

## Women, Public Policy and the State

Linda Hancock (Ed)

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Whether in health, education, the family, child care, the law, or recognition of Indigenous women's needs and rights, the rolling back of the state, the shrinking of the leviathan at the centre, the unloading of the overloaded crown, have meant that women have not done well. As Gwen Gray argues in the conclusion to her chapter 'Women's health in a restructuring state':

*Where government is unwilling to fund services and to cooperate with the community sector, the market and the voluntary efforts of women will increasingly become the primary sources of service provision...It will mean the abandonment of the principles of a broader, client and community centred, social view of health and wellbeing (p. 214).*

*Women, public policy and the state* is in two parts with part one providing the conceptual definitions of the market state and an overview of the previous gains which women had made in public policies, including the role of the state bureaucracy and leading women within the government machinery. It becomes clear that women and the gains that they had made are threatened by the policy shifts in the 1980s and 1990s and the chapters in part two discuss and document the impact of these shifts on previous gains. Thus the book is a marvellous fund of knowledge about almost every aspect of women's lives and how these are affected by public policy. There are 17 chapters and I shall therefore comment on only a few.

The chapter on women and 'Access to the law in an age of mean spiritedness' by Jocelyne Scutt gives a balanced, easily

understood, and yet moving portrayal of women working individually and collectively to improve women's access to the legal system. It appears as if every gain, such as the principle of equal pay for work of equal value or laws to redress sexual harassment, has been reduced by the way the law is interpreted, funded, and used, particularly in the 'mean spirited' climate of economic rationalism.

Pusey's chapter, 'The impact of economic restructuring on women and families', is a delight and while providing us with evidence of who has gained and who has lost under the new market state in Australia, thus confirming our beliefs about a redistribution from the poorer to the richer members of society, demonstrates how societal values are not necessarily consistent with utilitarian economics, but are generally more complex. Women in particular work to achieve other rewards than simply payment for selling their labour in the marketplace.

The chapter on community auditing of government, chapter 16, should have been a key chapter in such a book but instead it was irritating. It was extremely difficult to read because of the constant breaking up into dot points, numbered points, headings and so on with insufficient commentary in between to engage the reader. Nevertheless, it is useful for the methodology it provides.

Anna Coote's chapter on 'The longest revolution: Women and the New Labour Government' in Britain is beautifully written. It provides a fitting concluding chapter, although it is not of course an attempt to summarise the conclusions reached throughout the book but rather a touching description of New Labour's first year in office in Britain and how policies on welfare

reform affected women. It touches briefly on the obstacles to progress and how, even with double the number of women in parliament, New Labour's inner circle was 'characterised by a new political brotherhood' (p.252). The British media appear to have exceeded even their own appallingly macho standards by calling Labour women 'Blair's babes' and 'pilloried them individually and collectively...from the start' (p. 251).

The content of the book is sometimes patchy, perhaps reflecting its origins as a series of conference papers written up as chapters. The patchiness refers more to the style being uneven than to the expertise of

the authors and the intrinsic interest of most chapters. *Women, public policy and the state* is an important book which will be viewed in future years as *the* commentary and critique on the transition in Australia to neoliberalism and the threats that this represents to the reforms which had incorporated women's interests into the policy agenda.

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