

## **An Overview of the History of Women's Organisations in Victoria before World War II**

### **For the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of NCWV**

**Women's Memorial Garden, Melbourne, 26 March 2022**

*Judith Smart*

#### Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to acknowledge that we stand today on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders—past, present and emerging.

Thank you for the invitation to speak on this great occasion. The origins and growth of the NCWV itself over its first three decades—before the creation of the NCWA in 1931—is a convenient and revealing way of examining the variety of women's organisations in Victoria, their growth, and the interactions between them. I will attempt to use this strategy for providing the overview of this early organisational culture I have been asked to present to you today.

The NCWV, the third such Australian council after NSW (1896) and Tasmania (1899) was formed between November 1901 and March 1902. It was a delayed outcome of the 1899 ICW conference in London where Victoria was represented at the last minute by Janet Lady Clarke as a consequence of the sudden death in London of the colony's leading suffragist, Annette Bear Crawford. Charged by retiring ICW president Lady Aberdeen to form a Victorian council on her return, Clarke seems to have procrastinated until pushed into action by the Tasmanian NCW vice presidents, Emily Dobson and Lady Alice Braddon. These two stalwarts travelled to Melbourne late in 1901 to persuade Lady Clarke to call interested representatives of women's organisations together. Janet Clarke gave her 'sympathy and support' and made her home 'Cliveden' available for a meeting to form the Victorian council on 22 November. After Mrs Dobson and Lady Braddon had explained the purposes of the council movement, the WCTU's Victorian president, Margaret McLean, moved formation of a state NCW.<sup>1</sup> A second meeting, chaired by Lady Braddon, took place on 28 November, when further information was provided about ICW by both Dobson and the former NSW state secretary, Mrs Aronson. A preparatory committee was formed, leading suffragist Vida Goldstein suggesting that its secretary provide all the women's organisations with a copy of the rules of ICW and request them to appoint delegates to a meeting early in the new year. The official foundation meeting on 11 March 1902, again held at 'Cliveden', saw representatives of 18 disparate women's organisations agree to affiliate, though there is some dispute over this number.<sup>2</sup> Norris says there were 35 but she gives the date of the inaugural meeting as 19 March at the Austral Salon.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that both meetings took place as part of the foundation process.

Dates and numbers aside, the lists indicate the variety of women's organisations and interests that had emerged in Victoria (as in most other parts of Australia and the Anglophone world) from the 1880s, for the council movement was never intended to be about suffrage. When its American founders called an international conference of women's organisations<sup>4</sup> to establish a world-wide coalition of women's groups and associations, they deliberately elected to go for representativeness and breadth rather than agreement on a single objective such as suffrage.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Australian Woman's Sphere*, December 1901, pp. 130–1; Kate Gray, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The National Council of Women of Victoria 1902–18', MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1988, pp. 34–5.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, 'Acceptable Face', pp. 35–6.

<sup>3</sup> Ada Norris, *Champions of the Impossible A History of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1902–1977*, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1978, pp. 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> Seneca Falls, New York, was chosen because of its significance for the origins of the American women's rights movement. It was here in 1848 that Elizabeth Cady Stanton organised the first women's rights convention and presented the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, following the form of the United States Declaration of Independence.

It would include all women activists ‘whether they be advocates of the ballot or opposed to women’s suffrage’,<sup>5</sup> its purpose being defined in the broadest possible terms as ‘the interests of women and children, and of humanity in general’.

The roll call of 18 in Victoria comprised the Queen Victoria Hospital, the Victorian Lady Teachers Association, the Domestic Economy Association, the Women’s Political and Social Crusade, the Women’s Progressive Leagues Union, the WCTU, the Victorian Alliance, the Austral Salon, the Collins Street Independent Church Ladies Reading Society, the Victorian Infant Asylum and Foundling Hospital, the Convalescent Home for Women, the Women’s Hospital, the Gentlewomen’s Aid Society, the Children’s Aid Society, the Daughters of the Court, the Jewish Women’s Guild and the Victorian Women’s Franchise League. Norris’s longer list includes the Australian Church Improvement Society, the Australian Women’s Association (affiliated to the ANA), the Princess Ida Club, other women’s professional organisations, and the YWCA. In other words, the previous 20 years had seen the emergence among Victoria’s women of a wide array of voluntary charitable and welfare organisations, with and without religious affiliations, as well as professional associations; cultural, recreational and social and moral reform groups; and those that had more political objectives. The explicitly political organisations joined a little later, and by World War I they included Vida Goldstein’s Women’s Political Association (1904), the conservative Australian Women’s National League and the Commonwealth Liberal Party Women’s Section (both 1911). But many of their leading figures had previously joined as associates or as representatives of other organisations so their influence was being felt almost from the beginning.

The council would provide a forum for the raising and debating of ideas and issues, and a platform from which concerted action could be taken on matters of common concern and agreement. It denied any political objectives but was never able to steer clear of political issues altogether, given the increasing role of government in the social reform process and the affiliation over time of the more explicitly party political and/or feminist groups. Overall, the council assumed a universal and common sense of female purpose above and apart from differences of class, religion and party, a conception of citizenship for women that was predominantly philanthropic, spiritual and welfarist, and for which the right to vote and how to exercise it was not seen as central, though it became more important over time. On the few occasions when party politics did become explicit it created bitterness and division and saw the council veer to the conservative side of politics, with which it continued to be associated over the long term.

Some of the affiliated organisations were about self-improvement and, increasingly, sociability for educated and professional women. These focused on reading, discussion of contemporary problems and issues, and companionship among those with common interests. The early ones included the Collins Street Independent Church Ladies Reading Society, the Daughters of the Court, the Princess Ida Club, the Women Writers Club, the Warrawee Club, and a little later, the Catalysts and the Lyceum Club. Some had their own rooms where they could meet, eat and converse in a relaxed atmosphere. They functioned as a place where educated and professional women could network and, as such, provided one of the sources of ideas and leaders in NCW circles. Some have produced their own histories but there is a case for a detailed study of their extent and significance in the early women’s movement. Specifically professional organisations also affiliated before World War I—teachers, public servants, medical women, nurses, postal workers. In the 20s they were joined by university women and the Business and Professional Women’s Association. Few unions joined. A notable exception was the Hotel Caterers and Female Operatives union, which was only narrowly voted in during the war years. But the overtly left-wing Women’s Socialist League was rejected. And the Labor Party women’s organisation (WCOC) was never affiliated.

We can identify the dominant concern of most organisations of women working for women in the early twentieth century as ‘maternal feminism’—a feminism focusing mainly on the welfare of home and family. The focus for action for feminists of this kind can be summed up as protection, education, health and morals, all of them essential and interconnected elements of the discourse of philanthropy and rescue

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in, Norris, p. 131.

that persisted into early twentieth-century Australian ideals of progressivist reform and social liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Rarely did these organisations working in concert understand the problems they were dealing with in terms of political economy and class, and only occasionally did they identify them as questions of social justice. Some of the more radical groups that did take a class position usually did so separately.

Although scientific evidence gradually became more important in NCW arguments and advocacy, with qualified experts (doctors, lawyers, teachers and the new category of social workers) gaining greater prominence among office-bearers and advisers, the council still mostly saw its work as primarily protective and ameliorative and gave no support to programs of structural change to society as a whole. In the interwar period and after, however, they did gradually come to espouse a more individualist rights-based feminism alongside the dominant maternalism. This reflected the growth of a more diverse and politically sophisticated women's movement over time.

The primary goal of protection was conceived of as public or civic motherhood and the basis of women's claim to citizenship. It was also one of the few ways women could exercise power outside the home, albeit primarily over other women and children—though their reach sometimes extended to marginalised and disabled groups generally. And their reform advocacy included measures to control male behaviours deemed particularly damaging to the wellbeing of the home and family. The NCW's earliest campaigns—many of them successful, others ongoing—included for (1) police matrons in city and suburban lockups for the protection (moral and physical) of women prisoners, (2) the establishment of a 'colony' for sufferers from epilepsy, (3) a children's court, (4) children's playgrounds, (5) free kindergartens, (6) the education and care of so-called 'mentally defective' children, (7) better lighting in Melbourne's parks and gardens, (8) inspection by suitably qualified trained women of boarding-out arrangements for neglected children, (9) effective maintenance provision for deserted and widowed mothers and their children, (10) education on household hygiene and supervision of mothers caring for infants, (11) a pure milk supply for Melbourne and its suburbs, (12) education programs for girls in domestic science and establishment of a training college for domestic science teachers, (13) legislation to limit the numbers of hotels and their hours of opening, and (14) and age of consent laws. Behind these issues were the various benevolent, charitable and welfare organisations and the WCTU, but they were also supported by women representing professional and more ostensibly political organisations and interests. Labor Party women went further, taking up the idea of paying mothers to mother and successfully persuading Prime Minister Andrew Fisher in 1912 to introduce a maternity allowance of £5 for every mother (except Indigenous women) giving birth, married or unmarried. It was justified as recognition of the rights of citizen-mothers and their service to the nation and as a means of reducing infant mortality by providing for a woman's needs in childbirth. Many in the NCW were at first ambivalent about the so-called 'baby bonus' as endorsing immorality and undermining individual responsibility, but they did not oppose it, and, in the post-war years, led the campaign for its retention by organising a national conference of women's organisations held in Melbourne in March 1923—the largest such meeting to that time.

From the very beginning meetings and conferences heard papers and discussed women's suffrage and even equal pay, but only after the ICW gave the green light to suffrage advocacy in 1904 did the Victorian council form a subcommittee to lobby for the vote and equal citizenship rights for women. The Victorian council's entry into the last stages of the struggle for the state vote was gradual and tentative, and its involvement was generally low key and limited though possibly more influential than has been generally acknowledged.

---

<sup>6</sup> On maternal feminism see Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs*, 14 (Autumn), 1988, pp. 119–57. On progressivism in Australia, see Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought 1890–1960*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press Scholars' Library, 1984; and on social liberalism, see Marian Sawer, *The Ethical State? Social Liberalism in Australia*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2003. Also Marilyn Lake, *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and Transpacific Exchange Shaped American Reform*, Boston, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2019)

Although Victorian women had been entitled to vote in Commonwealth elections from mid-1902, many of those prominent in the various women's groups were still less than enthusiastic and felt little urge to fight for the state suffrage. Suffragists such as Vida Goldstein, Annie Lowe, Evelyn Gough, Louisa Bevan, Annie Watson Lister, Catherine Thompson, and Alison Pymm were early members of the executive but seem not to have used the council as a platform for their views. Some other members, however, openly expressed doubts about continuing the fight. The basis of their opposition or indifference was class prejudice—a concern with the rights of property, and fear of the working classes and their presumed susceptibility to rabble rousers. This fear of mass democracy lay behind the founding rationale of the Australian Women's National League, formed early in 1904 to organise and channel the votes of newly enfranchised women in the conservative cause—loyalty to king and empire, opposition to socialism, and preservation of the purity of home life. And an early affiliate, the Victorian Trained Nurses Association, was led by women who urged nurses to eschew political activism for individual rights and focus instead on 'higher' things and their duty of sacrifice.

The vote did not take up much time at council meetings but in the last stages of the campaign for the state franchise for women, the NCW threw its support behind the movement and decided to organise a deputation to the premier. It was received by Thomas Bent in early November 1906 and was led by Mrs Stella Allan, a New Zealander trained in law but a journalist by profession—later and better known as 'Vesta' the *Argus* women's columnist for 30 years from 1908—and included representatives of the Labor Party, the UCSS, the WCTU and the WPA. Another NCW deputation saw the premier in September 1908, just a couple of weeks before he agreed to enabling legislation. I have argued previously that although the council may not have played a major part in the struggle, its official active support was critical in the final stages. The fact that this coalition of more than 30 women's organisations was now clearly prepared to make its support felt put paid to the claim that the majority of Victorian women were not interested in this fundamental right of citizenship. Although the suffrage was never the central objective of the NCWV there was nevertheless a quiet sense of satisfaction and achievement in the 1908–09 annual report's statement that: 'During the past year the Adult Suffrage Bill became law, and received the Royal Assent, so granting women the State, as well as the Federal franchise'.<sup>7</sup>

In the year after the Great War broke out the organisations affiliated with the NCWV numbered 52. The Council's leadership estimated that it represented the views of well over 100,000 women.<sup>8</sup> But the NCWV could not escape the community tension that opened into bitter division in the first year of the conflict and lasted well into the postwar period. Four key issues divided the council and vitiated many of their other activities. The issues were peace and free speech, recruitment and conscription, treatment of Germans, and the cost of living (economy and thrift). The split was along political lines but, although it overwhelmed consensus and continuing action on less contentious matters, it did not entirely destroy ongoing work on matters such as child welfare, domestic science education, consumption of alcohol, the nationality rights of married women, and access of women to public office. This was especially the case with respect to alcohol consumption and a more recent concern with the threat from venereal disease, both of which became major foci of attention. I have written about these in some detail in journal articles but the brief summary I'm giving today comes largely from *Respectable Radicals*.

Once war broke out in August 1914, peace activism declined and was barely tolerated in most NCW circles by 1916, particularly in Victoria, under the influence of the powerful and very pro-Empire Australian Women's National League (AWNL). With no ICW congresses between the Rome quinquennial in 1914 and Kristiania in 1920, meetings and reports of the international standing committees, including peace and arbitration, were suspended until the end of the war, and the president, Lady Aberdeen, instructed national councils to do what they felt to be necessary in their national contexts.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Judith Smart and Marian Quartly, 'The National Council of Women of Victoria, Suffrage and Political Citizenship 1904–14', *Victorian Historical Journal*, Women's Suffrage Centenary Issue, vol. 79, no. 2, November 2008, pp. 224–36

<sup>8</sup> NCWV Council Minutes, 25 May 1916.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Ogilvie Gordon, 'The International Council of Women (1888–1938)', *International Council of Women Bulletin*, 10, June 1938 (Jubilee Edition), p. 78.

While the NSW council was trying to keep channels of communication open,<sup>10</sup> the Victorian council showed little willingness to continue international contacts or peace talk. Within the first few weeks of the war, NCWV issued a curt response to the Melbourne Peace Society's request for cooperation that 'it was not within the province of the Council'.<sup>11</sup> Peace and international arbitration work was now regarded as disloyal. In 1915 Jessie Strong, who earlier that year had helped form the Sisterhood of International Peace (SIP) for education and discussion purposes, felt compelled to resign from NCWV after the council decided not to accede to her request that the peace standing committee be revived, instead decreeing that the question of peace should not be discussed at all. Jessie Strong was a founding member of the Victorian council and its much-respected senior vice president, so her resignation could not be taken lightly. Although requested to reconsider, Mrs Strong declared that this censorship of open discussion was intolerable. Her decision, she said, reflected her 'growing dissatisfaction at the way the business of the Council was conducted ... and the underhand tactics in regard to standing committees'. The Victorian executive was not prepared to compromise and finally recommended that council accept the resignation 'with very much regret'.<sup>12</sup>

In the latter part of 1915, NCWV went still further, adopting what came very close to a party political position, and one that interfered with the autonomy of member organisations. In August, the council refused to admit outspoken pacifist Adela Pankhurst as the Women's Political Association (WPA) delegate because she 'had taken a prominent part in much peace propaganda' and 'had expressed sentiments with which the majority of the Council felt that they could not in any way agree'. One prominent member even asserted that 'working for peace at the present time was little short of treasonable'. A special by-law was passed making all delegates subject to council's approval. It was challenged by Vida Goldstein and some others at subsequent meetings, and police were finally called to evict Pankhurst from the October council assembly.<sup>13</sup> Rejection of the women's section of the Socialist Party as 'unsuitable' for affiliation, resolutions against all things German including the German NCW, and outright support for conscription in the referendum campaigns of 1916 and 1917 were even clearer indications that the NCWV had forsaken political neutrality and internationalist principles for an outright militarist and strident patriotic position.<sup>14</sup>

The main public health concerns of organisations affiliated to the council in this period were alcohol and venereal diseases, and these helped preserve a semblance of unity. Alarm about their effects on the health and future of the nation were evident during the first decade of the council's existence but reached a peak during the war years.

The war-time anti-drink campaigns were couched largely in terms of national efficiency, and, even when linked with sexual licence and venereal disease, the focus remained on civil and military effectiveness. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union led the campaign for dry canteens in army camps, and for dry troopships and early closing of hotels after outbreaks of drunken violence among soldiers in the streets of Melbourne. But they were supported by most women's organisations and the National Council threw its weight behind the campaign.

---

<sup>10</sup> NCWNSW Council Minutes, 6 August 1914, Box MLK 03009, MS3739, NCWNSW Papers, State Library of NSW (SLNSW).

<sup>11</sup> NCWV Council Minutes, 25 September 1914, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending).

<sup>12</sup> NCWV Council Minutes, 11 and 27 May 1915, 8 June and 24 1915, 13 July 1915, 26 August 1915, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending); NCWV, *Report for 1915*, p. 6; *Weekly Times*, 3 July 1915, p. 10; *Argus*, 27 August 1915, p. 9. For more detailed discussion about internal conflicts, see Kate Gray, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The National Council of Women of Victoria, 1902–18', MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1988, pp. 109–10, and Judith Smart, 'Women Waging War: The National Council of Women of Victoria 1914–1920', *Victorian Historical Journal*, 85 (1), June 2015, pp. 61–82. SIP was to become the first branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in Australia.

<sup>13</sup> NCWV Council Minutes, 23 September 1915, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending); *Argus*, 24 September 1915, p. 6, and 29 October 1915, p. 6; NCWV, *Report for 1915*, p. 5. See also Gray, 'Acceptable Face', pp. 111–16.

<sup>14</sup> Gray, 'Acceptable Face', pp. 116, 120–1; Smart, 'Women Waging War', pp. 70–4.

During February and March of 1915, rumours spread that recruits at Broadmeadows were being seduced from their duty not only by the ‘liquor evil’ but also by the adjacent ‘camp of the harpies’.<sup>15</sup> This linking of drink, soldiers’ health and sexual morality was a powerful means of manipulating public emotions. The April meeting of NCWV passed a series of resolutions. Prefacing the first was a statement of concern about ‘the grave danger to the whole of the British Empire and to womanhood arising from indulgence in alcohol’. The following motions urged prompt government action to limit the hours of sale of alcohol, to ban sales in cafés, and to close hotels at 6pm, and called on all affiliates ‘to follow the noble example of His Majesty by themselves at once abstaining from and discouraging the use of alcohol in their households’.<sup>16</sup> A week later, the Council participated in a deputation to the premier. Standing for ‘many thousands of women’, the deputation argued for early closing of hotel bars in the interests of ‘military efficiency’ and the ‘general public interest during this time of stress’.<sup>17</sup> The Intoxicating Liquor (Temporary Restriction) Act—to close hotel before 9am and after 9.30pm—was passed in July 1915.<sup>18</sup> By April 1916, NSW, South Australia and Tasmania had all held referendums resulting in 6 o’clock closing. This was finally achieved in Victoria in December 1916 by act of parliament after it had been decided to abandon a planned referendum because it would cause confusion if held around the same time as the conscription referendum planned for October.<sup>19</sup> All four states that had introduced six o’clock closing had the support of the national councils when it was made it permanent in the wake of the war.

NCW concern about the venereal diseases also predated the war. Most women’s organisations had a history of opposition to the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts designed to inspect and detain prostitutes in lock hospitals and passed into law in the UK and some of the Australian colonies, but efforts were now made to separate the issues of prostitution and VD. In Victoria, debate in the medical profession about policy towards syphilis and gonorrhoea was sparked by publicity at the 1908 Australasian Medical Congress about their extent in patients at the Melbourne Hospital.<sup>20</sup> In 1910, a trial system of notification of suspected cases of syphilis showed that 3167 patients had indications of the disease.<sup>21</sup> Aware of the political power of moral opposition to any regulation, the government enlisted the co-operation of the Council of Churches and the National Council of Women in a public education campaign to support compulsory notification and treatment, ostensibly targeting men and women equally.<sup>22</sup>

In 1914, NCWV also agreed to join the Australian Natives Association and members of the medical profession in their efforts to ‘mitigate ... the spread of venereal disease’ by circulating information brochures prepared by the Board of Health. March 1915 saw the return of the first troops from overseas, many of them suffering from venereal disease. Sent at once to Langwarrin in Victoria, originally a camp for prisoners of war, they were initially herded behind barbed wire in appalling accommodation.<sup>23</sup> In October, Melbourne was alarmed by the news that 85 of them had escaped, and that 60 of them were still at large.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> *Argus*, 27 February 1915, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> NCWV Minutes, 22 April 1915, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending); *Argus*, 24 April 1915, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Argus*, 1 May 1915, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Victorian Government Statutes*, 1915; *Victorian Year Book*, 1914–15, p. 457.

<sup>19</sup> NCWV Minutes, 27 July 1916, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending); *Argus*, 8 September 1916, p. 6; 12 September 1916, p. 6; Judith Smart, ‘The Pattern of Liquor Legislation in Victoria, 1906–1919 with Particular Reference to the Impact of World War I’, BA Hons thesis, Monash University, 1971, chap. III.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Department of Trade and Customs, Committee Concerning Causes of Death and Invalidity in the Commonwealth, ‘Report on Venereal Diseases’, *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Papers*, 1914–15–16, vol. 5, p. 114 (Report pagination, p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> *Truth*, 4 September 1909, p. 5.; 8 July 1911, p. 6; 5 Aug. 1911, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Truth*, 26 August 1911, p. 3; 30 September 1911, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> A.G.H. Butler, *The Australian Army Services in the War of 1914–18*, vol. III, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1943, p. 175

<sup>24</sup> *Woman Voter*, 28 October 1915, p. 2. The figures vary. In state parliament the number of escapers mentioned was 60 and those still not recaptured, 19. *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 141, Legislative Assembly, 26 October 1915, p. 2967.

The spectre of infected soldiers triggered government action across Australia. A Commonwealth committee of inquiry into the causes of death and invalidity also issued its recommendations about venereal diseases in 1916, giving alarmist statistics about the incidence of syphilis and gonorrhoea. The vast majority of the medical profession believed that coercive legislation with compulsory treatment and detention of those infected was the only way the spread of venereal disease could be halted, and that the traditional moral arguments distracted people from the main problem.

In Victoria, most women's groups supported regulation; even the WCTU, previously staunchly anti-regulation, was at best ambivalent. Council meetings in June and July canvassed an array of views. The July meeting heard Dr Roberta Jull from the Western Australian council, who assured them that the WA act treated men and women equally. A resolution urging state legislation on the lines of the Western Australian legislation was passed in the face of objections from some radical feminists who remained convinced that the bill would victimise prostitutes and many sexually active young women in order to protect soldiers, despite its apparent gender neutrality.<sup>25</sup> The Women's Political Association was the measure's principal opponent, arguing that to use law and regulation was to deal with symptoms not causes. Compulsory notification and what amounted to regulation not only of prostitutes but also large numbers of young women seeking fun and romance would detain and control the wrong section of the population. It was in their view a revival of contagious diseases measures long opposed by women's organisations. But this social feminist position on the venereal diseases problem was a very isolated one in 1916.<sup>26</sup> The 1916 and 1918 Victorian legislation constituted a victory for the dominance and power of the medical profession, including the women doctors treated as expert advisors by the NCW.<sup>27</sup>

The onset of war had given a fillip to both the temperance movement and to the agitation for regulations controlling the spread of venereal disease. Morally coercive laws to control venereal diseases, like temperance measures, could be easily justified in terms of patriotic sacrifice and national efficiency, especially by women who were unable to fight and had to prove their citizenship in other ways.<sup>28</sup>

It is hard to see how the postwar National Council of Women could recover that 'extraordinary degree of unity' and accommodate 'the breadth of opinion' that had been the hallmark of its pre-war years. Yet, it lost few of its affiliates during the war, and the chief internal source of opposition to the leadership's increasingly rabid loyalism, the Women's Political Association, disbanded in 1919 after Vida Goldstein left Australia for the women's peace conference in Zürich. A new, more moderate, feminist group, the Victorian Women Citizens' Movement, affiliated in 1922, and a renewed Housewives' Association aimed to resolve the anger of women engaged in Melbourne's food riots in 1917 by supporting modified co-operativism, as well as targeted boycotts. It soon rivalled the dominance of the AWNL in the council's leadership and brought working-class women into the council's sphere of influence. Five years after the war, the number of member organisations had risen to 67 and the political antagonisms of the war years had mostly dissipated, in part because the more radical organisations had disbanded or did not seek affiliation.<sup>29</sup> Labor women continued to remain unaffiliated and emerging radical women's organisations such as those within the new Communist Party chose to remain separate, though it is doubtful that they would have been admitted had they applied. And the Victorian Council retained a wary attitude towards the more explicit feminism represented by the new Australian Federation of Women Voters, as well as keeping its distance from the radical pacifism of the successor to the Sisterhood of International Peace, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

---

<sup>25</sup> NCWV Minutes, 18 July and 31 August 1916, NCWV Papers, SLV (classification pending).

<sup>26</sup> Judith Smart, 'Feminists, Labour Women and Venereal Disease in Early Twentieth Century Melbourne', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15, 1992, pp. 25–40.

<sup>27</sup> Victoria's amending act of 1918 'tightened up' the earlier act. Measures for arresting those escaping from treatment and for stronger discipline in places of detention were added, and it was made mandatory for doctors to inform the parents or guardians of intending marriage partners if one or other of them was suffering from a venereal disease.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Smart, 'Sex, the State and the "Scarlet Scourge": Gender, Citizenship and Venereal Diseases Regulation in Australia during the Great War', *Women's History Review*, 7 (1), 1998, pp. 5–36.

<sup>29</sup> See NCWV, *Report for 1923*, pp. 19–21.

NCWV thus largely benefitted from the expansion and diversification of the women's movement in the postwar decade, a product in part of increased confidence derived from war work and activism. But legacies of wartime internal conflict took time to abate and some never fully healed. The council now largely supported the mainstream feminist equality agenda, following ICW policies—for example the right of women to stand for parliament (conceded in Victoria 1923), equal pay, the right of married women to retain their own nationality, appointment of a woman alternate delegate to the League of Nations, equal marriage and divorce laws, and the appointment of women as JPs and to the boards of public institutions. Membership continued to expand with 108 organisations affiliated by 1935, the same as in 1949 when the council was at the beginning of its golden decades. It peaked at about 140 in the late 1960s.

Overall, the effects of the Great War on women's organisations can be summarised as, first, the breaking down of the division between conservatives and liberals as they joined forces against the perceived radical threat posed by the labour movement, second, a growing emphasis on modernist ideas of scientific and national efficiency as the powers of the state expanded to deal with the demands of the war effort, and third, in the wake of the peace conference, the gradual expansion of international understanding beyond the British Empire/Commonwealth.

In both the pre-existing women's groups and the new mainstream women's organisations of the interwar period we see the absorption of the earlier type of conservatism into an increasingly dominant and self-consciously modern progressivist liberalism to form a new hybrid. For example, although the AWNL continued to stand for small government, free trade, commercial more than manufacturing interests, rural development and individualism, its conservatism about citizenship rights for women moderated in the interwar years into a more liberal set of attitudes about the social order, equal pay and matrimonial law, as well as the desirability of women standing for parliamentary election (which they opposed until the late 1920s). Much the same could be said of the Housewives' Association's blend of domestic ideology, its commitment to an equal rights agenda and its assertion of economic power and influence as a consumer-watch organisation. And the WCTU became more interested in peace activism and issues of race equity in the 1930s. Added to this was the general expansion of international organisation and co-operation among women in the context of a pre-eminent concern for world peace in the wake of the unprecedented carnage of the Great War. While loyalty to Britain remained strong, international activism and representation through the ICW, the League of Nations and the Pan Pacific Women's conferences expanded.<sup>30</sup>

Thus mainstream organised women's claims to equal citizenship and to a greater role in public representation and policy formulation grew not only louder and stronger but also more reform-oriented and progressive in the 1920s and 1930s. However, there was still much to do both within and outside the council to change demeaning and paternalistic attitudes to and interventions on behalf of those defined as 'inefficient' and/or in need of special protection or control, and thus understood to be incapable of exercising full citizenship—among them children, single mothers, Aboriginal women, those defined as 'mentally unfit' and the disabled. This change of mind-set would be the task of a new generation and is beyond the focus of this summary of the organisational culture of Victoria's women in the first 30 or 40 years of the 20th century.

---

<sup>30</sup> Judith Smart, 'A Mission to the Home: The Housewives' Association, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920–40"', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no. 28, October 1998, pp. 215–34.