that it would enable women to get access to simple early term abortion techniques performed by trained professionals in a secure environment and would include pre and post abortion counselling services.

According to Betty most of the other members of the collective were young, well-educated women. Some were already working in health service areas and had assisted friends to obtain abortions. Others had experienced difficulty in obtaining an abortion themselves or had experienced the trauma of a backyard abortion. A few others had close friends and relatives who had died from botched abortions. As she wrote later: 'All believed in a woman's right to choose. All believed that contraceptives and contraceptive advice should be widely available. All believed that the question of abortion had no place in the criminal code.' (Vivian 2003: 87)

As one of the 'highly educated young women' in the Control collective, I vividly recall Betty at that time. While she was not the only mature age woman in the group she stood out because she could see beyond an abortion referral service. She was the

first to encourage us to imagine the possibility of establishing our own women's community health centre.

I was charged with the task of contacting the federal Minister for Health on this matter. When he suggested that we prepare a budget submission to the Hospitals and Health Services Commission, I thought it was a ploy by him to fob us off. Betty however saw this as a breakthrough. She prepared a draft budget and sent me off to state and federal health bureaucrats for advice and then put the finishing touches to the final submission. Nevertheless when I did send it off, I did not expect to receive a few weeks later a cheque for \$33,000 - sufficient to rent and equip premises and hire staff for the first six months.

Without Betty's skills, experience and initiative, the Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre might never have become a reality. She not only took charge of the cheque, opened a bank account and made sure the money was secure, she also found a suitable building to rent, organised the equipment and showed the management committee how to advertise and interview staff. Betty was a born administrator. To a brash young feminist like me, Betty was a revelation. Stefania Siedlecky, the first doctor employed at the centre recalls those heady days:

Anxious women started to arrive even before the furnishing was finished. The very first client had to be examined on the desktop. She was aged 30, with a broken marriage behind her and had become pregnant despite using an IUD. She was referred by a country doctor to a Sydney gynaecologist who agreed to do an abortion for a fee of \$450 (insurance rebate was about \$50), and asked how she would feel when she knew she had murdered the only baby she might ever have. [She went elsewhere and a cheaper abortion was arranged], but the IUD was not located. By the time she came to the Leichhardt Centre she was in a state of great anxiety and stress, typical of many women who attended the centre.

Leichhardt saw itself as 'health' centre not a 'medical' service, with an emphasis on preventive medicine, community education and self-help groups. It took Sydney by surprise and a storm of protest followed, particularly when Leichhardt announced its intention to perform abortions as a routine part of health services for

women. Since it was a government funded centre no fees would be charged. (Siedlecky and Wyndham 1990:87)

The ensuing media uproar served as an advertisement for the Centre, attracting women from all over Australia and New Zealand. For Betty Pybus, the LWHC was a dream come true.

Edna was also making her dream a reality - the achievement of the same minimum or basic wage for women as for men. Having returned to the paid workforce in the 1950s, she was enraged by the significant difference in men's and women's wages, in particular in industries where women and men performed the same work. Between 1969 and 1972 however, the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission handed down two decisions that markedly improved wages for women workers like herself. In the first decision, women working in exactly the same occupations as men, such as teaching, were awarded the same margin for skill. This affected about 18% of the female workforce. In the second decision, women workers gained equal pay for work of equal value, that is, a rate for the job, regardless of sex. This had applied to women in industries where jobs were sex segregated, that is, where women were not allowed to perform exactly the same work as men but had the same set of skills to perform it. As a result of this judgement, which was phased-in over three years, one and a half million women workers benefited.

But neither of these decisions affected the lowest paid female workers. As unskilled workers they could only earn a percentage of the basic wage because it was considered a male breadwinner's wage. The discrepancy was significant. By 1973 the female basic wage in New South Wales was \$34.50 per week, while the male basic wage was \$60.80. Unskilled women workers, who comprised a significant proportion of the female work force, were missing out on the wages boom.

Edna felt this injustice keenly. Her own mother had been an unskilled worker, who had supported her large family. By observing her experiences, Edna had first become aware of wage discrepancies between unskilled male and female workers and the widespread belief that only men were breadwinners. Her mother's experience as a

breadwinner, trying to keep her family afloat on 54% of the male basic wage, fuelled Edna's determination to overturn this injustice.

In April 1973, she joined the women's industrial group in WEL which met weekly to discuss how they could tackle this problem. They quickly identified two obstacles. One lay in Commonwealth legislation which stated that the basic wage was a male breadwinner wage. Since women workers were not considered breadwinners they could at best only earn a percentage of it. So the WEL Industrial Group set out to get the legislation changed.

They lobbied the federal minister for industrial relations, Clyde Cameron, to amend the legislation. He pointed out that the exclusively male basic wage was incompatible with the terms of the ILO's Equal Remuneration Convention No 100. They suggested that the legislation be amended to replace the word 'male' with the word 'adult'. He agreed and in November 1973 he introduced an amending bill but Opposition members in the Senate where the government did not have a majority, refused to support it. They argued that men must retain their position as the family breadwinner. So WEL members from the Liberal Party lobbied them. They pointed out that many women were also family breadwinners. Early in December the Senators changed their minds and the bill was passed. This was an early victory for WEL.

The other obstacle was the evidence the Arbitration Commission would need to award the same minimum rate of pay as men. They had to show that many low paid women workers were family breadwinners. But how many were there? How could they prove it? Where could they find the evidence?

It was here that Edna Ryan's industrial skills and experience shone. First she persuaded WEL to prepare a submission to the National Wage Case to be heard in Melbourne in February 1974. Then she wrote to the Commonwealth Statistician seeking statistical information about the number of female breadwinners in Australia. This information had only recently become available from the Henderson Poverty Inquiry and Edna was the first to use it. The evidence that she presented in the WEL submission to the National Wage Case, that more than 130,000 low paid women workers were family breadwinners, created a sensation.

Neither the government advocate, the ACTU advocate, nor the employer advocate could believe the statistics. But the judges on the Arbitration Commission were less surprised. As one of them told Edna years later, they had been waiting for a long time for this information to be presented to the court. But it was not in the interests of the government, the unions or the employers to do so. None was prepared to promote the plight of the lowest paid women workers. The judges on the Arbitration Commission accepted her evidence and the last obstacle to women workers receiving the same minimum wage as men, was finally overcome.

So for Edna Ryan and Betty Pybus, the year 1974, saw the realisation of long held dreams.

### **What happened next?**

They quickly pushed on. The success of the first women's community health centre at Leichhardt in Sydney quickly led to plans for a second, at Liverpool, on the south western outskirts of Sydney. This time Betty Pybus was appointed the administrator. But Betty was also a woman in a hurry. She was more interested in effective service delivery to women than concerns about how the staff should do it. The staff on the other hand wanted to try new decision making processes which in Betty's view were inappropriate. A clash was inevitable and Betty's involvement in Liverpool Women's Community Health Centre ceased towards the end of 1975. Undaunted she immersed herself in new challenges. Two decades later, she would become a mover and shaker in the Older Women's Network in Hobart.

Edna Ryan had another twenty years of feminist activism. She wrote a history of women's work and wages in Australia, secured funding to establish the Women's Trade Union Commission which became the spearhead for the ACTU Women's Charter in 1983, initiated work based child care and wrote a swag of academic articles about women's workforce participation. When she died in Canberra at the age of 92 in 1997, she was drawing attention to the impact of enterprise bargaining and compulsory superannuation on low paid women workers.

But both women would agree that without their successes in 1974, they would probably have faded from second wave feminism. Instead their initial successes gave them new energy to consider new possibilities and as women in mid life neither wasted time in taking advantage of the opportunities presented.

### **The Legacy of Betty Pybus**

The women's community health centre movement owes a great deal to Betty Pybus. Leichhardt and Liverpool were established when community health centres were a bold new concept in health service delivery and there is no doubt that they initiated new approaches to health care for women. Many of their practices have now been incorporated into the mainstream health system.

I have not been able to find a tally of such centres in Australia today, but in the Sydney region alone, Leichhardt and Liverpool still survive, with others at Bankstown, Blacktown, Penrith and the Gosford. They all have a strong community focus and still have activist management committees that promote women's health issues in the broadest perspectives. In my view these advances have been the women's community health movement's greatest legacy. Today the Liverpool Women's Health Centre is strong focus for health care for refugee women from the Middle East.

### **Health Care Issues for Women Today**

The major issue still remains access to affordable and high quality abortion services for women. Indeed the procedure is in danger of being removed from the Medicare schedule. Yet from the only reliable abortion statistics we have, from South Australia, the number of number of abortions performed each year has remained static for the last 20 years, although the age demographic has shifted from teenagers to women in their twenties and thirties many of whom have at least one child. In the area of abortion service provision, eternal vigilance is needed.

One bright light on this horizon is the possible introduction of RU 486, the Morning After Pill, actively opposed for years by recently retired Tasmanian Senator, Brian Harradine. I am delighted to see that it is now actively promoted by a woman government minister, Sharman Stone. It has huge potential for women's reproductive

health. On the other hand, the plan by the federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott to offer advance payments of the Baby Bonus at 12 and 24 weeks pregnancy, must be seen for what it is, a very small bribe to women, to proceed with unwanted pregnancies. Nevertheless, I would argue that women should have access to the widest array of choices and services in relation to their reproductive health.

### **The Legacy of Edna Ryan**

Between 1970 and 1975, 379,000 women entered the workforce of whom nine out of ten were married (Labor Essays 1980:7). This is the largest number of women to enter the workforce in such a short period in Australian history. Most however were low paid workers. Let's look at the impact of the adult minimum wage on their pay packets.

In 1970 the minimum weekly wage of female adult workers across all industries was \$39.68. In 1975 it had jumped to \$108.55. In 1970, the average weekly earnings of women workers were 52% of average weekly earnings of men. By 1975 it had jumped to nearly 64%.

What are wage parity rates between women and men workers in 2005? For full-time non-managerial employees, the ratio of female to male average weekly earnings is 89.2%. Of course this relates to full-time work only in certain areas. But I thought that you would be pleased to know that the ratio of female to male weekly total earnings for full-time adult non-managerial employees is highest in Tasmania at 98.1% and lowest in WA at 81.3%. Wage parity in certain areas of full-time paid work is now very close to reality. Edna Ryan would be thrilled.

What has happened to women's workforce participation rates? In 1975 just on 50% of women between the ages of 15 and 65 were in the workforce. In 2005 this has increased to 57.4%. In the same period men's participation rates have decreased from 84% to 72.4%. The statistics for women's workforce participation are gradually creeping up and that for men decidedly drifting down. Is it possible to predict that by 2015 women's and men's workforce participation rates would have equalised at about 65%. What will be the implications?

### **Where to from here?**

In 2005 Australia is enjoying the greatest economic boom it has ever known – even greater than the long boom of 1947 to 1971. More women are in paid work than ever before, the budget is in the biggest surplus ever known, and yet, women are still not getting their fair share of the cake.

- The government sends troops to Afghanistan and Iraq but won't accept their refugees. Women comprise the vast majority of the world's refugees. Why are they missing out?
- The projected changes to Industrial Relations legislation will have the greatest impact on low paid workers in casual jobs. Women comprise the majority of low paid workers. Why should they miss out?
- Australian universities are starved for funds. Women comprise the majority of university students. Why should they be denied first class higher education?
- The major cultural institutions in Australia are starved of funds. Women are the greater consumers – as listeners to the ABC, as attendees at theatre, concerts, opera and art galleries. Why are these institutions missing out?
- Women are the greater consumers of child care, of health services of education, welfare and aged care. Yet these areas are clearly missing out.
- Women are elected to all local, state and federal politics in greater numbers and in all political parties. It is time that we began to expect a greater input from these women in policy making.

As women we need to find new ways to empower ourselves and reposition our influence in a democratic society.

Like most of you I have thought long and hard about these issues. One possible way forward could be for women to demand a greater say in the expenditure of their taxes. This could happen with the formation of a women taxpayers' association. It could operate as a lobby group and up an agenda for redistribution of women's taxes.

This leads us to the next question. How much tax do women pay? How much of the GST do women pay? I am not suggesting for a moment that women pay more tax than men, but I am saying that more women are paying more tax than ever before and forming a higher percentage of overall tax revenue than in the past. We also know that women are the majority of Australia's population. We need to find ways that women can get access to the resources to pursue the issues that matter most.

We know that taxes fund infrastructure and that women need and use infrastructure more than men. It is certainly an issue that women MPs of all political parties can take up. We need to find ways of using our new economic strengths more effectively.

This may sound bizarre, but is this more bizarre than arguing for women's health centres and the same minimum wage for women as for men? These ideas were considered off the planet in 1969 – a man on the moon had more resonance.

### **Conclusion**

As feminist mothers, Betty and Edna were the reverse of their daughters. While Cassandra and I were convinced that the tide of second wave feminism was here to stay, Betty Pybus and Betty Ryan knew that it would recede. How do we remember them? I remember them as two feisty mid age women who dived into the wake of second wave feminism to make long term changes for women. Betty taught us to take risks for what we believe in. Edna told us 'There is a world to win.' It looks like we need their fire, humour and imagination and be prepared to take risks to create the third wave of feminism.

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