

EDITORIAL

In March 1895 the *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1894* (SA) received royal assent. This act was the final requirement necessary to extend suffrage to women on equal terms with men in the State of South Australia. Prior to the enactment, no woman in the British empire was permitted to vote. Women were accorded the status of citizenship but were denied involvement in legislative, judicial, and executive functions.

This issue of the *Adelaide Law Review* is devoted to celebrating the centenary of that momentous reform - to remember and reflect upon the efforts of those engaged in the sustained and vigilant campaign to enfranchise women and also to reflect upon the efforts of those who continued and still continue to fight the legal subordination of one sex to the other.

It is well to remember that those engaged in campaigning for enfranchisement did not perceive the right to vote as an ultimate goal but rather as a vehicle by which women could fully include themselves in society and redress imbalance in social relations. Although the ideals of the reformers might have been utopian they were realistic enough to recognise that the hard work which preceded the passage of the bill granting women the right to vote in 1894 had to be followed by further campaigns and education to continually improve the social welfare, status and health of women and children. A number of organisations which had been involved in the campaign for votes for women, such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, remained important political lobbyists and other groups such as the Woman's League were formed to maintain the momentum of reform. However these groups remained politically non-aligned as did most of the female candidates who stood for election after the amendments came into effect. Indeed up until 1916 when the *Parliamentary Qualifications (Women) Bill* was passed there was some doubt that women could stand for election despite having the vote. It was not until 1959 that two female candidates endorsed by the Liberal Country League were elected to the South Australian Parliament.

The utopian vision of the reformers did not detract from the essentially grass roots nature of their movement. The reformers were very much concerned with the day to day struggles of women in a frontier society and it is no coincidence that other frontier societies such as Nebraska and Montana were also among the first to extend the franchise to women.

The modern challenge for reform is to maintain the momentum set by these early pioneers while at the same time remaining in touch and relevant to those who are disadvantaged as a result of inequity. In form many of the inequities have been addressed. Anti-discrimination laws prevent overt discrimination and the full rights of citizenship, prima facie, are open to all. Yet women remain under represented in the legislature, judiciary and executive. As a group, women receive less legal aid than men. Women are also more likely to be employed in lower paid jobs than men. The gender neutrality of current law and procedure (including alternate dispute resolution) masks a clear imbalance in application as between the sexes which in itself can lead to unfairness.

It may prove much harder to fight laws which impose standards like reasonableness and merit but which conceal systemic injustice. Nevertheless, if we as reformers are dedicated to improving the human condition in the same manner which drove those seeking votes for women 100 years ago and if we are prepared to work as hard and as long we must succeed.

Editor