Deborah McCulloch – transcript – OH 346/10

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DEBORAH WORSLEY-PINE: So could I just pause you there, and get a bit more specific about how you actually did come to be involved in the Women's Movement and what sort of things influenced that movement into the Women's Liberation Movement, or into the Women's Movement?

DEBORAH McC: Yes. Well, again it was a man. He was a student in Politics at Adelaide University and he knew about the Women's Movement, which was something that **I** didn't know. At that time - this is 1969 -it was, as far as I know, it was only in the university, so there might have been other people who knew about it **but** the only people who I knew who knew about it were in the universities. So he introduced it to me and he did so by getting me Germaine Greer's book. Well, first of all by talking about housework and how he ought to do some which - I can remember saying to him, "But somebody's got to do it. Why shouldn't it be me?" My God. So he put me straight about that and then he got me *The Female Eunuch,* and I read it, and I agreed with a lot of it. I agreed that women worked really hard to please men and it was a piss off.

And then I read Kate Millett and I can remember reading it on the back step of his house and saying, "This woman really hates men." And **I** particularly liked about *Sexual Politics* - I particularly liked her analysis of male writers. **In** particular what she did to DH Lawrence because I found DH Lawrence - DH Lawrence, oddly enough, had been one of my mother's favourite writers but I found him very hard to take, and I still do. And I mean that was one of the reasons why I loved the Women's Movement. It just explained so totally why I would read DH Lawrence and I could see that it was great and I didn't agree with a word of it. But I didn't know why and I didn't have the words to say why. I just used to read it and think, "Yes, well." And sort of grump around. "I don't like this man. I don't agree with him." But I didn't know how or why. And so when I read Shulamith Firestone it genuinely was an enormous opening in my life. And looking back on it, when I read her again later, I could see that what she did was she analysed the power of relationships between men and women in relationships. And she also called on literature, which - as both Germaine Greer and Kate Millett had done - and I was an English teacher so I knew a lot of it. I mean, I knew a lot of the works that she was discussing. That they were all discussing - not all of them, though. But I mean she just said it the way it was, you know. She actually laid it out - what I felt, how I behaved, why I behaved in the ways that I behaved, how I had always to consider my position *vis* à *vis* the man that I was attracted to or was negotiating with at the time, and how I always ended up in a powerless - a 'less than' position, *vis* à *vis* that man. And it was an extraordinarily powerful experience for me.

All that year, which was 1971, which was much later than most of my friends - I mean, the Women's Movement had started in South Australia in 1969, but I hadn't known anything about it. And I didn't join in 1970. By join, I mean I didn't go to the meetings which were held weekly at the university. But in 1971 I started to. And then about November I read Shulamith Firestone and that was it. I was sold. I went to every meeting and I set up groups. I did everything I could possibly think of, you know. This was the way. This was the cause. This was so right. After about a year people said, "If you talk about it once more I'll scream." So I think I was an extremely enthusiastic convert.

However, I got really annoyed with Women's Liberation because we sat around talking about how awful it was but we didn't do anything. And we spent a lot of time - I mean, Shulamith Firestone allowed one to say how awful it was for me, which is what I really wanted to do, but at the same time it just became clear that once you've had that analysis how very much worse it was for hundreds of other women. For all other women, essentially. For one's mother, one's female relatives, the women you saw in the street, the women who served you in the cafes. Everywhere you went you saw women in oppressed situations. So I became much more interested in what you could do about it since, I mean, I don't find writing easy. I'm not really a writer. I mean, the only writing I've done -I've written a few articles - but the only real writing I've done is poetry and that's because you can scribble it on the back of an envelope while you change meetings, you know, or while you're sitting on a bus or something. You don't have to stop doing, but to write anything proper you do have to stop doing. And I know writing is an act in itself but it's not really for me.

And so in July 1972 Women's Electoral Lobby started in Melbourne and they wrote to me after a while and asked me if I would set up a branch in Adelaide, and I did. We had the first meeting in my house. I can't remember the date - in July. And I asked a number of women who had also said in the Women's Liberation meetings, "But what are you going to do about it?" And they were an odd collection of women and three of them said no, they didn't want to have anything to do with Women's Electoral Lobby, thank you, it was all too reformist and ordinary and boring, and three of us said yes, this is what we want to do, so we did it. And so we had - then we got kind of started in semi political life.

I mean, it's women's politics, therefore it doesn't look like ordinary politics and people are still quite rude about it. Not about - I mean, they're rude about Women's Electoral Lobby now, yes, true. But they were dismiss - they are still dismissive. They don't realise. I mean, the last person I've read is Beatrice Faust in Susan Mitchell's book *The Scent of Power,* and she says women just don't have the political savvy, actually to do it. And that is because women conduct politics differently from the way it's conducted by men. And we have as yet only had the opportunity to do it in our own way within our own organizations which are unfunded and entirely voluntary,

and therefore carry those particular burdens, so that, you know, you have to stop commenting on this bill or writing this submission in order to raise money so that you can pay the phone bill and keep on doing this stuff. So it's no wonder that women's politics haven't taken off in the way men's have. Because to be in politics you have to have money. There's no doubt about it. You have to have a financial base. And the Labor Party's got the unions and the Liberal Party's got business and so - and we haven't got anything. So our politics is limited.

So what we did between 1972 and 1974, when I left the Women's Liberation, I mean, left Women's Electoral Lobby, was to write submissions, lobby politicians, interview politicians, make known their dreadful opinions and it got really good publicity and it was kind of easy because what we doing was showing up, essentially, nineteenth century values around women.

There were a very few men who had shifted from the nineteenth century. But the ones who had, still defined women, say, entirely in the workforce. Now, those men were in favour of equal pay, let us say, but they had no understanding of women's place in the family. Women's relationships with men. The fact that these determine everything else about women. The fact that women are still struggling out of the family and most women are still in it. And that until you get free of the family you haven't really got free. And that analysis comes directly from Women's Liberation. It doesn't come from women's politics. Because at the same time that I went off and did all this stuff, Women's Liberation went on, and it's analysis was, you know, like far better than anything else that was done anywhere else in Australia in any other way. And that analysis was available to women like me and it was available through friends who weren't - you know, women I knew who were over there, going to conferences and talking about Women's Liberation sort of things, and I would have dinner with them or something. And I was still really interested in my own life. I mean, it became clear after - I don't think I would have been able to verbalise this - but looking back, what Firestone's analysis does, it says that your life is where it's happening, you know. It's not out there and it's not - I mean, it is out there and it is in the institutions of the country but it is also in every mouthful you take, every breath you take, certainly everything you say, and everything anybody says to you, sexism is - if it's not there, then you notice it at once because it's there so much of the time. So I still went on seeing my life, although I was really active -and I like being active - I think I still maintained something of Women's Liberation because I had this sense that the way I lived my life and the relationships I formed and the things that I did were as significant as what you did out there. But what you did out there fixed the world, to a degree, for women who didn't have the analysis, and it seemed to me, and I think that this was an essential thing to do. And the difference between Women's Liberation people and me was that I thought it was not enough merely to conduct the analysis. I thought you had to conduct the analysis and do something with it because if you didn't, then you were allowing oppression to continue really.

So 1974 I had a child and 1976 I got the job as Women's Adviser to the Premier so there I was, in the Women's Unit, in the Premier's Department from 1976 to 1979 and while I was there I fell in love with one of the women working there and so I stopped being Women's Adviser in 1979 and started working part time and kind of retrained myself as a teacher of self esteem, because what I discovered, working - one of the things I had to do as Women's Adviser was kind of work out the position of women in the Public Service and, I mean, it was really horrendous, because, again, you were dealing with an organisation that had a very nineteenth century view of women. It had only just stopped sacking them on marriage in 1969. Women could only enter the clerical range, which was where all the careers were made, in 1974. Only two years before I got there. So it was easy to be successful because you just had to look at the rules and regulations. You just had to listen to women and they told you these most horrific stories, not just of the way they were sexually harassed - mind you, that concept wasn't around - but they were put down by their bosses, they came last everywhere. If they were making up a tea roster, the women got most of the work. If they were making up a roster for when you took your holidays the men all got first choice and the women got what was left.

I mean, everywhere you looked, in thousands of tiny things and in huge things, women were discriminated against and kept out of any ability to earn money. I mean, that's what it boiled down to. They didn't want women to earn money because they had this view in their heads that women were looked after financially by their husbands, and yet if you looked at the construct of marriage, I mean, women were certainly not looked after by their husbands. They were, legally, totally dependent upon them, and if those husbands wanted to treat them badly there was no recourse. And there still isn't actually, except divorce. There still is no legal recourse. There's no place you can go under the law and say, "He doesn't give me enough housekeeping, your Honour. He expects me to feed four kids on the smell of an oily rag and he's just bought a boat." You can't - there's nowhere you can actually go with that sort of help and I still think that's incredibly needed.

But anyway. So what happened was that in the Public Service we spent a lot of time - or I spent a lot of time listening to women, and we, a whole bunch of us, spent a lot of time working out how you could fix it. Right? The various things you could do. I mean, getting each of those through was a huge battle but you could do it. And then after two years or so, in my last year as Women's Adviser, I trotted about telling all these women that I'd talked to, "This is what you can do." You know. "You told me these stories. Now you can do these things, and we really would like you to take these opportunities up." And they said to me (whispering), "I don't have the confidence to apply." And at first I just went into the old school teacher routine, "Oh, you'll be right. You'll be right. And here's a class in this, and here's a book on that, and go off and do it." And it took me about six months actually to hear that, and to recognise what they were saying, you know. Do you know how awful that was? What we would call - what I would call now internalised sexism, but then

I didn't have a word for it, you know. All I could see was that the damage was infinitely greater than anybody had ever seen. It was just total. These women ended up being married because that was the best thing that could happen to them. You know, somebody loved them, somebody chose them, somebody said, "You're okay," and they had grown up with abuse - what we would now call abuse - all their lives. You know, these are mostly general staff, you know, office assistants and clerical staff and stuff like that.

So I decided that I'd become Women's Adviser as a heterosexual woman, and I was now a lesbian. I had no faith really in the kind of reforms that were able to be carried out because they weren't addressing the real question which was how these women felt about themselves. And while I met lots and lots of women who felt okay, well they were fine. They could go off and do it. But I became really interested in the women who couldn't. And there were just so much more of them than there were - and they were in the lower pecking orders, you know. They were at the bottom of every heap. You found this group of women who battled on bravely, day after day, putting a good face on terrible feelings of inadequacy and fear and self hatred that were just awful. So I stopped being Women's Advisor.