

**Proceedings of the IAW Conference, Melbourne,
8 to 12 October, 2012**

The Conference of the **International Alliance of Women** in Melbourne was sponsored by Women's Electoral Lobby Australia and organised by Women's Electoral Lobby Victoria, the League of Women Voters and the Union of Australian Women. The 40th Anniversary of Women's Electoral Lobby was also celebrated. The Conference included a Welcome Reception at the Wheeler Centre and a Conference Dinner at the Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Melbourne.

Conference participants were welcomed with speeches by a member of the **Wurrunjeri** culture, a speaker for **Mary Wooldridge**, Victorian Government Minister for Women's Affairs, Mental Health and Community Services, detailing initiatives to combat violence against women, **Lyda Verstegen**, President of the International Alliance of Women, **Helen L'Orange**, Chair Women's Electoral Lobby National Executive Committee, **Emeritus Professor Marian Sawer AO, ANU**, **Dr Clare Wright**, author of the television documentary "**Utopia Girls**".

Lyda Verstegen explained how, in 1902, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Legal Citizenship was founded by leading American suffragists at a meeting in Washington attended by women from eleven countries. A second meeting in Berlin, in 1904 formally constituted the organization under the name International Woman Suffrage Alliance. At the Congress of 1926 in Paris the name was changed to International Women's Alliance and in 1946 the present name was adopted.

Professor Marion Sawer showed the changes in cartoons illustrating how feminism has been depicted from the early 1850's up to today. However she believes that

women are normalised in politics now. She quoted Gloria Steinem's famous remark that "you're either a feminist or a masochist."

On Tuesday, refugee and immigrant women discussed problems in Australia and explained to our overseas visitors how we are coping and lobbying.

On Thursday we had a wonderful discussion about the Fair Work Act explained by lawyer **Professor Beth Gaze** from Melbourne University with lawyer **Keelia Fitzpatrick** from the Trades Hall Council pointing out the gaps in the system.

This was followed by a session on seniors' rights by **Susan Ryan, Commissioner for Ageing**, together with students from two high schools who presented their ideas on discrimination and human rights for all.

Andrea Sharman from **Monash University** talked about the problems of housing. She has conducted a survey of women aged 40 years and over. These women who were earning will face poverty on retirement if they don't own their own homes. There could be a partial solution if land was supplied on lease (as in Canberra) and monies were organised on a debt paying system. Removing these women from the rental market should mean that lower income groups would have better access to lower rents.

The highlight of the Conference was the electrifying speech given at the conference dinner on Thursday night by **Dr Clare Wright** who researched and presented the brilliant documentary "**Utopia Girls**". Clare melded the problems that women faced getting the vote with the extraordinary happenings in Parliament on Tuesday when **Prime Minister Julia Gillard** finally told Parliament what was sexism and misogyny.

Kerry Lovering

Convenor WEL Victoria