

Our Centenary of Women's Suffrage

July 2009

The first parliamentary election following the federation of Australia was held on 29 March 1901 in New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, and 30 March 1901 in Queensland and South Australia. The election was conducted according to then-existing state electoral laws - as laid down in the Federal Constitution - until the newly constituted Federal 'Parliament otherwise provides'.

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Overview

What happened on the way

'The prized means to an end long desired': [1](#) *Exercising the franchise at the 1903 federal election*

The first parliamentary election following the federation of Australia was held on 29 March 1901 in New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, and 30 March 1901 in Queensland and South Australia. The election was conducted according to then-existing state electoral laws - as laid down in the Federal Constitution - until the newly constituted Federal 'Parliament otherwise provides'.

The states were very diverse in their approach to voting eligibility requirements. Such things as residential and property qualifications for enrolment, whether adult women could vote, Aboriginal and non-white voting rights, and whether members of the police forces could vote varied markedly between jurisdictions [2](#). Even voting methods differed; however, one uniform provision was in force at the first Federal election – the Constitution explicitly provided that in the choosing of members each elector should vote only once [3](#).

Following the 1901 election, there was a formal review of the various State electoral laws, and in 1902 the federal Parliament passed the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1902*. This contained the detailed instructions for the *uniform* holding of Commonwealth elections, including the appointment of the Chief Electoral Officer for the Commonwealth, the creation of electoral divisions, the preparation of electoral rolls, nominations procedures and postal voting.

Section 95 of the Act, relating to nominations, opened the way for women to stand for election. To nominate, a person had to be qualified under the Constitution to be elected. Under the Constitution ('until the Parliament otherwise provides') the qualifications included: being of the full age of 21 years and being an elector entitled to vote at the election of the House of Representatives. And on 12 June 1902 the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* had provided that 'subject to the disqualifications hereafter set out, all persons... whether male or female married or unmarried... shall be entitled to vote at the election of Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives'.

1. Melbourne Leader, 28 November 1903, cited in F Kelly, 1985, 'Vida Goldstein: political woman', in M Lake and F Kelly (eds) *Double Time: Women in Victoria-150 Years*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, p. 167.
2. Simms, M 2001, 'Voting and enrolment provisions', in M Simms (ed), 1901: *The forgotten election*, UQP in association with the API Network and Curtin UT, St Lucia, pp. 28-31.
3. Rydon, J 2001, 'Electoral Methods', in M Simms (ed), 1901: *The forgotten election*, p. 21.

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Helping women to exercise their vote – the formal approach

The electoral authorities in the Home Affairs Department drew up and published a code of instructions on how to vote, for the benefit of the newly enfranchised women voters, which was reported in several newspapers. The reports also noted however that 'the hints therein apply with equal force to gentlemen, inasmuch as if they are followed the voter can hardly go wrong'. The *Adelaide Advertiser*, in referring to these instructions, noted that 'among other things the ladies are exhorted to vote early "but at only one place", which is an improvement on the maxim "vote early and often"'.

Several newspapers drew up a 'voters' guide' – with the sequence of procedures listed simply and clearly. The Guide in the Melbourne *Argus* reminded voters not to strike out any name (which had been the previous voting method in Victoria) as this would invalidate the vote. It also gave the hours the polls were open – 8 am to 7 pm. It was suggested that the best time for women to vote was between 10 and 12 and 2 and 5, as 'men will rush to the booths during the other hours'. In the *Brisbane Courier's* address to women voters, it was noted that votes could be recorded any time from 8 am to 7 pm, but 'of course the time when there will be least crush at the booths will be during the hours when the men-folk are engaged at their places of business.'

Early in the campaign a serious practical problem was identified by the Melbourne *Age*. This related to the exercise of the vote by women who were working in urban factories, offices and shops. As these establishments mostly closed at 6pm, this left only an hour to vote, with a subsequent rush expected at the metropolitan polling booths.

The administrator of the Home Department had dropped a heavy hint to employers, hoping 'they would give every facility to their employees to record their votes'. As *The Age* commented: 'If employers take the hint and grant the facilities either in the dinner hour or in the afternoon there should be no risk of the disenfranchisement of the working women or of overcrowding in the polling booths on 16th December.'

However, on the day following the original report, *The Age* stated that they had received assurances from several firms employing females 'that they will give their hands every opportunity of exercising the franchise'.

The Advertiser also commented on this matter, noting that the Home Department paper, by encouraging women to vote mid-morning or afternoon, had reminded some considerate observers that thousands of girls and women were engaged in shops and factories at those hours. 'Employers were being urged to liberate them at such times as may be convenient.'

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A different approach to morning teas

We hear of several election teas and lunches for next Wednesday. Women voters are prepared to treat the business of the day solemnly, but they wish to bring a little lightness and brightness into the matter afterwards. Election refectations will be distinguished by several new dainties. There has been a large demand for a recipe for 'Deakin meringues'. These are charming little puffs, with a smooth creamy surface, and an absolutely hollow centre. The recipe concludes – 'The vacuum can be filled with jam if desired'.... Smaller dainties are neat sponge cake effigies of Messrs Barker, Best, Dow, McCulloch and Styles*, each served with quantities of butter, and the neck of each being encircled with a tiny whip made of boiled and coloured sugar.... 'Federal capital cake' looks well, but is far too expensive for any but the most extravagant luncheons.

Women's Realm, *The Argus*.

*These were Senate candidates not favoured by the paper.

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Preparing to exercise the franchise

In the opinion of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* 'at this early period in woman's political history, every effort should be made to overcome her natural timidity and induce her to record her vote at the polls'.

Women started attending political meetings. Sometimes the organisers offered the inducement of a 'number of seats reserved for ladies', often at the front of the gathering. There were also meetings just for women, generally organised by one of the women's associations. The Women's Liberal League of NSW was particularly active in this respect, and was well reported in the Sydney papers. The ladies' meetings were often held in the afternoon, sometimes at private houses; approved candidates might address the gathering, or general political topics be discussed, questions invited and a vote of thanks would conclude the proceedings.

At such meetings quite a fashionable exercise was to hold a mock election, 'to instruct the new voters in the technicalities of the ballot box'. At a meeting of the Women's Suffrage Association in Hobart, for example, the Federal Electoral Officer for the division of Denison gave a clear and detailed address explaining the procedure and then superintended the ballot. He received a hearty vote of thanks.

Another meeting in the Western district of Victoria was not so smooth – a lecture was given to the ladies on the ABC of politics by a mere man. 'The mere man was afterwards much snubbed by the audience, who declared that he must think them children, who had never read a newspaper, to judge by the elementary instruction he gave them.'

The women's organisations and committees also looked at strategies to ease the process for women attending polling booths. There were proposals for looking after small children, either in someone's home or in a room at the polling centre. Another suggestion was that women who had more leisure should form committees to relieve others from their domestic duties for sufficient time to enable them to record their vote. Some of the organisations rostered their members to attend the polling booths and give assistance as required by women recording their votes.

A letter to *The Age* asked for a very particular form of assistance for voting – a list of the current candidates showing who favored and who opposed the granting of the women's vote.

'It is very necessary to take precautions so that women may not be cajoled into voting for men like Mr Knox or Colonel Templeton. Both of these have the effrontery to tell women they should not be trusted with the vote, and then ask that they shall make full use of it and vote for them. Yours, A WOMAN VOTER'.

Mr. Knox retained his seat but Colonel Templeton was unsuccessful in the Senate election.

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Election issues relating to women: editorial comment

What the newly-enfranchised woman elector would do with her vote was a matter of some concern in editorial commentary. Various papers managed to equate women's best interests with support for their chosen policies and candidates.

The Advertiser argued that little had been said about 'the questions of the day' by the organised political associations for women or by the individual women in the field. However, 'fiscal peace, industrial progress, and racial purity mean even more to women than to men. And when this fact is fully realised there can be little doubt as to the direction in which the Australian woman's vote will go.'

Under the heading 'Feminine Facts and Fancies' *The Age's* view was that 'the women – and the men – who, by dint of much patience and perseverance have won for us the suffrage, have done so, first and foremost, that the home may be safeguarded, and that domestic legislation may gradually remove many existing evils'. It was noted approvingly that home-making and home keeping women were interesting themselves in the forthcoming election – attending election meetings and taking part in activities promoted by women's organisations such as the WCTU and the YWCA and clubs. The argument was then developed that for women in paid work the home was also a matter of vital consequence. This was contrary to the conservative argument that such women had little connection with home life – leaving it daily and finding nearly all her interests outside it.

'Just as long as their homes depend on the conditions under which they earn the money to support them will the wise woman see to it that the right kind of man represents her in Parliament.... Women who feel no need to safeguard their own privileges will do well to remember at this season the disadvantages under which many of their sisters labor. Will they support the cause of Liberalism and make the burdens of those sisters lighter, or will they help the conservative to 'open doors' and reduce wages till life for the majority of working women means little more than mere existence.'

In the opinion of *The Mercury*, 'Women are apt to be credulous in regard to some matters, but they are, too, frequently endowed with a degree of shrewd commonsense not conferred upon the male creature and not yet blinded by contact with a rude and very untruthful world'. By inference, therefore, women would not be taken in by the statements of 'a Federal Minister', who reached the high top-gallant of impudence when he 'assured the people of the NW coast that Federation, that is, of course, the Federal Tariff, had given them fine prices for their potatoes, though everybody knows that the prices were caused by the drought, and that there never was a duty on potatoes in NSW.' It seemed therefore to *The Mercury* that 'one main duty of the women voters [was] to look to honesty of intellectual character and to vote for those candidates, and those candidates only, who will face the facts and give an honest consideration to them' (the candidate in question was returned by a very small margin, and also survived a petition to the Court of Disputed Returns, with costs awarded to him).

The *Sydney Morning Herald* identified the principal issue that the elections would turn on – a very simple issue – 'that appeals at once to the experience and common sense of the new electors' – the federal tariff. 'Probably every woman elector now realises that our Federal Tariff has made the family groceries and the family clothes on the whole at least a quarter dearer than they were before NSW gave up freetrade.' In addition 'we are not helping the revenue. We are paying practically all that money to a few firms in South Australia and Victoria'. Every woman voter 'who understands how to spend her money to the best advantage' would vote for the three selected freetrade candidates for the Senate and for the selected candidate in her own electorate. 'Only women who prefer dearness to cheapness will hesitate to act in this way.'

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Things that happened: They must be true, they were all in the papers

Making sure

In Melbourne Vida Goldstein arrived at the polling booth for the Lonsdale division at 7.20 am. She was the first to enter and cast her vote, as the Post Office clock banged out the hour of 8 am. In Sydney 'Mr Dugald Thompson's sister' was one of the first to vote (he was the unopposed candidate for North Sydney); Miss Agnes Robertson, the only surviving sister of Sir John Robertson, at age 83, exercised her franchise at 8.15 am in the morning. In the Valley (Brisbane) two ladies were waiting to exercise their votes at a quarter to eight, and they were the first to record their votes.

A family occasion

Many women brought their small children with them to the polling booths. In some electorates women's committees had made arrangements for looking after children while mothers voted. Outside other polling centres there were always a few go-carts and perambulators, with the baby consoled by a 'comforter' and a brother or sister of four or six standing by as sentry. 'Many ladies openly contravened the law that they should enter the voting compartment alone' – they took their babies with them. As another report remarked, the babies seemed very adaptable, and this practice caused no great inconvenience to anyone but the mothers themselves.

Occasionally the indispensable constable stationed at the polling booth was asked to hold the baby. Older children, of two or three years, could cause more disturbance, by loudly demanding the 'boo pencil' mother was writing with.

There were several incidents concerning wives and husbands. In South Brisbane the presiding officer approached a man winking and laughing at a woman as she voted. The spectator responded that he was looking at his old woman, who had never voted before. 'It is the first time in my life that I have seen her nervous.' After she had completed the process, the lady responded with a crushing look. At a Melbourne booth, husband and wife showed each other their papers before putting them in the ballot box. The wife appeared unhappy with her husband's choices and declared that she would 'tell Katie to come down this afternoon and vote for Vida Goldstein, just to spite you. There now! See if I don't.' A more troublesome incident concerned a man the worse for liquor, who accompanied his wife into the booth, and drunkenly maintained his right to instruct his wife to vote in what he considered the right way. After several warnings, the deputy returning officer gave him one minute to get out of the booth or be arrested, and called a policeman. The man went out.

As reported in the *Brisbane Courier*, a lady voted once, and then came in again. When queried by an official as to how it was she wanted to vote again, she claimed that she had another vote. The puzzled official asked for an explanation, and the lady replied: 'Well, I was not married when the constable took my name and put my name on the roll. I am now Mrs. ----, and when I was married I sent in my name again and got it on again.' She was a little surprised to learn that provision had not been made for double voting, even as a reward for matrimony.

Delivering the votes

Another new feature at the election, noted in *The Age*, was the use of motor cars, driven by supporters of the various candidates, to bring voters to the booths. 'The vehicles did useful service throughout the day, and the only mishap recorded overtook one of the machines which was being driven on its last trip at a rate which came perilously near to being "furious" when something went wrong with the works. A couple of ladies were aboard, and it wanted but four minutes to 7pm. A distance of about 50 yards lay between the fair voters and the booth – in Collins Street – but, urged on by the motor driver, the pair, discarding the conveyance, made a hot pace over the intervening footway and entered the booth with fully a minute to spare.'

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Commonwealth of Australia: General Election, 16 December 1903

Electoral mechanics

According to the *Electoral Act*, the creation of the electoral rolls for Federal elections was to be the responsibility of the Commonwealth Electoral Officers in each State, with the assistance of 'all officers in the service of the Commonwealth and all police statistical and electoral officers in the service of any State'. In practice, the collection agents were generally local police. [4](#)

The Electoral Rolls at the 1903 election were the subject of much adverse comment when people came to vote and found that their names were not included. A post-election report noted that one disenfranchised woman, whose name was not on the official printed roll at the booth, was married to the policeman who collected the information for the rolls and had put her name down; in another incident the policeman, it was asserted, had 'taken down my name and Mary Anne's, and cracked jokes, and went away – and I'm not down and Mary Anne is!' A lodging house keeper was disenfranchised because the number of her house was wrongly stated on the roll, but her lodgers, whose names were taken at the same time, could vote.

Several States had already introduced postal voting as a response to problems of distance. [5](#) Arrangements for postal voting in Federal elections identified three classes of elector: - anyone having reason to believe they would be more than five miles from their polling place where they were enrolled, anyone who would be prevented by serious illness or infirmity from attending the polling place, and anyone 'who being a woman believes that she will on account of ill-health be unable on polling day to attend the polling place to vote'.

Evidence given at the 1904 enquiry into administration of the Electoral Act indicates that, although not stated overtly, such female ill-health was equated with 'being enceinte', that is, pregnant. [6](#) It was also suggested that this provision might have been rorted.

For Federal elections the South Australia voting system was adopted – the box opposite the chosen candidate's name was to be marked with a cross. In all other State systems the names of those candidates not wanted were to be struck out. [7](#) After the election *The Age* noted that 'the new fangled fashion of marking the cross did not appeal to many Victorian electors who, in the old days, positively enjoyed wreaking their displeasure on the men for whom they were not voting by savagely running the blue pencil through their names.'

It should also be noted that neither enrolment nor voting was compulsory at this time.

Turning out to vote

On 26 February 1904, George Lewis, Chief Electoral Officer for the Commonwealth, presented to the Parliament the returns for each of the House of Representatives divisions, and the Senate returns by each division within a State. These statistics showed names of candidates and votes polled by each; number of informal votes; total number of electors (male and female) who recorded their votes, and number of electors enrolled (male and female) for each division. [8](#)

The House of Representatives

There were more women than men enrolled in 22 electorates throughout the country, with 11 of these in Victoria. More women than men voted in five electorates (although one difference was very small). In general the turn-out rate (the percentage of those enrolled who recorded a vote) for women was lower than for men; in all States the highest rate for women was at least ten percentage points lower than the highest for men. In only three electorates was the turn-out rate for women higher than for men, and in eleven the rate for women was at least 20 percentage points lower.

Because the federal voting procedure was generally different from those used in most State elections, there had been some concern that there would be many informal votes cast. Averaged across the contested electorates in each State, informal votes, as a proportion of all votes recorded, were highest in Western Australia at 5.2%. Tasmania recorded 3.0%, New South Wales 2.8%, South Australia and Queensland 2.7%, and Victoria 1.9%.

Voting in Western Australia – a special case

It has been argued that the franchise was given to women in Western Australia in order to maintain the level of conservative support in the city and along the coast, as against the radical leanings of the increasing numbers of men coming to the Goldfields. [9](#) In 1903, it is interesting to note, the highest number of women voting was recorded in the goldfields division of Kalgoorlie, 1494, as against 1416 in Perth and 1372 in Fremantle (candidates in the other two divisions were unopposed). The turn-out rates for women were 19.6%, 11.6% and 16.3% respectively.

The new members

In 1901 neither South Australia nor Tasmania had declared electoral divisions, so the elections for the House of Representatives had been held on a state-wide basis. In 1903 incumbent members were elected unopposed in five of the new electorates in South Australia. In Boothby two sitting members contested the election, and in Hindmarsh two new candidates were nominated – they had not stood in 1901. In Tasmania all five electorates were contested. Three of the successful candidates had been elected state-wide in 1901; there were two new members, one of whom defeated a sitting member.

In New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia, there were 63 House of Representatives electorates. In 12 of these seats the member was elected unopposed. All of these unopposed nominations were sitting members. In 37 seats the sitting member stood and was returned; in 6 seats the sitting member stood again and was defeated; in the remaining eight seats the sitting member did not stand again.

Thus the new House of Representatives had 58 members (77% of the total 75) who sat in the previous parliament.

After the election there were four petitions to the Court of Disputed Returns gazetted. Two were successful – in one the re-elected sitting member was replaced by his opponent (in both 1901 and 1903), in the other the ex-member was reinstated.

The Senate

The 1903 election was for half the Senate only, to replace the three Senators from each State who had had half terms of three years (as laid down in the Constitution). In Victoria there were four places to be filled; one elected Senator had died and been replaced by nomination of the State government, and a successor to this vacancy had to be elected to complete the term. Thus a total of 19 Senate places were up for election.

There were 63 candidates in the various States. In Victoria and Tasmania all three of the half-term senators nominated (the nominated replacement senator in Victoria did not stand). In New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia two nominated; in Western Australia one nominated, and also a replacement Senator nominated by the State government to fill a short term vacancy.

In Victoria two were elected, one came 13th out of 18; in Tasmania two were elected, one came fourth. In New South Wales both were elected; in Queensland one was re-elected, one came last; in South Australia one was re-elected, one came fourth; and in Western Australia the half-term Senator was re-elected, and the replacement Senator came fourth. Thus, nine of the thirteen were re-elected, and nearly half of the new Senators had already had experience in the Federal Parliament.

The overall turn-out rate for the Senate elections varied across the States, ranging from 28% in Western Australia to 55% in Queensland. Queensland also had the highest rate for men (62%) and the second highest for women (45%).

Turn-out rates (%) for Senate election, December 1903

	Female	Male	Overall
New South Wales	41	53	47
Queensland	45	62	55
South Australia	23	42	33
Tasmania	34	55	45
Victoria	46	57	51
Western Australia	15	36	28

Electoral participation in South Australia – 1901 and 1903

In South Australia both women and men had voted in the 1901 Federal election. The House of Representatives ordered a return, showing the number of men and women who were enrolled and the number who actually recorded their votes. The return was tabled and printed. This shows that, at the 1901 election, the turn-out rates for women and men were 31% and 49% respectively.

In 1903 the number of women enrolled on the Federal Rolls in the State had increased by 18%, compared with the State Rolls in 1901. The increase for men was 2%. In the 1903 Senate election, the turn-outs were 23% and 42% for women and men respectively. The actual numbers recording votes were lower in 1903 than 1901. Since voting was not compulsory, some voters in the five uncontested seats in the House of Representatives may have decided not to bother with the elections at all.

4. Bourke, P 2002, 'The Australian electorate ca.1894-1930: issues and data', in M Simms (ed), *A Hundred Years of Women's Politics*, Occasional paper series1/2002, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra, p. 89.
5. Simms, M, op. cit., p. 32.
6. Bourke, P 2002, 'The Australian electorate ca.1894-1930: issues and data', in M Simms (ed), *A Hundred Years of Women's Politics*, p. 90.
7. Rydon, J 2001, 'Electoral Methods', in M Simms (ed), *1901: The forgotten election*, p. 22.
8. Australia is one of the 'few countries in the modern democratic world which counted separately the total of women enrolling to vote and then recorded separately the numbers of women and men voting in general elections'. See P Bourke, 'The Australian electorate ca.1894-1930: issues and data', in M Simms (ed), *A Hundred Years of Women's Politics*, p. 83.
9. Oldfield, A 1992, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: a gift or a struggle?*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, pp. 53-55.

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Standing for election – the female experience

Selina Anderson: The House of Representatives

Selina Sarah Elizabeth Anderson stood for election in the seat of Dalley (NSW); the electorate covered Leichhardt, Annandale, Balmain and part of Glebe. On the ninth of December the *Daily Telegraph* published

her photo and brief biography, along with several other candidates. She was described as an artist by profession, and it was noted that she had 'the distinction of being the only woman seeking election to the House of Representatives'. She was identified as a protectionist candidate and as an active member of the Women's Political Labor League. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Miss Selina Anderson had been assisted by several speakers from unionist circles at her concluding campaign meetings, 'which were numerously attended'.

Selina Anderson received 17% of the votes recorded, and did not forfeit her deposit, as the third candidate standing in the division did. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'many more women voted than men, and they did their business in a manner that showed business'. In fact the female vote in the electorate was only 54 higher than the male (8812 as against 8758). Dalley was one of the seven NSW electorates with more women than men enrolled; however, the turn-out rate for women was not as high as in some other electorates, and not as high as for the men in Dalley.

The night after the election Selina addressed a meeting of the electors of Dalley, and according to the *Telegraph's* report – stated her intention to lodge a challenge against the election on the ground of illegal interference with voters at some of the booths. (No further action on this is apparent.)

Nellie Martel and Mary Ann Bentley: The Senate

Nellie Alma Martel and Mary Ann Moore Bentley nominated for the Senate in New South Wales. Their candidatures were not viewed favourably by some women's organisations. At a meeting of the Women's Political League in Bathurst it was unanimously resolved that the time had not yet arrived when women should be nominated as Senators. A meeting of the Women's Social and Political League was reported as carrying, practically unanimously, a motion that the league should *not* select and support some women for the Senate, even though the league had received letters from Mrs Bentley and Mrs Martel asking for support. Two other women's political associations had written to the League, stating that their members disapproved of the nomination of women for the Senate. This attitude was condemned in a later letter to the *Daily Telegraph* from an original member from the beginning of the original "Women's Suffrage League", earnestly asking 'why is this? Have women still no confidence in each other?'

Mrs Bentley had announced her candidature by the middle of October. As reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, the local mayors presided at campaign meetings in Windsor and Granville. At both meetings she advocated a tax upon land values, which would help private enterprise. 'Protection had yet to be proved as a creator of work, as up to the present the reverse had rather been the case....' Freetrade, Mrs Bentley concluded, was the saviour of democracy. *The Advertiser* noted that Mrs Moore Bentley had been addressing meetings in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, and that she advocated 'raising the federal revenue by taxation on land values'.

For several years Nellie Martel had been an active member of the Womanhood Suffrage League (WSL) (in which Rose Scott was a major figure), but she became unhappy with the centralised decision-making processes of the organisation. With other dissident WSL members, such as the Golding sisters, she founded the Women's Progressive Association in 1901. This group of suffragists were more lower middle or working-class in origin, with Labor oriented political sympathies. [10](#)

Mrs Martel ensured some press coverage when she wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, to query that paper's support for Messrs. Neil, Pulsford and Gray, the three so-called 'selected freetrade candidates'. She claimed that the selection process involved only a small committee (of which the three were members), and that the Freetrade League, in which she claimed she was active, had nothing to do with the selection. She stated that she would not have been a candidate if the Freetrade League had made the selection, and condemned the evil of caucus voting and minority rule – 'we do not want the same tactics resorted to in the great cause of free trade'.

In response, the *Daily Telegraph* argued that 'exercising the franchise and sitting in the Legislature do not necessarily go together'. There was still prejudice amongst women and men, against women going into Parliament. Of the three selected freetrade candidates, two had already rendered valuable services as Senators, the third had polled well at the previous elections, and there was 'every ground for believing that

he will make an admirable representative'. Mrs Martel could serve the freetrade cause by promptly announcing her retirement from the contest. 'She cannot win a seat by persisting in her candidature, but it is possible that she may imperil a seat. Votes given to her instead of to one of the selected three will be clear gifts to the enemy.'

Just a few weeks before the election, a libel suit hit the law reports, both in Sydney and in some interstate newspapers. Annie Golding, the plaintiff, was an associate of Mrs Martel, and the case related to reports of alleged activities at a meeting of the WPA which had appeared in the 'Watchman' Newspaper. During cross-examination there was extensive reference to Mrs Martel as president of the WPA, with dark hints of sectarian intrigue and divisions. A verdict was returned in favour of the plaintiff on 7 December, nine days before the election.

On 9 December Mrs Martel addressed a large audience from the balcony of the Grand View Hotel, Paddington. She delivered an address upon federal politics and claimed equality of womanhood with manhood.

Mary Ann Bentley came tenth and Nellie Martel eleventh in the overall field of twelve Senate candidates in NSW. The three candidates elected were strongly supported by both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, as the 'Freetrade 3' for the Senate. The two women each polled about one tenth of the votes for the leading candidate.

Vida Goldstein: The Senate

Vida Goldstein, a high profile suffragist over many years, nominated for the Senate in Victoria. This action was criticised by some in the movement as potentially damaging to the State campaign for women suffrage – the upper House of the Victorian Parliament had continually blocked votes for women, partly on the grounds that once they could vote, women would want to sit in Parliament. [11](#)

Goldstein campaigned as an independent, although one newspaper commentary listed her as a 'protectionist'. The strongly free trade *Sydney Daily Telegraph* commented: 'Women candidates are apparently going to exercise in politics the same unsophisticated wiles with which they achieve success in social affairs. This is Miss Vida Goldstein's declaration of fiscal belief:- "Free Trade was not free, and protection did not protect. Too much was made of the fiscal question."

Vida Goldstein was also the subject of a smear campaign. Four days before election day, there was a brief report in the *Argus* that 'Miss Goldstein's committee advertise today an intimation relating to certain rumours.' The advertisement read: 'It has come to the knowledge of Miss Goldstein's committee that FALSE REPORTS are being spread to damage her candidature. One is that she holds peculiar views about marriage, and is in favour of easy divorce. Her committee desire to give the MOST EMPHATIC DENIAL to this slanderous imputation. Miss Goldstein's views on marriage are quite normal and she has, both with voice and pen, protested against easy divorce as being directly antagonistic to the stability and purity of the home. Another rumour is that, if elected, she will not be allowed to take a seat in the Federal Parliament. This is not so. Sir John Quick and other of the highest authorities on the Commonwealth Constitution have declared that there is no question as to the right of a properly qualified woman to sit in the Federal Parliament, if elected. Miss Goldstein was brought up, and is, a Protestant, and a regular church attendant.' The slogan at the bottom of the advertisement read: VOTE FOR THREE MEN and ONE WOMAN.

Two days later there was reference to the statement in a letter to *The Age*: noting that the advertisement described Miss Vida Goldstein as a regular church attendant, 'As this rather wide statement might tend to create confusion in voters minds, might one ask whether the lady candidate is not what has been absurdly called "a Christian Scientist"?' This missive was signed 'Yours and etc, ONE WHO KNOWS'.

Vida Goldstein came fifteenth out of a field of 18 candidates. She polled 51,497 votes, around 4% of votes cast. She did much better than her overall position in Gippsland and Bendigo; in both divisions she polled more votes than two of those elected. She did not improve on her overall position in Melbourne or Bourke divisions, both of which had more women than men enrolled, and both of which had a relatively high female turn-out rate.

In Melbourne the press had been less uniform than the Sydney papers in their support for candidates, with different tickets endorsed in the *Argus* and *Age*. Two of the candidates supported by *The Age* were elected; both had been sitting Senators. None of those supported by *The Argus* were successful, although two came fifth and sixth. The pattern of voting in divisions was more variable than in NSW.

A week after the election Vida held a meeting, with an audience of about a hundred, at which she reflected on some of the lessons learned during her candidature. This was given good coverage in *The Argus*. She said she was beaten but not disgraced. (Applause) She noted that both *The Argus* and *The Age* had used their influence against her, and that the Labor party had put out a pamphlet warning electors not to give her a vote, because first as a woman she was not qualified to sit in the Senate, and second she was not a pledged Labor candidate. Another thing she had learned was that women were not going to be degraded by politics, and that large bodies of men would always protect them from insult. The meeting closed after those present were addressed by Miss Raper on the necessity for further organising the women's vote.

10. Oldfield, A, op. cit., pp. 93-95.

11. Lees, K 1995, *Votes for Women: The Australian Story*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, p. 129.

All other quotations come from newspapers of the period held in the microform collection of the National Library of Australia. They include: *The Age* (Melbourne), *The Argus* (Melbourne), *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), *Brisbane Courier* (Brisbane), *Hobart Mercury* (Hobart), *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), *West Australian* (Perth) for the months of November and December 1903.

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After that day

'Women have on the first opportunity available to them shown a keenness of political instinct and a practical alertness in electioneering methods which will go to make this election an epoch-making one in Australian history.' *Daily Telegraph*

'Women voters most certainly took kindly to their new responsibilities, and in the polling booths they discovered none of those contaminating influences which the opponents of the suffrage were so fond of predicting.' *The Age*

'It is pretty certain that the women have voted in considerable numbers. This addition to the voting strength has not led to any radical change, and it was hardly to be expected that it would.' *The Mercury*

'One feature of the women's enfranchisement which stands out prominently is the almost severe manner in which the candidature of the sex for Parliament has been discouraged. The poor showing made by the ladies who contested seats in NSW ought to completely reassure those apprehensive people who foresaw early petticoat domination in the very House itself. It proves clearly enough that the majority of women do not as yet approve of parliamentary women.' *Daily Telegraph*

An alternative explanation was that women 'showed a regard for discipline that took no account of sectarian feeling or sexual prejudice... the women electors neglected the claims of the two [Senate] candidates of their own sex and voted the freetrade ticket.' *Sydney Morning Herald*.

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The final accolade

In 1910 the Senate passed a resolution, which was to be cabled to the British Prime Minister. It concluded:

Because the reform has brought nothing but good, though disaster was freely prophesied, we respectfully urge that all nations enjoying representative government would be well advised in granting votes to women.

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Part 2 - Your vote is your voice

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'Your vote is your voice': Rose Scott and the Women's Political and Educational League

On 12 June 1902, the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* came into effect, granting most Australian women the right to vote in Commonwealth elections. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act* opened the way for women to stand for election. On 16 December 1903, Australian women exercised the right to vote in Commonwealth elections. The question in 1903 was: now that women had won the vote, what would they do with it?

Just how women would use their 'one day of power', to quote Free Trade Party leader G.H. Reid, was the topic of considerable public comment. Not all of this commentary was favourable, with some newspaper writers lampooning the female voter as fickle and faddish. It was into this arena that Rose Scott entered when her open letter to women was published in two newspapers prior to and on the day of polling.

'At the outset I desired women to dissociate themselves from party turmoil, and when they came to vote to do so not at the dictates of a league or party, but according to their conscience.'

Rose Scott, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 November 1903.

Rose Scott was a key figure in the women's suffrage campaign, and devoted her entire life to improving the condition of women. In her letter, Scott writes as the President of the Women's Political and Educational League (WPEL), an organisation she established in 1902 in order to educate women as to how to use their vote and, to use her own words, 'bring a new element into political life – the woman's point of view' (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1903). WPEL would become the platform from which she would develop policy for women and children, and lobby leading politicians and intellectual figures in order to support legislative and social reform.

In her letter, Scott urges women to eschew party politics – 'beware of party cries', beware of sectarianism' – and vote according to their conscience rather than party lines. 'Your vote is your voice', Scott writes, 'and

to find it you must consult your own mind and heart.'

'What is the Australian woman going to do with her vote? ...Who is to guide woman? I reply: Certainly not man, in the first place! ...The chief guide is always to be found within, not without. We must, in fact, think for ourselves.' Rose Scott in *Table Talk*, March 1903

Party politics were viewed by Scott and by other women leaders such as Vida Goldstein and Ada Bromham as something that would steal women's energies and ignore their specific needs and interests. [1](#) The majority of post-suffragist women worked in separate organisations setting their own priorities and agendas in order to put pressure for reform on all parties - what we would now refer to as lobby groups or non-government organisations. However, not all suffragists took this stance - conservative women formed their own anti-Labour organisation, the Australian Women's National League (AWNL), while Labour women also eschewed the feminist label by forming a women's branch of the Labour party called the Women's Political and Social Crusade in 1905.

For Scott, it was the erosion of 'individual conscience' within political parties and also the masculinity of parties which was a problem. Political parties were dominated by men, many of whom felt that their liberties were threatened by feminist demands. As an alternative, Scott turned her home into a 'salon' where she invited influential political, intellectual and artistic figures to debate the issues of the day. Scott used her personal influence and the power of persuasion to build the political alliances necessary to achieve reform.

Scott's brand of non-party lobbying received criticism from party organisations and in particular their women affiliates. [2](#) Speculation about how women would vote was the topic of much public debate. It was expected that women would vote as their male relatives voted, and that each party would get its share of the women's vote.

In contrast to the highly courted women's vote of contemporary times - which can well decide an election outcome - politicians could easily afford to skirt the issues of relevance to women. As it happened, most women voted for party candidates, and it has been conjectured that women voted as the males of their household did because their own economic interests were bound up those of their husbands and fathers. [3](#) The significance of women's franchise cannot be in doubt, and it can be measured by Liberal Victorian Premier Thomas Bent's reaction to the 1903 election. Bent blocked votes for women in Victoria until 1908, blaming women for Labour's high polling. [4](#)

Election of women to parliament was an important goal yet this was but one part of women's campaigns for what Scott termed the 'public good'. Women had a distinctive agenda, and 'a special work to do' (WPEL meeting, 11 June 1903). The work of the 'woman citizen' - as she was known - was to establish a more inclusive base for citizenship and to bring new values to public life. While committed to a 'human basis of citizenship' [5](#), the woman citizen embodied the maternal qualities which would represent the needs of women and children and also transform the political landscape. It was thus that in her letter Scott urged women to vote for men who have proved that they are 'in sympathy with the needs of women and children, or the weak and suffering'.

Voting was not yet compulsory, yet hundreds of thousands of women turned out to exercise their right to vote on December 16, 1903. None of the women candidates put forth in the 1903 election were successful - a limit of the non-party way of doing politics. While women failed to win election to Federal Parliament for another 40 years - in 1943 with Enid (later Dame Enid) Lyons (House of Representatives) and Dorothy Tangney (Senate) - their enfranchisement marked their entry into the political process. Women such as Rose Scott shaped future policy by putting women's demands on the political agenda of all parties. In hindsight, women's 'one day of power' was to become a century of transformation of the political domain.

Miles Franklin on Scott's famous salon: 'The cosy reception-rooms were often crowded. There came everyone of intellectual note or interest, residents or visitors to Sydney, regardless of clique, creed or political colour. There would be men in crumpled "slops", who did not believe in evening dress, rubbing shoulders with dandies, to whom tails in the evening were a rite. Shy girls in high-necked frocks from the country or outer suburbs felt that they were in the high life as they chatted with some fashionable person

exhibiting every bare inch permissible in a gown that was the dernier cri. All were put at their ease, and found interest and companionship under the fusing influence of the hostess.' Miles Franklin, *'Rose Scott: Some Aspects of Her Personality and Work'* 1938.

1. Allen, J 1994, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne. p. 170.
2. Allen, J 1988, "'Our deeply degraded sex" and "The animal in man": Rose Scott, Feminism and Sexuality 1890-1925', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 708, Summer, pp. 64-91. p. 82.
3. Oldfield, A 1992, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A gift or a struggle?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. p. 221.
4. *ibid.*
5. Lake, M 1999, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards. p. 143.

Contrary to the ridiculing of women suffragists as 'old frumps' and 'freaks of nature' by certain parliamentarians, author Miles Franklin recalls Scott as a woman of beauty and charm: 'She was always sensibly and graciously dressed for time and occasion, and her bonnets were the delight of Sydney'. Miles Franklin, *'Rose Scott: Some Aspects of Her Personality and Work'* 1938

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Milestones

1847 Rose Scott is born on 8 October at Glendon estate on the Hunter River, near Singleton, NSW.

1854 At age seven, Scott recalls, '...my mother read to us *The Taming of the Shrew*. It was with suppressed indignation that I contemplated Katherine, at the bidding of her husband, taking off her cap and trampling on it! (I would have thrown it in his face!)...'. Scott credited Shakespeare with the awakening of her anger and indignation at the suffering of women and children.

1879 Scott and her mother move to Sydney from Newcastle, where the family had lived for the last 20 years.

1891 Scott begins her campaigning for the enfranchisement of women. In this year Scott attends a gathering at Dora B. Montefiore's home to discuss the formation of the Womanhood Suffrage League. Scott becomes corresponding secretary as a result.

1899 The *Early Closing Act* is passed following Scott's campaigning on behalf of women working in retail, who had to work on their feet from 8am to 9pm weekdays and Saturdays until 11pm.

1902 The Women's Political and Educational League (WPEL) was formed in 1902 with Rose Scott as president.

1907 Scott forms the NSW branch of the London Peace Society, remaining president until 1917.

1910 The campaign for raising the age of consent finally achieves its aim with the passing of the *Crimes (Girls' Protection) Amendment Act*. Having petitioned parliament for many years, Scott helped draft this legislation which raised the age of consent for girls from 12 to 16. With this achievement, Scott closes the WPEL down.

1921 Scott retires from public life due to ill health and old age. Scott's last position is as an officer of the International Council of Women.

1925 Scott dies on 20 April. A pioneer in death as in life, Scott chose to be cremated. Scott was a founder of the Cremation Society, and her cremation was among the first.

In Scott's final speech to her feminist friends, she offered this advice: 'Be sure of your facts; do not forget that every cause demands patience, self-sacrifice and eternal vigilance. Be passionately in earnest and loyal to your womanhood and your sex – and in the end you will certainly win.' *Rose Scott's speech to the Feminist Club, 12 April, 1921.*

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Part 3 - Women in Politics – according to UNA of Sydney's Daily Telegraph

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Women in Politics – according to UNA of Sydney's Daily Telegraph

In 1903 the *Daily Telegraph* had a regular columnist who was identified simply as 'UNA'. She (?) wrote about various social welfare institutions and activities, often concerning the experiences of women and children, and also about social issues of the day. The style of the articles was very individual, combining narrative, description and conversational dialogue between service providers and an unidentified enquirer/commentator.

The first Federal election at which adult white women* could vote was to be held on 16 December 1903. From September the UNA by-line also appeared on columns under the general heading of 'Women in Politics'. At first these alternated with the social welfare topics; however, from the middle of November to the end of the year all UNA articles were focussed on women and the election. Some of the earlier ones have a similar style to the parallel series – conversational dialogue, explaining issues with simple examples. The later ones directly promote the *Telegraph's* editorial policy of support for the Free Trade cause, urge women to make sure their names are included on the Electoral Rolls, and then concentrate on getting women to vote.

* The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* excluded 'Aboriginal natives of Australia, Asia, Africa or the Islands of the Pacific except New Zealand' unless entitled under Section 41 of the Constitution.

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Women in Politics – The Women's Organisations

Early in the campaign the UNA column featured three major women's organisations based in NSW. Miss Rose Scott of the Women's Political and Educational League (WPEL), Miss Golding of the Women's Progressive Association (WPA) and Mrs Molyneux Parkes of the Women's Liberal League (WLL) were questioned about the objectives, activities and policies of their groups.

Rose Scott, for WPEL, stated that they wished to avoid party politics and sectarianism, and to go on the ground of a common womanhood. 'The main object of our league, founded in October 1892, is to teach women to think for themselves. We don't want this vote to be a mere adjunct to the men's vote. We want them to look into political questions, judge for themselves, and vote according to conscience.' After discussing the implications of the State Children's Bill, and other issues relating to women and to home life, Miss Scott stated 'We mean to vote for the man who will assist in making equitable, humane and effective laws to deal with such cases'.

Miss Scott gave her personal opinions relating to free trade – strongly in favour – and opposing the government's immigration policy, 'that selfish policy... totally contrary to the essence of the Australian spirit; the hospitality which is regarded as our chief characteristic'.

According to Miss Golding, the WPA was strictly non-sectarian, non-party and non-fiscal. The main plank of their platform was to educate the women how to use the vote for the general good. 'We hope that women, whatsoever their political opinions, will steadily support all good measures of social and domestic reform, and particularly those that affect the welfare of their own sex.' One such measure discussed was legislation to prevent sweatshop labour. The WPA had helped some women to form unions, for example covering hotel and restaurants' employees, the Order Tailoresses and laundry workers, and were hoping to do something for domestic servants in hotels and boarding houses. They also advised 'the girls to value their work properly, and to claim equal wages for equal results'. The WPA would urge women to vote for the men 'who will help us to secure our aims'.

The avowed object of the WLL was the establishment of liberal principles in political life. Mrs Molyneux Parkes, the president, believed firmly in party government – 'constitutional history teaches us that party politics constitute the essence - the life blood - of constitutional government'. This meant, she said, she could not work with Miss Scott even though they thought alike on some subjects. Mrs Parkes also saw the need for a strong women's organisation, who 'would then be consulted with regard to the selection of Liberal candidates, and, what is better, the knowledge of our position would bring forward more candidates of a higher type. This is the only way in which we can be sure that our influence will bring in better men.' Mrs Parkes said that the WLL felt that their chief energies must be directed to the purification of our institutions and to economical administration of the public funds. 'We must get our finances into a sound condition before we talk about social reform, for all this means the expenditure of money.' The fiscal question was the vital question of the hour; 'in fact, freetrade means liberty and protection means bonds'. Mrs Parkes discussed League membership and organisation, suggesting however that 'women who have to earn their livings are afraid to identify themselves with any party, lest they should lose customers, or offend employers, or injure their husbands' trade or profession.' She also asserted that 'women are not yet accustomed to join organisations, and some who have done so are not allowed by their husbands to attend the meetings.' But they assured her 'they are with us in spirit.'

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Some of UNA's efforts:

- Checking that names are on the rolls: 'Now, sisters dear, why this "mighty pothor" over an act which is simplicity itself? All you have to do is to go to the nearest post-office, suburban or country, and ask to see the electoral roll. You were probably visited by a smiling policeman some weeks back, who made a note of your name, accompanied by a facetious observation; but a policeman may "smile and smile" and yet be a villain-to the extent, at least, of mangling your name and address hopelessly beyond recognition... don't rely wholly on his efforts... go to the post-office and make quite sure you don't figure under some fancy title, which your own mother wouldn't recognise.' (If the name was not found on the roll or was incorrect, the *Daily Telegraph* offered assistance with filling in the required form and sending it in.)
- The importance of voting: 'Don't think that harvesting, or cooking, or Christmas house-cleaning, or making Christmas presents, or going to your boys' school-breaking-up, or any other ordinary duty is to come before the one paramount duty of citizenship- the duty of going to the polls. Remember, you have only ONE DAY OF POWER. And-even at the cost of leaving your family dinnerless, and the ironing undone, and the carpets unshaken, ...you should go to the polls! But you need not take such extreme steps, for, by the exercise of a little forethought, you can arrange matters very well. Work a little harder on the 15th, and that will leave the 16th, the sacred Sixteenth, free! You know, you often do this when you want to go to a race or to a picnic! Why not for a matter of such supreme importance to the home, the State, and the Commonwealth as the recording of your vote?'
- Choosing the cause: 'Surely the issues of the Federal elections are of vital importance to women, as well as to men, to the home, to the future of our sons and daughters, to the State, to the whole Commonwealth. For the great question of national prosperity is involved in the Federal elections; and to this issue women, who are citizens, as well as housekeepers, dare not turn a deaf ear. And to ensure prosperity they must of necessity vote for a freetrade candidate.'
- The last rally: 'Remember that the act of voting is simplicity itself. If your name is down on the Federal electoral roll, YOU NEED NOTHING MORE. The ballot papers will be given you at the polling booth. Go as early as possible in the day so as to avoid crowds. Every woman knows the name of the selected FREETRADE CANDIDATE in her electorate-the candidate for the HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES-and you can easily put a cross against his name. Leave the other names severely alone.
Make no other mark or the paper will be disqualified. Do nothing but put a X against the name of your Freetrade Candidate.'
- In NSW there was also a referendum on the size of the State Parliament. *The Telegraph* supported the reduction to ninety members (as described by UNA -'the minimum allowed us in the referendum by superior man'). UNA therefore urged that 'women should make up their minds to cast a solid vote in favour of the minimum number 90.... Impress that important number on the minds of all around you- male as well as female. See that your husband, or your lover, or brother, or any other man you can influence, is sound on the subject of 90.'

In January 1904, UNA was investigating again, first the Sydney Medical Mission, followed by 'The Cure of Alcoholism'.

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Part 4 - Dr William Maloney vs Sir Malcolm McEacharn

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Dr William Maloney versus Sir Malcolm McEacharn [1](#)

Who would Vida vote for?

'When Cr Jeffries, the deputy returning officer in charge of the polling booth for the Lonsdale division of the city, arrived at the booth at St. James's School, Bourke-street west, at 7.20 am, he was surprised to see awaiting his coming a well dressed lady, who informed him that she wanted to vote. "What name?" queried the officer, as he unlocked the door. "Goldstein – Vida Goldstein," was the answer. Cr Jefferies directed the Senate candidate to a seat, where she sat quietly until the Post Office clock banged out the hour of 8 am, and before the carillons had ceased their jangle the first vote ever cast by a woman in Victoria under the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* had been cast by the first Victorian candidate for the Federal Parliament.' *The Age*, 17 December 1903

For the Senate presumably she would follow her own slogan 'Vote for three men and one woman'.

For the House of Representatives she had a choice – Sir Malcolm McEacharn or Dr William Maloney. Both were strong personalities, and both had contested the same seat of Melbourne at the first Federal election in 1901.

1. Unless otherwise acknowledged, biographical material drawn from the following: Dunstan, D 1986, 'McEacharn, Sir Malcolm Donald (1852-1910)', in B Nairn and G Serle (General Editors) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, vol. X pp. 263-264; Obituaries in *The Age* and *The Argus*; Other material from contemporary reports in *The Age* and *The Argus*.

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Sir Malcolm McEacharn [1](#)

Malcolm McEacharn was born in London in 1852; his father, who died in 1854, was a master mariner who had engaged in the Australian trade. After leaving school at age 14, Malcolm entered a shipping office as a junior clerk, rose to a senior position, and then struck out for himself as a ship broker. In 1875 he joined with Andrew McIlwraith to start the shipping firm McIlwraith, McEacharn and Co., based originally in Queensland (amongst other ventures the firm pioneered the frozen meat trade between Australia and England). From 1879 he was actively involved in expanding his Australian business interests, mainly in Queensland, where he settled in 1880; he came to Melbourne in 1887 to open a branch of the shipping line, which then became the headquarters of the firm.

Once settled in Melbourne Malcolm McEacharn began to take a leading part in the commercial life of the city, holding a number of directorships and being at one time the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce. As a result of his business connections with Japan, he was asked to become honorary consul for that country. In 1893 he was elected to the City Council, serving as mayor from 1897 to 1899. He was knighted in 1900, and in 1903 he was again induced to occupy the civic chair as Lord Mayor. During his time on the Council he initiated or supported a range of municipal projects; as noted in *The Age* obituary, 'he assisted materially by his work in the council, and out of it, to further the growth of the city, both on the industrial and on the ornamental side'.

In 1901 Sir Malcolm was elected as the representative for Melbourne in the first Federal Parliament. During this campaign, as in the later ones, he received active support from business men and property owners. He was the target of noisy opposition, the favourite term of abuse being 'you smoodger!' He was accused of

using coolie labour on his ships trading with Calcutta, but not on local shipping. This he strongly denied, and was supported by the secretary of the Seamen's Union, who confirmed that Sir Malcolm had acceded to union pressure and had removed colored crews from his boats. Also during this campaign Sir Malcolm expressed his strong opposition to women's suffrage, which drew a firm public rebuke from the United Council for Women's Suffrage.

He stood again for Melbourne in 1903, and again experienced what appeared to be organised hostile demonstrations at his meetings. However this treatment was seen by press commentators as enlisting support for him. It was alleged that Mr Maloney's committee had offered to use their good offices to assure orderly meetings, and Sir Malcolm's secretary had said they welcomed interruption as it would get them a sympathy vote. Sir Malcolm also had the problem that he had lost the votes of those who had business places in the city, but did not reside there, as a result of the new *Federal Election Act*. He was returned by a very small majority, and then saw the result voided by the Court of Disputed Returns. He lost the by-election to William Maloney, who had opposed him in 1901 and 1903. Sir Malcolm then abandoned politics, his Council seat, his command in the Victorian Scottish Regiment (which he had helped found), and Australia, returning to Scotland in 1905.

Sir Malcolm McEacharn died suddenly, of heart failure aggravated by pneumonia, at Cannes in the South of France on 10 March 1910. He was cruising in the Mediterranean for the sake of his health; he had been suffering from serious heart troubles for some time.

'Immediately news of Sir Malcolm McEacharn's death was received on the Bay the flags of all vessels were hoisted half mast out of respect for his memory, and two steamers of the McIlwraith McEacharn line, were painted with the blue streak of mourning round the hulls.' *The Age*, 12 March 1910.

1. Unless otherwise acknowledged, biographical material drawn from the following: Dunstan, D 1986, 'McEacharn, Sir Malcolm Donald (1852-1910)', in B Nairn and G Serle (General Editors) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, vol. X pp. 263-264; Obituaries in *The Age* and *The Argus*; Other material from contemporary reports in *The Age* and *The Argus*.

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Dr William Maloney [2](#)

William Maloney was born in West Melbourne in 1854 (as noted in one obituary, within eight months of 'the historic battle of the Eureka Stockade') and grew up in a lone-parent family. He attended primary school and National School in Melbourne, spent a year in New Zealand, worked in a bank, spent some time at Scotch College, then rejoined the bank. In 1874 he and his mother took up a selection in Gippsland, and over several years cleared 100 acres.

William then matriculated through night school, went to London to do a medical course, qualifying in 1885, and worked in London hospitals for two years. During the time in London he became friendly with artists John Peter Russell and Tom Roberts, and went on a walking tour with them to France and Spain (Russell made several splendid portraits of him).

William Maloney returned to Australia in 1887, and opened a general practice in Melbourne the next year. He was elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly in 1889, and that year introduced one of the first Bills in the Empire for women's suffrage. About 1896 the 'Little Doctor' established the Medical Institute in Elizabeth St. which provided treatment and counselling to the poor and needy, and maintained this establishment for the rest of his life.

Dr Maloney stood as a candidate in the Labor interest, for the federal seat of Melbourne, in the elections of

1901 and 1903. After the 1903 result had been declared, he filed a petition 'praying for a declaration that McEacharn was not duly elected, and that he, the petitioner, was duly elected, or, in the alternative, for a declaration that the election was void', mainly on the grounds of irregularities and illegal procedures in the conduct of the election, particularly in relation to postal votes. William also alleged that Sir Malcolm was incapable of being lawfully elected a member of the House of Representatives as at the time of the election he was Honorary Consul for the Empire of Japan, and as such 'under an acknowledgement of allegiance, obedience or adherence to such foreign power'. The election was voided by the Court of Disputed Returns. As already noted, Dr Maloney was elected at the following by-election in March 1904; he held the seat until just before his death in 1940.

William Maloney was actively associated with the Australian Women's Suffrage Society, founded by Mrs Brettana Smyth (also known for her promotion of contraception usage through her own business and publications on women's health and birth control). [3](#) Later on, he was a member of the (Victorian) Men's League for Women Suffrage, and was included in the 1908 delegation which met with Victorian premier Sir Thomas Bent, to urge his government to introduce a bill giving the women of Victoria the right to vote at State elections. In 1910 he moved the House of Representatives motion supporting women's suffrage, which, with a similar motion from the Senate, was cabled to British Prime Minister Asquith.

Dr Maloney appears to have been a very individual politician; a colleague described him as 'a most colourful and picturesque personality'. By supporting women's suffrage before the plural vote was abolished, he was going against the policy of the Labor Party. [4](#) John Russell wrote in a letter to their mutual friend Tom Roberts (undated but some time around 1890) 'Will Maloney is honest... and will do heaps of good for Australian politics. Can't you keep him from going off his head? Impregnate him with some of that hard common sense of yours.' [5](#) On the occasion of the delegation to Sir Thomas Bent, the Premier noticed 'that Mr Maloney had not yet let out as he usually did; he had been more tactful than usual.' *The Age* described his contribution as being 'in a vein of moderation and sweet reasonableness, on which the Premier subsequently commented with astonishment'.

Altogether Dr William Maloney served in the Victorian Legislative Assembly and the federal House of Representatives for fifty one years. Although he never achieved ministerial rank, he was a member of several Parliamentary Committees and sat on two Royal Commissions. He attended the coronations of both George V and George VI as a member of the Parliamentary Party. He was long before his time as a campaigner for pensions, the maternity allowance and child endowment. [6](#) By the time of his death in 1940 he was a much-loved and respected public figure. He was accorded a State Funeral, and at the request of Prime Minister Menzies his body lay in state at the Victorian Parliament House. There Sir Isaac Isaacs gave a short address, saying 'that no one deserved more the grateful memory of Australians. In public life his voice was always raised and his vote cast fearlessly to make this changing world a better place to live in, to equalise opportunities, to lessen poverty and misery, and to give to the less fortunate a better and juster chance to rise.'

'Deep regret at the death of Dr Maloney was expressed by Labor leaders and trade union officials in all parts of the State yesterday. The flags at the Melbourne and provincial trades halls were flown at half mast, out of respect to his memory.' *The Age*, 30 August 1940

'Flags were flown at half-mast yesterday from Parliament House, Canberra, and other public buildings in Canberra.' *The Argus*, 30 August 1940

The electoral contests for the federal seat of Melbourne

1901 Election	Sir Malcolm McEacharn	4985 votes (60%)
	Dr William Maloney	3212 votes (39%)
	Informal	66 votes (1%)
1903 Election	Sir Malcolm McEacharn	7756 votes (49.5%)
	Dr William Maloney	7679 votes (49.0%)
	Informal	219 votes (1.4%)
	Dr William Maloney	8667 votes (52%)

1904 By-election Sir Malcolm McEacharn 7808 votes (47%)
Informal 225 votes (1%)

2. Unless otherwise acknowledged, biographical material drawn from the following: G Serle, 'Maloney, William Robert (Nuttall) (1854-1940)', in B Nairn and G Serle (General Editors) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.X pp. 389-390; Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 165 pp. 29-40; Other material from contemporary reports in *The Age* and *The Argus*.
3. Oldfield, A 1992, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: a gift or a struggle?*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, pp. 137-139.
4. Oldfield, A, *Woman Suffrage in Australia*, pp. 174-175.
5. Galbally, A 1977, *The Art of John Peter Russell*, Sun Books, Melbourne, p. 95.
6. Serle, G 1986, 'Maloney, William Robert (Nuttall) (1854-1940)', in B Nairn and G Serle (General Editors) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, p. 390.

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Part 5 - The Electoral Process and Women's Suffrage

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The Electoral Process and Women's Suffrage

The granting of women's suffrage was one of a number of significant changes to the electoral process made prior to the 1903 election. From the 1890s through to the 1920s, there were many major changes to the operation of electoral systems in Australia. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act (1902)* not only granted Australian women the right to vote and stand in election, it also required voters to be British subjects,* over 21, and cemented the idea of 'one adult one vote'. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act (1902)* established the machinery and requirements for Federal Elections, including laws in regard to postal and plural voting. These changes form the basis of the institutional context for women's suffrage in Australia. In many cases, such as plural and postal voting, these changes were linked to the development of women's suffrage.

Before the 1903 election, new federal electoral rolls had to be created and then checked by electors to ensure their names were on the list. The *Electoral Act* specified that all persons qualified to vote were entitled to have their name placed on the Electoral Roll for the Division in which they lived, but not on more than one Roll. Voting more than once was declared an electoral offence punishable by a 'penalty not exceeding Fifty pounds [sic], or imprisonment not exceeding three months'.

Prior to either of these Acts, the Australian Constitution (1901) included a ban on plural voting, replacing it with 'one man, one vote'. Up until the 1890s, with the exception of South Australia, plural voting was allowed for men who owned property in more than one electorate. South Australia had led the way, enjoying manhood suffrage and also one man one vote since 1856. The state's 1894 bill for women's suffrage gained full support from trade unions, the United Trades and Labour Council and the United Labour Party once the property limitations of earlier female suffrage measures was removed.¹ Support from the labour movement was denied to suffragists in other states because of their own campaign to abolish plural voting.

*Australian Citizenship was not established until 1948. In Australian colonies, a British subject was a person born in any part of the British Empire or who had been naturalised. [2](#)

Plural voting was a contentious issue in the 1890s: Alexander Forrest was reputedly entitled to vote in almost all of the forty four electorates of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1899. [3](#)

The provision of postal voting was another change which had a particular connection with women's suffrage. *The Constitution (Female Suffrage) Act 1895 (SA)*** which gave women the vote in South Australia had a more generous provision for absent voting by women than by men; women could get an automatic postal vote if they were more than three miles from the nearest polling booth or if they felt that the state of their health prevented them from voting on the day. Postal voting had been introduced in South Australia in 1890 and Victoria in 1899.

(*While this bill granting women the right to vote and stand for election was passed by the South Australian parliament in 1894, the bill could only be enacted with Royal Assent, which was given by Queen Victoria in 1985.)

The basis for the allowance of postal votes was the capacity to attend polling booths, and it has been argued that postal voting was largely devised in order to facilitate women's voting. [4](#) Under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*, postal votes were granted to any person more than five miles from a polling place on the day of voting, or for any elector 'who being a woman believes that she will on account of ill-health be unable on polling day to attend the polling place to vote'. 'Ill-health' in this instance is a veiled reference to pregnancy, as distinct from the more general 'serious illness or infirmity' which is given as the third justification for a postal vote application. As the reference to ill-health is unclear – given that it could refer to a range of 'women's problems' – it created difficulties for the evaluation of the system. The Select Committee on Electoral Act Administration was set up in 1904 to investigate and report on the manner in which the 1903 election was conducted.

The committee revealed considerable concern over the abuse of the postal voting system. Evidence was given by William Maloney that '80 per cent of postal ballot papers issued to women were unjustly obtained, inasmuch as the applicants were not ill in the sense of being *enceinte* [pregnant]'. The committee responded by asking: 'It was understood that when women applied for a postal vote they were in that condition?' 'I do not want to say that.' The officer was further questioned thus: 'It seems that the Act gives a wider scope for the use of the postal ballot papers than you allow?' He replied: 'It gives far too wide a scope for their use.'

The administrative problems caused by the lack of clarity regarding the meaning of the second clause reveals some of the assumptions about women's character and the 'age-old identification of voting and polling day as rough, male occasions attended only by loose women'. [5](#) Unease about postal voting also related to broader anxieties over the effects of women's suffrage.

Prior to the 1903 election there was much debate about the character of women voters, specifically the degree to which they might affect the existing political and social relationships. The cartoons of the period demonstrate these anxieties acutely; women were either characterised as fanciful, dim-witted voters, or as fierce quasi-masculine figures finally able to 'wear the pants' as signified by *The Bulletin's* 'breeches' sketches. That the female voter was lampooned as rough and brutish is particularly interesting given the concern about the polling booth as a masculine place that was too rough for woman's delicate sensibilities. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, however, the women who turned out to vote on 16 December 1903 cast a welcome and civilising glow over the proceedings:

'As a rule, the woman voter rose to the occasion, and set an example to many of the stronger sex by the smart and business-like way in which she did what was necessary, and gave way for the next comer. As one returning officer said:- "To my surprise, they proved quiet and business-like electors." Even the most bitter and uncompromising and inflexible opponent of womanhood suffrage, had he visited some of the booths yesterday, would have had to admit that the advent of the woman voter had lent something of picturesqueness to the aforesaid sombre and depressing process of vote-recording.' 17 December 1903

1. Magarey, S 1994, in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, C Daley and M Nolan (eds), Auckland University Press, Auckland, pp. 70-71, State Library of South Australia 2001, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, viewed 29 May 2003, www.slsa.sa.gov.au/women_and_politics/sa3.htm. pp. 70-1.
2. Australian Electoral Commission 2002, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, viewed 29 May 2003, http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/how/education/fact_sheets/fact3.pdf.
3. Trinca, M 1997, 'Launching the Ship: A Constitutional History of Western Australia', The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia, Perth, viewed 29 May 2003, www.ccentre.wa.gov.au/html/res01_11.htm.
4. Bourke, P 2002, 'Women and Electoral Politics: Cases Before Suffrage (US 1850s) and After Suffrage (Australia 1894-1930)', in *A Hundred Years of Women's Politics*, Marian Simms (ed), Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra, pp. 82-107. p. 90.
5. *ibid*

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Who was eligible to vote?

While the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* did not discriminate on the basis of marital status or property ownership, it did discriminate on other grounds.

The *Commonwealth Franchise Act* disqualified those of 'unsound mind' or any person 'attainted of treason, or who has been convicted and is under sentence or subject to be sentenced for any offence punishable under the law'. Reflecting the dominant thought of the times, the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* also disqualified 'coloured races' which encompassed not only Australian Indigenous men and women, but any person native to 'Asia, Africa or the Islands of the Pacific except New Zealand' unless entitled under Section 41 of the Constitution. Australian Indigenous men were already entitled to vote in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, and were thus formally entitled to vote in Federal elections under Section 41. Indigenous people were not fully enfranchised until 1962, when the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* was amended.

A notable disqualification in State legislation occurred in Queensland, which introduced adult suffrage in 1905. In 1907, wifebeaters were disenfranchised, as were drunkards – incentives introduced in order to encourage a high turnout of women at the poll. Wifebeaters and drunks were subsequently re-enfranchised in 1915 by a Labour government.

Did you know?

- The 1903 election was held on a Wednesday. While the *Electoral Act* specified the hours in which polling booths would open and details about postal voting, elections were not held on a Saturday until 1911.
- In 1903 it was not compulsory to vote. Voting was not compulsory until 1924. It became compulsory to enrol to vote in 1911.
- Australia was one of only a few democratic societies to regard voting as an obligation. Voting was framed as a duty of citizenship which was monitored through the construction of electoral rolls. Australia was also distinctive in its separate tabulation of men and women's enrolments and voting frequencies.

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