

Introduction: A Tale of Two Speeches

The first publication commissioned by the Politics of Social Change Foundation focuses on the career of a woman who liked to describe herself as an ‘accidental politician’. The late Ann Symonds was ‘catapulted’ into the New South Wales Legislative Council in September 1982.¹ Having narrowly missed election to the Council in 1981, she was chosen by the Australian Labor Party to fill the casual vacancy caused when Peter Baldwin, another member of the Labor Left, resigned to run for a federal seat. She was elected in her own right in 1984 and 1995, but retired in April 1998.

Ann was a left-winger in a party dominated by the Right faction and a feminist joining a parliament where women were barely visible. Her arrival in 1982 brought the number of women in the then 44-member Legislative Council up to a resounding eight. This was better than the Legislative Assembly where two women were swamped by 97 men. Even so the Council, which was in the final stages of transition from an appointed to an elected body, had a reputation as something between a gentleman’s club and a retirement home for tired party loyalists. As a feminist who was active in the peace movement, Ann brought with her ideas and causes rarely discussed in the Council and not particularly congenial to the power brokers in her own party.

How did Ann address the double disadvantage of her faction and gender? The words ‘head on’ seem appropriate. The best introduction to her politics – and to the themes of this book – can be found in the first and last speeches she made in the Council. Her arguments remained quite consistent, but the reaction to them was strikingly different. On 23 November 1982 she rose to make what was then called a ‘maiden speech’. Both the speech and its reception broke parliamentary conventions. New members usually spent time thanking the families, mentors and supporters who had made their arrival possible. They were also expected to set out their political values and philosophies without engaging in full-throated attacks on those who held other values and philosophies. In return political opponents did not interject. Apparently no-one alerted the new member to these rules and her speech exploded all those conventions.

Although Ann admitted to a ‘natural trepidation’ Virginia Chadwick, watching from the benches opposite said to herself ‘She’s telling a fib. She’s not scared at all’². Ann then proceeded to turn what was ostensibly a speech in support of the

state Labor government's budget into a frontal assault on the policies of the federal Coalition government under Malcolm Fraser. After the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975 Fraser had won three general elections with majorities that allowed him to unravel Labor programs. As far as Ann was concerned, the events of 1975 were unforgotten and unforgiven, even as members of the Labor Right were distancing themselves from the Whitlam legacy. She began to sketch out themes that would recur in subsequent speeches, when she would champion ideas that were already becoming unfashionable and express them with a vigour that was sometimes caricatured as 'emotional'.

Before taking up her Council seat Ann told the *Daily Mirror* 'I am going to fight for the untidy and inarticulate'.³ She was only half joking. Central to her politics were the questions, 'Who gets to speak?' and 'Who is heard?' As a member of the Upper House she did not have a specific electorate but, through the causes she adopted, she created her own constituency. It included homeless women, juvenile offenders, women prisoners and their children, the victims of domestic or sexual violence and the drug-dependent. She argued that too many of those constituents – mainly but not exclusively women – lacked the opportunity to speak for themselves. All the more reason for Ann Symonds to use her new privilege to make their case.

In this first outing she attacked complacent assumptions about Australian egalitarianism and identified her 'people':

There is little equality in Australian society for women, for children, for Aboriginal people, for members of ethnic groups, and for the poor.⁴

Although she did not use the word 'capitalism', Ann made it clear that these inequalities were reproduced by the current economic system. She was insistent that inequality demanded corrective government action and, unlike many of her friends outside the Labor Party, she still believed that progressive social change could be achieved through parliamentary politics. When she argued that 'inequities are growing, not receding' under the Fraser government she focused on the funding cuts that were eroding Labor's services for women and children, services she herself had worked to establish.

This narrative did not sit well with the members of the Liberal and National parties who remembered the Whitlam government as an extravagant shambles and argued that cut-backs were essential. But it was only when Ann suggested

that Fraser's party did not deserve the title Liberal and should adopt the name Conservative or Tory that John Holt burst out 'I find it intolerable ...' and had to be reminded not to interrupt a maiden speech. A few days later, however, Derek Freeman was free to comment:

In the ten years I have been a member, it was probably the most tasteless maiden speech I have heard in this House. The honourable member's speech was provocative, no doubt deliberately so, and it espoused some ideas that were extraordinarily divisive for the whole of the community. It must have sent shudders up the backs of some of the more moderate members on the Government side. The only other thing I can say about the speech is that it showed extreme left-wing views are alive and living on that side of the House.⁵

No-one seemed to remember that Millicent Preston Stanley, the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly and a member of the Nationalist Party, had also made a 'challenging' first speech in 1925 and had also been heckled.⁶

How different was the atmosphere in the Council chamber on 29 April 1998 when both sides of the Council paid tribute to Ann Symonds on her retirement. Although she was officially leaving because her health was deteriorating, her farewell speech hinted at other reasons. Harking back to her 'tasteless' debut Ann began by apologising to Malcolm Fraser, saying she found herself agreeing with him more and more. She singled out his steady opposition to apartheid and his criticism of New Zealand's root-and-branch deregulation of markets and privatisation of services. The New Zealand model had admirers in the current Coalition government led by John Howard, while Labor 'modernisers' also looked wistfully across the Tasman. Ann's final speech was brief but touched on arguments she had rehearsed throughout the 1990s in party forums and in the parliament as state and federal Labor governments adopted more of the neoliberal agenda of privatisation and corporatisation. In November 1982 she had defended Whitlam government programs for women and children as the product of Labor values. Now she regretted the *bipartisan* abandonment of certain Australian traditions: common ownership of assets and cross-subsidisation of services. Perhaps what Fraser and Symonds had in common was a certain disappointment in, and distance from, their own parties. Service under three Labor Premiers (Neville Wran, Barrie Unsworth and Bob Carr) and opposition to two Coalition Premiers (Nick Greiner and John Fahey) had shown

her the limitations as well as the possibilities of progressive social change through parliamentary action.⁷

When politicians retire everyone accentuates the positive. The valedictory speeches from the Liberals and Nationals were noticeably warm. Leader of the Opposition John Hannaford argued that Ann should have been on the front bench while Richard Bull spoke for the Nationals who were sorry she was leaving so soon. Both men stressed her ‘unflinching’ articulation of her political philosophy. Perhaps there was an element of mischief in their celebration because on many issues, from uranium mining to drug law reform to electricity privatisation, Ann *had* sent shudders up the back of ‘more moderate members’ of her party. Members of the Coalition had occasionally goaded her about her irrelevance as a member of Labor’s left-wing rump. But much of the affection from the opposing benches was genuine.⁸

In part this reflected the character of Legislative Council. Although it became a directly elected body in 1984, it was never just a miniature version of the Assembly ‘Bear Pit’. Proportional representation allowed for the election of minor parties: by the late 1980s neither Labor nor the Coalition could command a clear majority in the Council and leaders had to learn to negotiate. Much of the Council’s most constructive work was done in its standing and select committees, where ideas were contested but consensus was the aim. Finally the intimacy of the small chamber encouraged cooperation, even friendships, across its narrow divide. Ann, for example, had a good relationship with Sir Adrian Solomons of the National Party and enjoyed martinis with John Tingle of the Shooters Party.

The generous goodbyes from conservatives, independents and even members of the Labor Right – who may well have been glad to see her go – also reflected Ann’s personality. She could be fierce: after one battle in the Labor caucus she got in the lift with her opponents, turned to smile at them and heard, ‘Watch out, here she comes again!’ She could be caustic. Meredith Burgmann remembered that she and Ann made so many sharp interjections from the back benches that they were likened to ‘Marge’s man-hating sisters Patty and Selma from *The Simpsons*’. But the farewell speeches cited Ann’s other qualities, such as charm, wit and sociability.

They also stressed her capacity for hard work, evident in her service as Deputy Chair (1988-95) and then Chair (1995-98) of the Legislative Council’s Standing

Committee on Social Issues. This committee dealt with issues outside the regular battleground of economic management and industrial relations. But they were often issues that generated headlines, including Juvenile Justice, Sexual Violence, Youth Violence and Drug Use Among Youth. The committee's brief was to go beyond tabloid simplicities, to make recommendations based on detailed investigation. Given her interests Ann Symonds was an obvious choice for membership of the committee. The Reverend Fred Nile, who disagreed with Ann on virtually every social question, was another member of the Committee in the early 1990s and his farewell speech hinted at some stormy sessions. (An incident involving a glass of water was mentioned). As Chair, however, Ann had successfully steered the Social Issues Committee to make unanimous recommendations. Greens MLC Ian Cohen reflected on her *modus operandi*. They had both served on the recent Joint Select Committee on Safe Injecting Rooms. Ann had taken over as Chair in September 1997 and Cohen watched this long-time campaigner for drug law reform as she attempted – unsuccessfully this time – to shepherd the committee towards accepting safe injecting rooms as a first instalment of change. He remembered her as ‘very patient and determined’. Of course those qualities do not always sit easily together. Dr Marlene Goldsmith had been Chair of the Social Issues Committee when Ann was Deputy Chair and had dissented from the Committee's majority reports on Drug Use Among Youth and on Medically Acquired Aids. Despite adding her best wishes, Goldsmith remembered some ‘interesting’ inquiries, using ‘the word ‘interesting’ in the Chinese sense’. Perhaps Chair Ann Symonds was fortunate in that she did not have to argue with a determined Ann Symonds?

One small group of Legislative Councillors did not join in the celebration of Ann's career and qualities. The Labor Right could afford to be gracious, but no-one from the ‘Soft’ Left marked the departure of this member of the opposing ‘Hard’ Left. The bitter tensions between the fractions of the Left, which often seemed to have as much to do with personalities and positions as they did with policy, had produced a formal split in the late 1980s. For the benefit of the baffled outsider, the current Labor frontbencher Andrew Leigh has drawn the following distinctions between the groups: the Soft Left derived its support from party branches and had a less intransigent relationship with the Right, while the Hard Left drew more strength from the union movement and also maintained ‘closer links with the broad left outside the ALP’⁹. (It has to be noted that members of the Soft Left firmly reject the argument that they were

more amenable to the Right.) In later interviews Ann was inclined to duck the direct question ‘So did you belong to the Hard Left’, but even though factional in-fighting was never her *raison d’être*, her allegiance was clear. After the valedictory speeches, the polite silence of the Soft Left reminds us that the subject of this biography was indeed a politician, not a candidate for canonisation.

This *Tale of Two Speeches* provides a brief introduction to Ann Symond’s politics and methods. But being a member of parliament was only part of her story. Since joining the Labor Party in 1967 Ann recorded fifty years of political and social activism. In the early 1970s, as a member of the New South Wales Labor Women’s Committee, she played a key role in developing federal Labor’s childcare policy. During her time in the Council she was involved in extra-parliamentary movements for drug law reform and nuclear disarmament. In 1983, for example, she made her office, phones and photocopier available to women organising a Peace Camp at Pine Gap. Ann always liked to make parliament accessible to ‘outsiders’ and in 1989 hosted the first of what have become annual luncheons to celebrate the feminist Jessie Street. At the time the Presiding Officers had to be convinced about the suitability of this unusual use of the Strangers’ Dining Room.

When Ann retired from the Council in 1998 Treasurer Michael Egan correctly predicted that ‘we will still be lobbied by her and have our arms twisted by her, because she will continue to fight for the causes she believes in for the rest of her life’. Like the veteran left winger, Tony Benn, who retired from the UK House of Commons ‘to spend more time with his politics’, Ann enjoyed a busy parliamentary after life.¹⁰ She remained active in the peace movement and in campaigns to reform prisons, children’s services and current drug laws. In pursuing these and other causes she made new and sometimes surprising alliances. When she was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2015 the citation noted her parliamentary career and singled out her ‘significant service to social justice, particularly through drug law reform’.

Doing justice to this long career is a daunting task. This is not a conventional biography organised on chronological lines. The first chapter, ‘The Making of a Not-So-Accidental Politician’, does detail the events and early influences that shaped Ann’s politics. This biographical chapter introduces some of the issues and interests that characterised Ann’s career, but these are explored in greater detail in the following chapters. These are organised around themes and discuss

a *selection* of the causes Ann championed before, during and after her years in the Legislative Council. This book is not intended as a how-to primer for aspiring social activists, but the story of Ann Symonds’ successes – and setbacks – should provide insights into the sheer hard work of progressive social reform.

¹ ‘Ann Symonds’, in *HerStory: Australian Labor Women in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments, 1925-1994*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds and Jean Willoughby (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 1994), p. 45.

² Symonds, 23 November 1982, *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates (NSWPD)*, 3rd series, vol. 172, p. 2728; Chadwick, 28 April 1998, *NSWPD*, 3rd Series, vol. 263, p. 4079.

³ *Daily Mirror*, 21 September 1982, p.8.

⁴ *NSWPD*, 3rd series, vol. 172, p. 2729. See pp. 2728-33 for the entire speech.

⁵ *NSWPD*, 3rd series, vol. 173, pp. 3369-70

⁶ Deborah Brennan, ‘Women in the “Mother Parliament”’: inaugural impressions, in “*no fit place for women*”? *Women in NSW Politics, 1856-2006*, ed. by Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), p. 23.

⁷ *NSWPD*, 3rd series, vol. 263, p. 4076.

⁸ *NSWPD*, 3rd series, vol. 263, p. 4077. All comments cited in the following paragraphs are taken from pp. 4077-81.

⁹ Andrew Leigh, ‘Factions and Fractions: A Case Study of Power Politics in the Australian Labor Party’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 437, 440.

¹⁰ ‘Benn retires to spend more time with his politics’, *Independent*, 28 June 1999, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/benn-retires-to-spend-more-time-with-his-politics-1102948.html> (accessed 4 February 2019)