



# Same, Same, But Different

When Robyn Kemmis, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Administration), UTS was invited to speak at the Silver Jubilee of the New South Wales Spokeswomen's Program in May she retraced her steps back through the records to the mid 1970s — 'an exciting time in a very different climate to that of today'

Twenty-five years may seem like a world away politically, but it's not very long in archive years. So the Public Service Board file from the 70s Robyn Kemmis sought for her research had not yet reached the 30-year mark, when State records are normally available for public access. Instead it remained a closed file held in the Government Records Repository at the Western Sydney Records Centre, for which she required permission to gain access.

↑ 'There's a Future for Girls in Trades': late 70s style meets EEO in this poster design for a campaign by the Job Opportunity Division of the NSW Public Service Board, 1978

POSTER REPRODUCED COURTESY OF COLLEEN J MOORE

Much research in the reading rooms involves records that are generations, even centuries, older than the researcher. In this case the researcher was seeking access to a proposal she had written herself. Robyn Kemmis was invited to speak at the conference, because it was she who had written the original submission proposing and outlining a Spokeswomen's Program for the Public Service and had overseen its establishment. Her submission was still on file.

The file transported Robyn Kemmis back to a time when she had just returned from the UK, where she had been associated with the first sex discrimination bill put to the House of Commons. On her return to Sydney, Kemmis joined the NSW Public Service Board and became responsible for staff development.

In her conference paper she remembers being taken aback to find a pamphlet entitled 'How to be successful in your job' in her training material. The pamphlet, which came from a guide to good grooming and deportment (in a pink cover), said:

'Be enthusiastic — enthusiasm is showing you are keen and interested in your work and you have a desire to please others. Be happy — don't have an empty looking face. Do your eyes sparkle? Be interesting — don't envy the personality of others, have confidence in yourself. And, most importantly, be feminine! Make the most of your face and figure. Develop an air of vitality, sincerity and optimism, by making sure you are perfectly groomed and your general deportment is up to scratch.'

This at a time when 'the majority of all NSW Government employees were women' — a numerical strength 'derived from a 300% increase in numbers during the postwar years when labour was in strong demand'.

As Kemmis observes in her conference paper: 'Regrettably, the growth in numbers didn't change the status of women. Almost two thirds of women in the workforce were employed in clerical, sales, service or process occupations while the women in professional occupations were employed almost exclusively as teachers, nurses and librarians. Women had limited prospects of upward mobility, received little of the investment in training and education, were characterised by cautious trade union activity and were regarded as suited to appropriate "women's work".'

But things were on the turn. Kemmis remembers 1977 as 'a great year' marked by the establishment of the Ethnic Affairs Commission and Women's Coordination Unit within the Premier's Department and enactment of the Anti-Discrimination Act. Appointed to advise the Public Service Board on women's issues

in the same year (in a part-time capacity of course!) Kemmis was in the right place at the right time to guide change.

She recalls: 'While limited time and resources were devoted to Equal Opportunity matters at that time, the Board itself was responsive. They approved my recommendation that women be included on selection committees, and they subsequently approved the Spokeswomen's Scheme, which arose from my discussions with women in the Service'.

Kemmis proposed that Spokeswomen be nominated and elected by the women of each Public Service department and that they have direct access to Women's Liaison Officers at senior levels in those departments, as well as the Board's new Job Opportunity Division. The approach she outlined in her submission formed the basis of the Spokeswomen's Program which has gone on to celebrate its 25th anniversary this year.

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There is no question that important change took place in that period. But, reflecting on conditions in 2002, Kemmis laments the erosion of some of the 70s programs and expresses concern that some fundamental issues are still to be properly addressed, such as: 'adequate child care, equal pay for work of comparable value and changes in the law to reduce gender bias. The needs of Aboriginal, disabled and non-English speaking women are still critical issues.'

The work of the Spokeswomen's Program still remains vital. As Robyn Kemmis concludes: a 'study by academics at the Sunshine Coast and Australian Catholic universities, estimated that the number of women in Australia gaining a management guernsey has slowed to the point where it will take 170 years for them to have an equal share of the top jobs with men'.

So, in answer to her own closing questions: 'Can we afford to relax a bit in the knowledge of a job well done? Should we rest then on post-feminist rhetoric? Kemmis replies: 'reform is not inevitable and we should not take our achievements for granted ... it's important that we continue to assist each other and ensure that women have a fair and equal chance to satisfy the aspirations that they determine for themselves'.