



STICKY BEAK

An irregular column of profiles

Interview with Jennie George

Jennie George is the President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Ms Jennie George was born in Italy on 20 August 1947. She arrived with her family in Australia in 1950 and was educated at Burwood Girls High School in Sydney. After completing an Arts degree at the University of Sydney she commenced her professional life as a schoolteacher. However, her career took off in a different direction in the early 1980s, culminating in her election as the first woman President of the ACTU, in 1996.

Madeleine Spies

Madeleine Spies is a Canberra lawyer.

Q: I've been trying to get some background and historical information for this interview and 'Who's Who in Australia' indicates you were born in Italy. Where were you born in Italy and when did you migrate to Australia?

I was born in 1947 in a displaced person's camp in a little place called Trani on the Adriatic coast and my family migrated to Australia in 1950, so I was about 3 when we first came to Australia.

Q: You began your life as a teacher. What attracted you to become involved in the unions and did this interest in the unions begin before your working life?

Well I first got interested in the Teachers Union while I was studying to become a teacher at the University of Sydney. I was in the Trainee Teachers' Club and got active around the issue of inadequate scholarships. When I went out teaching in 1969 I became the union representative at Bankstown Girls' High School and got very involved with the union at the school and regional level.

Q: As the first woman to be elected to the ACTU executive and the first woman to be elected as ACTU President what were the barriers that you personally had to overcome?

Until I was elected in 1983, the ACTU executive had been the preserve of men

only. My election in 1983 was the first time a woman had sat on the executive since its inception. I think that showed the prevailing view of the world was that unionism was very much a male domain. It probably wasn't dissimilar to the kinds of challenges that women have fought in a variety of institutions that have been historically male dominated, including the legal profession.

By the time I'd got to the executive I'd had about a decade of full-time involvement in the Teachers' Federation. So I came to the executive with a fair degree of experience in the world of unionism, albeit in a white-collar, female-dominated union. It was like entering a new world — the philosophy of the ACTU was still in that era very attuned to the needs of full-time, male, blue-collar workers. Anyone from a white-collar background like myself was not seen to be quite as good as, or as militant or union minded as, those from the traditional ranks of unionism.

I didn't face any overt discrimination. I think we'd got beyond that by the early 1980s although there were always some men on the executive who couldn't refrain from comments that were a put down of women. Generally speaking, the atmosphere in which I worked on the executive was at least free from any personal or obvious discriminatory behaviour.

Q: In what ways has the ACTU benefited from the increased participation of women in executive positions? I know the ACTU has adopted an affirmative action position.

For a long time I was the only woman on the executive. We came to the realisation — well Bill Kelty, in particular as Secretary, and I — that if we were just going to leave it to history to redress the injustice in the lack of female representation we would never get there. So we got approval from the Congress to begin the process of ensuring a better

representation of women through changes to the ACTU's constitution and rules. The end result was that by congress next year (2000, at which point in time I'll be going) the rules will have provided for a 50% representation of women on the ACTU executive.

I think we've benefited in a number of ways. Women bring to the deliberations of the executive different experiences and a different world view. I think there's a strength in having a critical mass of women there, and I think with my own position being full time, it has provided positive signals to the rest of the community that unionism in Australia today is much broader than the conventional male-dominated stereotype of unionism. I hope that I've been able to be a positive role model for young women in particular, showing that if you apply yourself and work hard, you can make it to the top of a range of institutions, including the union movement, that have traditionally been the preserve of men.

Q: You say that next year is your last year. What's life going to be like for you after the ACTU?

It's a little hard to imagine because most of my adult working life has been working full time for the union movement, apart from several years as a classroom teacher. The thought of venturing into the unknown is daunting, but I have lots of experiences to draw on so I'll have to see what possibilities will open up.

As far as political options are concerned there has been some suggestion that, like my predecessors, I might go into federal politics. I haven't ruled out the possibility, if there's an opportunity for me, of moving into politics back in NSW (my home town is Sydney). I'm pretty keen to get back home. Like a lot of women my age I have some responsibilities for an aged parent. I'd like to get back home to Sydney and I'd like to continue in public life if the opportunity comes up. I'll just play it by ear and wait and see what offers there are and what I could do that could be useful.

I'm not terribly motivated by making lots of money or having a well paid career. I'm not that kind of person. I like job satisfaction but that satisfaction



Jennie George

comes to me by being able to do things that benefit ordinary people.

Q: The waterfront dispute in 1998 was such a powerful dispute, and affected all Australians. What lessons do you think were learnt by the government and the unions from that dispute and what were the positive outcomes for the unions?

Well I hope the government learnt the lesson that industrial provocation doesn't really achieve any good result. Now you'd recall very early in that dispute Minister Reith was loudly proclaiming it was the end of the MUA's dominance on the waterfront, that in the future workers on the waterfront wouldn't be members of the union. Luckily for us, I think, the government made it very clear when the PM said that they'd been sacked because they'd been members of the MUA, that they were in fact in breach of their own laws with respect to freedom of association.

I think what was amazing about that dispute was the way it captured the hearts and minds of people throughout the community whether they were on our side or not. Everybody was talking

about the maritime dispute to the extent that the proceedings of the Federal Court were televised live and lots of people eagerly anticipated the outcome of the High Court decision. It was a dispute that transcended the normal boundaries of an industrial dispute.

For the union movement, of course, it was a critical dispute. If the government was able to destroy the influence of one of our very strong, militant unions, it sounded danger signals for the rest of the movement. So it was important that we were able to hold the line. I also think the community, whether or not they supported waterfront workers at a personal, individual level, understood the importance of the union movement as some kind of strength between the powerlessness of individual workers and the might of government. It was really a David and Goliath struggle.

At the end of the day, the Maritime Union is still there representing the workforce. I'm sure the outcomes that finally came through could have been achieved in a much more civilised manner through the processes of negotia-

tion and consultation rather than industrial provocation. I hope the government has learnt that's not the way to go.

Q: Minister Reith has recently launched a discussion paper on the Internet titled 'The protection of employee entitlements in the event of employer insolvency'. In the paper, the coalition government canvasses two options for a national safety net scheme for the improved protection of employee entitlements owed on insolvency, but neither of the two options canvassed guarantees full payment of all entitlements for employees. The ACTU has responded to this paper. Should these options be opposed altogether or should we take what's offered?

I don't think we should oppose any option that heads in the right direction. I think it is to the government's credit that these options are now being discussed and debated. Mind you, I think Mr Reith has been driven into this position largely because of the hostile public commentary that followed the case relating to the Oakdale miners and the fact that they were owed \$6.3 million when the company went belly up.

We have a position of principle, which says that any scheme should be comprehensive — that is, it shouldn't just be a safety net. Of course we're concerned that the safety net notion promoted by Mr Reith would cap the payments at a very low level, still leaving many people with their legitimate entitlements unfunded. So we want a comprehensive scheme, not just a safety net, and we believe that any scheme must be premised on the basis that employees don't have to contribute to it, but that employers or government have to pick up the liability.

Beyond the existence of the scheme there's a need for urgent amendment to the existing Corporations Law to place workers much higher, before anybody else, in the list of creditors in the event of companies going belly up. So it is a start; we haven't rejected anything; what we've said is that models in the discussion paper don't satisfy our basic premise, which is that it should be a national scheme, and that it should be comprehensive.

Q: The ministerial discussion paper says this sort of approach represents a significant expansion of social welfare. Do you think this type of scheme should be placed in that context?

I must say I hadn't picked up those words. It is quite amazing — I mean

this has nothing to do with social welfare. This has everything to do with the legal protection of legal entitlements that are owing. So it is a rather quaint construction, one that's fairly typical of Mr Reith's view of the world, I think.

Q: The ILO's Committee of Experts has made a number of observations on the Workplace Relations Act and other legislation to which the government has responded by saying that they don't agree with their observations and that they're continuing their dialogue with the Committee. The second wave of reforms is aimed at, among other things, further reducing the role of the Industrial Relations Commission and unions representing their constituents. How will the coalition government justify these amendments in the face of international concern and how can the unions fight against such flagrant rejection of international objections?

Well let's begin with the ILO. They have found the current first wave of industrial laws to fall short of Convention no. 87 and Convention no. 98 relating to collective bargaining and the right to organise. The committee of experts has found that the current Reith laws breach the collective bargaining convention in giving primacy to individual contracts of employment, which override collective agreements.

The Committee of Experts has also found that the Reith laws unfairly restrict the right of Australian working people to take industrial action to advance their economic, social and political interests. We believe that the first thing the government must do is move amendments to bring current laws in line with international conventions.

Secondly, we believe that Mr Reith has made no case out for the second wave of changes he is proposing. Not only are they further in breach of ILO international conventions but all they do is further tip the balance in the negotiating equation in favour of employers at the expense of workers. The proposals continue to curtail the democratic right of unions to function, they severely impact on the low paid and vulnerable workers and would continue to exacerbate the inequalities that are becoming so apparent in the short time that the current Act has been in force.

What we are seeing is growing income inequality; a huge growth in precarious non-standard forms of employment; women's wages deteriorating; hours of work exploding with much more control in the hands of em-

ployers over the regulation of working arrangements. This is having a severe impact, particularly on women, in trying to balance work and family life.

Under the Reith laws we've gone backwards and no case at all has been made out for another round of changes which are driven, not by any pragmatic consideration, not by a consideration of what's in the national interest or what's fair in the equation. Mr Reith's agenda is driven only by the zeal to deregulate and to wind back the clock to before 1904 when this country gave birth to the conciliation and arbitration system. It's back to the bad old days of the master-servant relationship. That is essentially what Mr Reith would like to see in this country.

Q: Are there any attributes that you admire in your industrial opponents?

Well, 'industrial opponents' would cover a broad array of people including employers and politicians. In employers you want the same as they expect from you, that is, a bit of intelligence brought to the negotiating table, agreements that are win-win situations and agreements that have some honour and integrity attached to them. That is, once an agreement is made, both sides respect that agreement.

As for politicians: there's not much I admire in the Minister, Mr Reith. I don't admire his *modus operandi*. I think he's a skilful politician but the saying goes that some politicians never let the truth stand in the way of a good story. I deal with other politicians also. Obviously I now have to deal with the Democrats — who hold the balance of power in the Senate — in relation to the second wave changes Mr Reith is proposing. I expect from my industrial opponents the same as they expect from me — honesty and integrity in our dealings.

Q: Who were people in your life that have provided you or still provide you with inspiration?

There is a range of people, beginning with my mother. I find her inspiring because she has faced a lot of difficulties in her life but has managed to transcend those at a personal level. She worked very hard to ensure that I had access to good education. She made a lot of sacrifices in the early days when I was studying, and now, because the opportunities she has of seeing me are fewer than she would like.

I've always been surrounded by supportive friends and women friends. In particular those who are there to pick up

the pieces when things go off the rails or when there is pressure. As you can imagine this job gets pretty intense and it's nice to know that you can fall back on, and have the support of a close knit group of friends.

People I admire are generally people who have struggled hard to overcome adversity. So I think of people like Lowitja O'Donoghue, a personal friend and a remarkable woman. People like Patrick Dodson, and Carmen Lawrence in terms of her inner strength to rise above the orchestrated political witch-hunt that was aimed at her. So, anyone, I think, who has overcome adversity and risen to contribute to public life and public policy. Those are the people I admire.

Q: If you were Prime Minister, what kind of changes would you personally pursue?

Well I'm never going to be Prime Minister! I'd like to think that any future Prime Minister would understand the essence of what has made Australia such a good place to live in: its cultural diversity; its respect for different cultures and different religions; its tolerance; its democratic ethos; its belief in the values of a fair go. These are all things that make us unique and are very much at risk as we move into a new millennium.

I fear that those values of tolerance and acceptance and diversity and a fair go are being eroded by the values of the dollar and the bottom line. I think politicians forget that we don't just live in an economy but that we live in communities and in a society. What has made this country great over the last century is much more than the motivation of the bottom line. So we need to think in terms of the big picture issues and to build on important values and traditions that have made this country unique.

These are the things that I value, probably best expressed in a desire to forge a lasting reconciliation and proper understanding of the plight of indigenous Australians. Of course it means becoming a republic; ensuring that we continue to underpin our future by strong industrial and social safety nets; continuing as we have done to reach out and help those who need help at different stages; continuing to be a caring and compassionate society. These are the kind of general values I adhere to and hope to see flourish in the next millennium.