

Jennie George: A union pioneer for women

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"I ask you to close your eyes and think back 50 years because what happened in my time is quite different to the challenges facing women in Federation today..." said Jennie George, Federation's first woman General Secretary, in her video address to the audience of the Centenary Women's Conference. "I'd like to talk about some of my reflections, some of the highs and lows and some of the challenges that face the union in future years," she said, before good-humouredly warning her younger colleagues to look after their bones.

It was always anticipated the keynote speaker for the 40th Women's Conference in Federation's 100th Year would be Jennie George. That was until Jennie broke both her ankles, leaving her with very restricted mobility. So Federation had to find another way for her to be present with women delegates, at least in spirit.

Ms George was gracious in agreeing to be filmed for the event and she addressed conference on the big screen, sharing her regret at missing the momentous occasion that marked a very significant event in the history of our union.



Ms George described coming to Australia from Europe in 1950, under a United Nations program. "Everything I've achieved in my life owes a lot to the opportunities a good education system gave families such as ours. It was a land of opportunity. My parents wanted to escape the trauma of WWII and they looked to go to the furthest place on earth, which from Europe was Australia. We were very fortunate to arrive here."

As she reflected on her early years in migrant hostels, and then later in public housing, Ms George spoke of the hardship of living with her grandmother while her parents went in search of work. She began her schooling at Burwood Central School. "It was a great school," she said. "I didn't learn English until I went to school and, of course, there was no ESL teaching in those days. So public school has been the big constant in my life.

"I loved school, I loved the teachers and, being an only child, I loved mixing with other students. And I did well at school so that gave me a sense of achievement. The important thing was that my mother valued the importance of education. I'm quite typical of migrant families, where the parents face all the hardships and the next generation stands to benefit from those opportunities."

Ms George first became involved with the union at Bankstown Girls High School. As the union rep, she was involved in campaigns around staffing shortages. "I was very angry," she recalled. "The Year 12 English class was going through a series of changes with the teachers that were sent to the school. They'd come and go, and then someone else would come along and not stay very long. I thought this was really poor form because the students were due to sit for their exams at the end of the year but were missing out on a qualified teacher."

She reflected on her time studying to become a teacher, when she was active in the Trainee Teachers' Club and protested about the inadequacy of the scholarships. "Not only were we involved in organising at the university, but we also had regular trainee teacher meetings. We had our own journal and I had my own column called Jennie's Jottings. So I'd had a taste of union activity but it wasn't until I got involved with the Canterbury-Bankstown Association - which is still doing good deeds - that my interest in Federation grew."

Ms George describes herself as a political activist, feminist and unionist. "I was elected to the position of Assistant Correspondence and Interviewing Officer - it was really a Welfare Officer position - and at that time the union was different to what it is today."

She recalled that all the leading, influential positions were held by men, despite 57 per cent of the teaching profession being women. "That's why it's important to understand that the world I'm talking about was quite different to the one that faces people today," she said. "In my day, it wasn't just the importance of relying on women, but we needed male mentors to support and encourage women breaking through. I was very lucky that I came to the union at a time when Ivor Lancaster was Secretary." She credits his support and encouragement for enabling her to move into senior positions within the union.

In 1979, 10 years after she took her first teaching position at Bankstown Girls High School, Ms George was elected as the first female General Secretary of the NSW Teachers Federation.

"It took 61 years for the first woman to be elected as General Secretary of Federation and I was very honoured when council elected me," she said.

Bob Sharkey also contested the position, however she defeated him in the council ballot by a "sizeable majority". "It was 158 votes to 57, which demonstrated that people were prepared to accept women on their merit. I had experience as Welfare Officer, a union activist and as Ivor's right-hand person, so I felt I was on top of the issues important to the teaching profession and that I'd had good training and a good background from my years with Federation."

Despite being elected as the General Secretary, Ms George said she never saw herself as "being apart from other women". "I'm very anti queen-bee syndrome," she said. "I hate women who think they make it just because of their own innate talents. I've always seen myself as part of a broader collective and all my achievements have been with the support of women on behalf of women. We've all shared in successes along the way. Without Federation, I would never have achieved the other challenges and opportunities that came my way, particularly in the broader union movement and, finally, at the ACTU."

Ms George was Federation's General Secretary 1980 to 1982, but it was in 1975 when women began to leave their mark on Federation's agenda. "We'd made enormous strides in Federation. It was a great union in that regard - it was a militant union. We'd had our first statewide stoppage in 1968, but during my time as Secretary in the '70s, we were known for quite militant action around the issue of class sizes and staffing. Whenever we called stoppages, they were very well supported - we had a great record of being able to deliver industrially. People probably didn't realise at the time that there was still systemic discrimination against women in many unseen ways, including relating to the important issue of the rights of women returning to work at the end of their maternity leave period."

From 1986-1989, Ms George served as Federation's first female president. She became animated when describing her dealings with Education Minister Terry Metherell during the Greiner government. "Poor Mr Metherell," she said. "I don't think he'd ever coped dealing with women - particularly stroppy women. I remember our first delegation, deputation, to him and I had a list of issues I wanted to pursue on behalf of teachers as that's what I was paid to do. So I came along with my list of issues to discuss with him and he took offence. He said, 'This is not the opportunity for you to raise issues. This is my meeting. I've called it and we'll discuss what I want to discuss.' I said, 'Well, if that's your attitude, there's no point me coming to any more deputations if you're not willing for me and the representatives of the union to pursue issues we think are important.' So that was my first and last meeting with Mr Metherell."

The infamous former Education Minister is written into Federation history for provoking the biggest community protest the state had seen. "I think it out-matched the numbers we used to get along to mobilisations against the Vietnam War," Ms George said. "We planned a major rally on August 17, 1988 in the Domain, near Parliament House because we wanted politicians to see how serious we were."

Around 80,000 people showed up to send the government a very clear message. "I recall one sign being held

by a teacher that stood out very clearly: "Come back, Rodney, all is forgiven". So whatever difficulties we'd had with [previous Education Minister] Rodney Cavalier over the Teacher Efficiency Review, it was nothing compared to the terrible agenda of the Greiner government, led by Terry Metherell.

"It's something that'll always stay in my memory and something we can all be very proud of. We collectively worked to achieve such a big response on the day, and it showed that people understood the importance of defending public education. Of course, in subsequent decades we've gone on to continue the fight about fair funding; the Gonski changes; the disputes we've had over state aid; and the injustice of some of the funding at federal level. Campaigns still continue today."

Ms George encouraged her audience to recognise the progress women have made in the last 50 years. "My achievements have been the achievements of the women that fought battles with me," she said. "The fact I broke the glass ceiling, I didn't do it for me, I did it for all of us. It's been a fantastic journey. It's one I've shared with lots of good people.

"Your challenges in this era are going to be different to what mine were, but I want you to know you're helping build and maintain a fantastic union. It's always been a democratic, progressive, activist union - a union that cares about issues beyond working conditions and salary. Fighting for a better world and a better society has always been part of our brief, whether it was for Indigenous communities, the peace movement, or the Vietnam mobilisations, we've always been there when it mattered and when it counted."

Ms George concluded by saying she looks forward to following the outcomes of the union's centenary celebrations and expressed her desire for women to continue to be involved and active in making their mark in the next 100 years of Federation.