The Hon Susan Ryan AO, Whitlam Institute Distinguished Fellow
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The Whitlam Institute

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“...help the great and continuing work of building a more equal, open, tolerant and independent Australia.”

Gough Whitlam 2010

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Susan Ryan served as Australia’s first Age Discrimination Commissioner (2011-2016) and as Disability Discrimination Commissioner (2014-2016). As Age Discrimination Commissioner she was highly effective in drawing the attention of policy makers and the public to the extent of discrimination against older people.

She commissioned pioneering research into age stereotyping, and economic and social impacts of ageism and disability discrimination. She conducted the first national enquiry into workplace discrimination against older Australians and Australians with disability. The landmark report from this enquiry Willing to Work sets out national strategies for all sectors to improve the economic participation of Australians as they age and of people with disability.

Up until her appointment as Commissioner, Susan was the Independent Chair of the IAG and NRMA Superannuation Plan; pro chancellor and Council member at UNSW from 1999 to 2011; and chair of the Australian Human Rights Group 2008-2011. She was CEO of ASFA, the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia from 1993-1998, and President of AIST, the Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees from 2000 to 2007. She was a founding member of Australian Council for Superannuation Investors and of the ASX Corporate Governance Council.

From 1975 to 1988, Susan was Senator for the ACT, becoming the first woman to hold a Cabinet post in a federal Labor Government. In the Hawke Government she served as Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women and Special Minister of State. As Education Minister, she achieved a doubling of school retention rates while universities and TAFE enrolments grew to historic rates without the imposition of tuition fees. She pioneered extensive anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, including the landmark Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act 1986.

She was awarded an AO for services to the Australian parliament in 1990. She has been awarded honorary doctorates from Macquarie University, University of Canberra, University of South Australia, the University of New South Wales and the ANU.

Susan led the Institute’s ‘Revisiting the Revolution’ event in November 2019, examining the achievements of and lessons from the women’s lobby in 1970s Australia and soon after wrote this paper.

In memory of the Hon Susan Ryan AO, 1942–2020
Foreword

When the Hon John Faulkner, Chair of the Whitlam Institute, introduced me to the Hon Susan Ryan AO, I was a little in awe of this remarkable feminist, ground breaking female politician and policy maker and eternal activist for equality and change. I was quickly disarmed by her warmth and enthusiasm and she set about telling me what, as our Distinguished Fellow, she thought needed to be done.

Susan was concerned that of all the policy reforms and achievements of the Whitlam Government there was not enough on the record that captured what she describes in this Paper as the 'social and economic revolution for women' that was 1972-1975. She was also concerned that we hadn’t learned the lessons of what made that revolution possible, and the key role that the Women’s Electoral Lobby played.

And so we worked together over many months to plan and host the Institute’s “Revisiting the Revolution: Whitlam and Women” Forum in November 2019 at Old Parliament House. That place was wall to wall with incredible women, young and old, who have achieved so much to make Australia a better place for all. The mood across the full day of discussions was indeed historic.

The proceedings provided Susan with an incredible array of knowledge and experience to inform this Whitlam Legacy Paper. I thank all the participants on the day for their contribution to this body of work.

Little did we know then that Susan would no longer be with us now. It is our honour and privilege that she was able to complete this Paper in the months before her passing.

Along with all Australian women, and Australian society at large, the Whitlam Institute owes a debt of gratitude to this extraordinary person who shared with us so much of her intelligence, humour and wisdom.

I hope you learn as much from her in these pages as I did.

Leanne Smith

Director, Whitlam Institute
within Western Sydney University
Revisiting the Revolution: Whitlam and Women

On 11 November 2019 Australia, as it does each year, marked the Armistice, the end of the terrible First World War. On the same date, many Australians mark annually another historic ending of equal significance for Australia, the premature and shocking removal of the first progressive federal government Australian had experienced in 23 years.

On 11 November 1975 the Whitlam Government was thrown out of office, not by the people who had elected it, but by an unelected official, in what many maintain to this day was an unconstitutional act. Much of the background to this unprecedented action has been clothed in secrecy because of the refusal of the Palace to release to Australians the relevant correspondence between the Monarch and the Governor-General at the time. That refusal was set aside by the High Court decision of 29 May 2020, so more is becoming known.

The traumatic and premature conclusion of the Whitlam Government was a shock and a huge disappointment to many Australians.

For Australian women, it was particularly damaging and a major setback.

The Whitlam Government (1972-1975) was the first national government to implement a big reform agenda for women, the first to involve women at the highest levels of government, and the first to move with purpose and effect toward the objective of a society in which men and women of Australia would be equals in every way. The Whitlam Government made significant progress towards the gender equality objective. It would have made more if not cut off midway through its second term by the traumatic Dismissal of that government and its subsequent overwhelming electoral defeat.

In 2019, close to this historic date, the Whitlam Institute hosted a forum at Old Parliament House in the ACT, “Revisiting the Revolution: Whitlam and Women” (the Forum). This gathering of activists, old and new, considered the broad scope of Whitlam’s policy agenda for women. The contributors were drawn from the cohort of exceptional women who at the time under discussion were key activists, advocates, policy experts, public servants, diplomats and lawyers. They made the revolution happen. It also included perspectives from the new generation of Australian women leaders. This paper is informed by their contributions.

The papers contributed by these exceptional women are available on the Whitlam Institute website, whitlam.org.

I refer to some of this valuable material in this paper but commend readers to the complete contributions for their highly relevant and important detail. Together they create an authentic sense of those times when so much progress was delivered.

The aim of this paper is threefold: first to explore where Whitlam’s women’s agenda came from, and how it became a significant, even central part of the broader agenda of his government.

Secondly, it will revisit the major policy and law reform initiatives of the agenda. Innovations such as childcare; women’s refuges; universal health cover; equal pay; the minimum wage; access to senior levels in the Commonwealth Public Service; maternity leave for public servants; the appointment of talented women to top positions; and significantly, improved access to all levels of education. These changes amounted to a social and economic revolution for women.

In opening the Whitlam Institute Forum at Old Parliament House, the former Deputy Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, current Shadow Education Minister The Hon Tanya Plibersek, summarised what were, in her judgment, the most significant changes implemented for women between 1972-75.

Finally, this paper offers an assessment of the longer-term effects of the reforms of 1972-1975, highlighting the remarkable longevity of most of them but also points to the future: the legacy of the Whitlam Government for women today.
The Women’s Movement and Whitlam

To understand how this all began requires a return to 1972. That year, for the politically engaged, was marked by excitement and promise. The promise was this: after 23 years of lacklustre conservative rule, Australians would have the possibility of electing an ambitious, reforming government. Led by Gough Whitlam - with style, energy, comprehensive scope, and massive plans for a better Australia for all - Labor seemed well prepared to take power and set Australia on a welcome new direction.

The defining narrative of this new direction was opportunity, equal opportunity for all.

The Government intended to put in place purposeful and effective measures to deal with the inequalities and disadvantages that many citizens had suffered throughout the history of Australia since the setting up of the British colony in NSW in 1788. The Fair Go sentiment Australians loved to claim as defining our national identity had since 1788 excluded many of us: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, the poor, and of course, the biggest group excluded from a fair go, Australian women.

The Whitlam Government came into office in December 1972 well prepared to make a success of this historic opportunity for reform.

Whitlam himself, as Leader of the Opposition, had spent many fruitful years developing detailed policy papers on most issues and planning changes necessary to create fairness, equal opportunity, and economic progress. Comprehensive policy proposals dealt with education, health, the amenity of our cities and suburbs, and protection of the natural environment. Labor wanted land rights for the First Australians, and to provide fairly and effectively for the needs and human rights of newly arrived migrants.

In foreign policy and defence, Labor would pursue a newly dynamic role for Australia in our region. Further engagement with the world would be sought, particularly through participation in international forums. Manufacturing, agriculture, research, the university sector had all been considered and new directions developed. The full scope of Australian culture, across the performing and literary arts, was to be acknowledged, celebrated and supported.

Among these extensive preparations there was a serious omission. There were no proposals for detailed investigations into the many disadvantages suffered by Australian women at that time, because of their gender.

Such disadvantage had not in general attracted serious attention from policy makers, researchers, the media or political parties. The limited opportunities and the restricted, often detrimental circumstances of Australian women as a cohort were taken for granted. In this regard, at the beginning of the 1970s, Australia was backward and patriarchal. Laws and policies discriminated against women on the basis of sex. Women were in most respects forced into living as second-class citizens.

There were some indications of recognition of the need for change. The Australian Labor Party and the trade union movement were committed to Equal Pay.

Whitlam had made public his intention of using international instruments of the UN and the International Labour Organisation as building blocks for women’s progress.

But the Labor Party, along with its industrial partner the trade union movement, was aligned with the values of all other powerful institutions in Australia in this one respect. Labor as a party organisation had operated without including women at senior or decision-making levels, and without identifying improvements for women as central to their objectives. Because of these omissions, in the years leading up to the 1972 election, Labor itself generated few policies to advance the rights of women.

This historic neglect raises a fundamental question: given these omissions how was it that the Whitlam Government immediately on assuming office in December 1972, became active in a range of important and radical reforms for women, so much so that by 1975, at the first UN world conference on women in Mexico, Australia was recognised as a world leader in women’s rights?

The answer goes to the emergence of the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL).
The Beginnings of the Women’s Electoral Lobby

Where did WEL come from? By the beginning of 1972, support for international movements for women’s liberation, abortion law reform and feminism generally were developing fast in Australia. This dramatic cultural shift was driven by several factors.

From the 1960s improvements were occurring in women’s access to university education. This trend though slow, was starting to produce young women able to question the sexist status quo, and confident enough to do something about it.

The involvement of women in the anti-Vietnam war movement exposed women, most of them for the first time, to radical action. They learned how to organise and campaign, and how to effect change in community attitudes.

During the 60s the contraceptive pill had become available, offering Australian women unprecedented reproductive control. A birth control measure that was effective, simple to use and safe changed the decisions women could make about their most basic and fundamental right, that of control of their own reproduction.

Observing the early success of an American national women’s lobby during the US presidential election in 1972, a group of Melbourne women organised by Beatrice Faust formed a plan to tackle the neglect of women. Iola Matthews, a contributor to this Forum and author of the recently published significant history of women’s wages, Winning for Women, was a part of this group from the beginning. The new group planned to question and publically grade all candidates in the forthcoming federal election on their understanding of women’s circumstances, and the degree to which they would commit to progressive reform.

The instigator of this approach, Dr Beatrice Faust AO, died in 2019. Her contribution was immense. She played a crucial part in the subsequent success of what became the Women’s Electoral Lobby. Following the Melbourne meeting, women’s lobby groups quickly formed in Sydney and Canberra. Before long WEL groups sprang up all over Australia, including regional and country Australia and the far north. Several women key to those developments were contributors to the Revisiting the Revolution: Whitlam and Women Forum.

It is instructive to examine how the lobby grew so fast, and how bold and effective it became.

The WEL questionnaire for federal candidates consisted of 45 detailed questions, stunning in their range and incisiveness. Thanks to Jozefa Sobski AM, national convenor of WEL these days, and a Sydney original, and Dr Gail Radford, convenor of the first Canberra WEL group and currently a historian of WEL, a copy of that questionnaire and some of the results were available to the Forum.

The questions started with birth control and abortion, and explored how these services would be set up, funded and operated. Quite different from the yes/no binary questions so common today, the WEL questions sought detailed and specific answers. Both sales tax on contraceptives and the advertising of contraceptives were raised, as were attitudes to sex education in schools.

Another set of questions covered female poverty, a huge issue at the time when divorce was rare and available mainly to the rich. Single mothers got no financial support, whether they were unmarried, deserted, or had husbands in prison. Women were denied work on the basis of their sex and if they managed to gain employment could be sacked if they became pregnant. They had access only to low paid jobs without promotion prospects. They were limited to a female work ghetto. The neglect of fathers rearing children alone was also highlighted as requiring attention.

Childcare was a massive gap in public provision and a barrier, often insurmountable, to women taking jobs and so was the subject of several questions that sought details of funding, access, staffing and operation hours. The much feared and loathed concept of 24-hour childcare was raised. Further questions concerned divorce law reform and covered access and the cost and administration of a possible new law.

Sex discrimination in the workforce remained almost universal. As well as causing extensive female unemployment it also led to unequal and poor pay, inflexible hours and denial of workforce training. Further questions raised the extension of the Minimum Wage for women and paid maternity leave. Girls’ experience of schooling, at that time blatantly discriminatory at all levels, was also the subject of detailed questions.

The final question was: Would you support or oppose the setting up of a royal commission or a senate inquiry into the status of women in Australia?

This lobbying amounted to the most effective exercise of that kind ever pursued in an Australian election context. Surprising the political class, the media and the WEL lobbyists themselves, most federal candidates were willing to provide answers to the questionnaire. The answers were assessed by WEL women, rated and publicised. The media was interested, and some female journalists were on side.

In the assessments, Labor candidates fared much better than their conservative opponents. Tom Uren was the top scorer and Bill Hayden and Gough Whitlam were right up there.
The New Labor Government Takes Action

Labor was elected. The part played by the women’s movement in this victory was recognised. True to its commitment, the new government immediately set out on a program of promised pro women reforms.

In a short space of time, most of the issues raised in the WEL questionnaire were advanced in legislation or policy design.

By the time the Whitlam Government was prematurely dismissed it had:

- reopened the equal pay case;
- extended the minimum wage to women;
- introduced paid maternity leave in the public service;
- established a single mothers benefit;
- funded community child care;
- abolished university fees;
- ensured cheap and accessible contraception;
- introduced accessible no fault divorce;
- investigated for the first time the structural and cultural discrimination against girls in our schools;
- established universal health insurance; and
- funded refuges and women’s health centres

The most fundamental injustice suffered by Indigenous women was to be addressed by planned Land Rights legislation.

In aggregate these changes amounted to a social revolution. By 1975 the circumstances of women were improved by beneficial economic and workforce opportunities, and services and programs unheard of in 1972. Some of this was already implemented and other parts were being planned.

Then came The Dismissal. The subsequent electoral defeat of the Government in December 1975 left most of these plans unfinished.

This women’s business remained on hold during the seven years of Coalition government under Malcolm Fraser. Some things went backwards. When Labor finally achieved power again under Bob Hawke in 1983, I was honoured to be appointed to Cabinet with responsibilities that included taking up this unfinished work on behalf of women.

During the Hawke and Keating administrations much of the remaining Whitlam undertakings were delivered, along with the Hawke campaign commitments to women.

The answer to the question of how Whitlam’s women’s reform agenda was instigated is this: a movement of grass roots women without any institutional or financial backing, utilising only their own determination, energy and abilities, took collective action that contributed to a progressive government creating a social revolution for women.

Left to right: Dr Gail Radford, The Hon Elizabeth Evatt AC, Dr Helen Watchirs OAM, Prof Kim Rubenstein FAAL FASSA and the Hon Penny Wensley AC FAIIA at the Whitlam Institute’s ‘Revisiting the Revolution’ conference in November 2019.
Women and the Whitlam Government

One of the earliest decisions Prime Minister Whitlam took, and among his most controversial, was his appointment of a female advisor to join his prime ministerial staff to advise him on women’s policy.

This was the first such appointment in the world. Philosopher and feminist Elizabeth Reid AO took on a task that was overwhelming in scale, but transformative in effect. It is important to recognise that as well as the WEL agenda, and the thousands upon thousands of letters to her from Australian women, Elizabeth’s work was informed by, and responded to a diverse range of feminist actions. The Women’s Movement at the time was wider and more diverse than WEL and had focuses well outside of parliamentary politics. Feminists with various skills and agendas pursued feminist objectives in different ways: in academia; through independent publications; community arts projects; and autonomous community services.

Reid’s presentation to the Whitlam Institute 2019 Forum revealed vividly the scope of this work. These activists are of historical importance and were highly significant agents of change.

In her Forum observations, Reid correctly placed the Whitlam era reforms in a broader context of developments in social democratic movements globally.

In Whitlam’s office from early 1973, Reid was a magnet for previously suppressed hopes, sufferings, controversies and hostilities around all aspects of women’s lives.

Reid was treading where no one had gone before. In developing advice to address this myriad of female disadvantage, she had to engage with a resistant bureaucracy. At decision making levels the Commonwealth bureaucracy was all male. As Sara Dowse observes, these men, often brilliant and dedicated, had never contemplated such issues, certainly not as matters demanding public policy reform or major new laws. At that time women had hardly moved out of the typing pool in the Commonwealth Public Service (CPS). The marriage bar that prevented married women from careers in the CPS had only been lifted in 1967.

Whitlam soon made history here, appointing social worker Marie Coleman AO to head a new commonwealth agency, the Social Welfare Commission which advised and designed major welfare reforms including the single mothers benefit. He appointed women to the Australian Schools Commission, The Hon Joan Kirner AC (later Premier of Victoria) and Dr Jean Blackburn AO. The Schools Commission was fundamental to the entire Whitlam program. It developed the policies that opened educational opportunity to all Australian children and pioneered the policy of funding schools on the basis of the needs of the students.

He acknowledged and rectified the previous neglect of women in the law. In December 1972, in one of its earliest actions, his government briefed barrister Mary Gaudron (later Australia’s first female High Court Judge) to apply to the Arbitration Commission to reopen the Equal Pay case. In 1974 Gaudron was appointed Deputy President of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. Whitlam’s first judicial appointment of a woman was Elizabeth Evatt to the Arbitration Commission. When the Family Court was established, Elizabeth Evatt was appointed Chief Justice.
Since those path-breaking appointments, the growth of the numbers and progress of Australian women lawyers has been extraordinary. Professor Kim Rubenstein demonstrates the extent and quality of this change. Her presentation gives a detailed chronological account of the emergence of female lawyers and their success in the profession up to the present, when Australia’s High Court is presided over by a female Chief Justice, Susan Kiefel.

Former Chief Justice Elizabeth Evatt AC describes how she sees the significance of the changes:

“My own view is that women in the judiciary, and in the law, can bring wider/different perspectives. Appointments of women, and of minority groups, can serve to make the judiciary reflect better the society from which it is drawn. It can encourage other women to embark on or to continue legal careers, knowing that no prospects are barred, and that it is not solely the prerogative of male lawyers to aspire to the bench.”

Another distinguished woman of the law, Dr Helen Watchirs OAM described comprehensively the massive legislative achievements of the Whitlam Government that relied on the use of two major International Covenants, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. No-fault divorce and the establishment of Legal Aid were part of the new infrastructure to support women and the law.

Underpinning this expansion of women into senior legal roles was rapid movement of women into policy positions in the bureaucracy.

Emeritus Professor Dr Marian Sawer AO, a distinguished academic, has researched and published extensively on the effects of feminism in the bureaucracy, its programs and personnel from the Whitlam administration and beyond. Women moved into senior positions across the bureaucracy over the next few years. Talented, highly qualified and aware of the challenges - these “femocrats”, as they were called, were well placed to understand and support the new policies designed to provide opportunity for women. The big gap in policy for women that existed in the pre-Whitlam Government Labor agenda was closed over the next years and indeed even with some efforts from non-Labor governments. In her contribution to the Forum Professor Sawer observed:

“One effect of WEL’s extremely successful intervention in the 1972 election – the most successful third-party intervention up to that time – was that parties no longer felt comfortable going into election campaigns without a women’s policy, as even Labor had done in 1972. By the time of the 1974 federal election campaign Labor women’s policy appealed to women as a constituency with distinctive priorities and concerns.”

The 1974 election pamphlet, with its wonderful Bruce Petty cartoon of a woman soaring free of her shackles, told voters that one million women had got more in their pay packets as a result of the reopening of the equal pay case and that Labor was pledged to spend $130 million on a wide-ranging new childcare program.

Of the Whitlam reforms that have been mentioned so far, three deserve particular comment.

First, the introduction of universal health insurance, called Medibank at the time, improved the lives of all Australians, but transformed the circumstances of women and their children, the greatest users of health services.

Secondly, the abolition of tuition fees for universities removed the biggest barrier to women getting university qualifications. Women, previously a small minority on campus, took up the new opportunity to enrol at university in huge numbers.

Women of mature years who had been forced to leave school at fifteen, found universities prepared to offer them a place if they could demonstrate capacity and purpose. Of all the letters and messages Gough Whitlam received during his long life, expressions of thanks from women who benefitted for his no fees initiative outnumbered any other.

The third policy crucially assisted single women with children who had no financial assistance and could not work. The single mothers benefit provided a minimum income for mothers who were alone with children for any reason. Women who became pregnant without a partner or family support faced the choice of an illegal and dangerous abortion or giving up their baby for adoption.
Employment remained the biggest challenge on the road to equality. The changes in government policy and decisions implemented by Whitlam gave some women access to better paid and more significant jobs. Women’s participation in the labour market grew. But most female workers remained trapped in the low paid, low status areas, where their wages continued to lag behind men’s.

The struggle for equal pay attracted more support from women themselves and from parts of the trade union movement. Writer and advocate Iola Matthews has recently published a highly informed and comprehensive account of this struggle. For those women who had managed to position themselves in the areas where opportunity was opening, much was achieved.

One example of how some women were able to progress in this new era is the career account of Penny Wensley, who in 1968 started as a diplomatic cadet, the only woman in her year.

“I joined Foreign Affairs in 1968-aged 22, the only woman in an intake of 19 diplomatic cadets. I had nine overseas postings-six as Head of Mission/Ambassador, including as Australia’s Ambassador to the UN, in both Geneva and New York, as Australia’s Ambassador for the Environment, Ambassador to France and High Commissioner to India-and in all of these I was the first Australian woman to be appointed to the position. I was the first career policy officer/woman diplomat to have a baby on posting (in Mexico)-in 1977, the first HOM of a major post (Hong Kong) married, with small children-in 1986.”

After decades of international diplomatic work at the highest levels, The Hon Penelope Wensley AC was appointed Governor of the State of Queensland.

When the first UN World Conference of the International Women’s Year was held in Mexico in 1975, Whitlam recognised the Year nationally by funding a program of modest grants to women and women’s organisations, especially those who had not benefited from the recent progress.

This program attracted outpourings of insults and sarcasm, led by sections of the media. Further enraging his critics, Whitlam sent a delegation of Australia women, led by Elizabeth Reid, and including Margaret Whitlam and me to the Mexico Conference, where the world was surprised and impressed to learn of what had been happening for women in Australia.

Whitlam was by 1975 facing a hostile electorate, powerful enemies and dealing with a somewhat dysfunctional cabinet. Despite these existential challenges, he took the attacks on the International Women’s Year program in his stride. Whitlam supported equality for women regardless of the hostility these reforms aroused. He never took a backward step. His work for women attracted positive recognition globally in contrast to the nagging and complaints at home.

The international context was relevant. The women’s movement that persuaded and advised Whitlam to improve women’s lives resonated powerfully in Australia, especially among women, but its central concerns were not parochial. They were part of a wider international movement for social democratic reform.

One of the key women at the time had started her life in America. As a young person Sara Dowse lived through Roosevelt’s New Deal. Almost by chance she became an early and well-placed senior Commonwealth public servant. She oversaw the important developments of the reform agenda from the all-powerful Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Later she left public policy making and became a successful novelist.

“My formative years were spent under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal. To me, Whitlam offered me an Australian one. It wasn’t only that I had a government job, it was because his government gave that job meaning. Looking back, I can confidently say that those three Whitlam years were among the most exciting, creative times of my life.

Like many feminists then, I rode on the crest of the wave that landed Whitlam into his prime ministership, and a group of us into key government jobs. I was a lowly journalist in the Australian Information Service when I was seconded to Labor minister Clyde Cameron’s office, where I convinced him to put the government’s weight behind extending the adult minimum wage to women and, in his capacity of Minister for Immigration, to give asylum for the victims of the Pinochet coup in Chile.

Soon after that I joined the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as inaugural head of its newly created Women Affairs Section. This was the unit that Elizabeth Reid, Whitlam’s world-first women’s adviser, needed for bureaucratic backup.”
The Whitlam Legacy

Having revisited the pace, scope and value of Whitlam’s women’s revolution, the Whitlam Institute Forum considered the longevity of what was put in place between December 1972 and November 1975.

It was recognised that a lot remains, all of it important to women and all Australians.

The legacy lives on. Universal health care, despite many attacks, remains and continues to achieve Whitlam’s initial hopes. School participation of girls grew rapidly and remains high. Female participation in many university faculties is higher than that for males. Equitable access to university education has grown dramatically, though students now contribute to the cost. Research is no longer closed to females and consequently women make crucially important contributions to our national research output.

The movement of women into the law at the highest levels has been noted and seems permanent. In politics, women have achieved significant leadership roles including that of Prime Minister, Labor’s The Hon Julia Gillard AC. A woman, The Hon Dame Quentin Bryce AD, CVO has been Australia’s Governor-General.

Women heads of departments and agencies in the Commonwealth public service have approached half of those positions. Women increasingly run large and smaller businesses in the private sector.

In health, education, work opportunities, social reforms, and the ability to live one’s chosen life without discrimination, women’s lives and choices are now better supported than they were in 1972. Women need not marry to achieve financial security or parenthood. Gay women may choose to marry a gay partner without diminishing their career options or community standing.

The Forum also acknowledged that massive challenges to achieving Whitlam’s vision of equality for all remain. Young Aboriginal women, Teela Reid and Matilda Harry, in two sessions of the Forum passionately reminded us of the significant continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal women, and the decades of policy failure since Whitlam’s promising start.

Women are still not equal. Some old problems, especially lack of equal pay and exclusion from a fair share of powerful roles, continue. Recent or recently recognised problems of violence undermining women’s personal and physical safety, in their homes as well as in the community, are at epidemic proportions. A global campaign has put the spotlight on the shocking extent of sexual harassment in the workplace: all workplaces.

Indigenous women suffer scandalous rates of imprisonment, worse health and shorter life spans compared with mainstream Australian women. They do not yet enjoy constitutional recognition, nor do they have a constitutional right to contribute to decisions affecting their lives.

A great deal remains to be done to achieve gender equality in Australia. We who planned the Revisiting the Revolution: Whitlam and Women Forum hope that those now engaged on the work toward equality would find encouragement and inspiration in what was achieved by feminists working with Whitlam. As today’s women leaders, especially young emerging leaders, look for strategies to combat the many current attacks on women’s rights, they could take heart from revisiting 1972-75 and studying what happened.

The achievements of that period, important and enduring as they are, could happen only because Australia had for the first time a national leader in Gough Whitlam who brought to his government a reforming zeal and an unqualified commitment to gender equality.

For more, visit www.whitlam.org/publications/womensrevolution