

Her Place : Know the past: shape the future Prof. Gillian Triggs 21 March @ CT

Congratulations to all those with the vision to establish Her Place as both a record of women's accomplishments and a place to think about the contributions we can continue to make in the future.

First, the past. We all stand on the shoulders of others. It is important that we recognize and honour the many women who have paved the way for careers like mine. They include those who have publicly challenged the submissive role history has assigned to women: trailblazing jurist Elizabeth Evatt; writers and activists Germaine Greer and Anne Summers; politicians Susan Ryan and Julia Gillard; trade unionist and now politician Ged Kearney; First Nations peoples' advocate Pat Anderson; former sex discrimination commissioner Elizabeth Broderick. Among these intelligent, feisty women, one who inspires me especially is Jessie Street, a remarkable and surprisingly modern woman I have admired since I first learned of her work as a law student at the University of Melbourne.

Born in India under the reign of Queen Victoria, Street studied at the University of Sydney and became a pioneer activist for equal rights. She joined the Labour Party in 1939 but failed to gain political office despite several attempts; she lost an election in Wentworth on preferences—perhaps if she were alive today, she too would have given the former member, Mr Turnbull, a run for his money. Despite these setbacks, Street had tenacity and a clarity of vision for an Australia she wanted to see thrive on principles of equality and justice. She was an advocate for many issues we care about today: equality for women, constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, world peace and disarmament.

I especially admire Street's internationalism. She believed that international democratic institutions with an equal vote for each sovereign nation could achieve world peace and justice for all. She supported US president Woodrow Wilson's efforts to create the League of Nations in 1919 and to establish a global rule of law with the grand vision to end war forever. Street also understood the power of working with women throughout the world. At the league's beautiful building on the banks of Lake Geneva in Switzerland, she lobbied for the right to divorce and to fair custody of children, equal pay and birth control. But as storm clouds gathered over Europe in the 1930s, it became clear that the vision of the Covenant of the League and international rules to prevent war had failed, with catastrophic consequences.

In 1945, as World War II drew to an end, the San Francisco Conference renewed attempts to regulate international conflict and create a new world order through the United Nations Charter. The John Curtin government appointed Street as the Australian delegation's sole woman. Although fifty countries took part in the conference, there were only a handful of women delegates. But with this small band of women, Street successfully lobbied for the charter to incorporate the principles of equality, opportunity, responsibility and reward for men and women, and the elimination of all discrimination based on sex. Two years later, as the freshly elected vice-president of the new United Nations Commission for the Status of Women, Street understood that the agreed international standards needed to be enforced in national laws.

In Australia, she championed the recognition and respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 1967, she played a valuable role in the successful referendum campaign to remove discrimination against Indigenous people in the Constitution. Indigenous rights activist Faith Bandler, a key figure in the campaign, spoke of Street's determination and vision, and her advice, in a late-night phone call in 1956, on getting help to change the Constitution: 'You'll need a petition with 100 000 signatures. We'd better start on it at once'.

Street, who died in 1970, would be disappointed to know that as a nation we have regressed from being a good international citizen – from Doc HV Evatt to the Rome statute for the international criminal court- to a diminished reputation even among our traditional allies, attracting criticism from the UN Human Rights Council for our asylum seeker policies, for the global highest levels of incarceration of indigenous Australians and for rising domestic violence and homelessness.

2019 One hundred years later and Jessie's aspirations for women have not been met.

The World Economic Forum researches gender equality across four indices globally: education, economic empowerment, political engagement and health.

- As an aging 1960's feminist I am especially disappointed that, while Australian women and girls are ranked no 1 globally for educational attainment, we are ranked number 39 generally against all other nations, slipping down the ranks 24 points since 2006 when we were ranked 15th. Australia is now ranked 103th for health, 46th for economic engagement and 49th for political engagement.
- We slipped yet again in the 2018 assessment because of the widening of the gender gap and the reversal of wage equality.
- These are distressing rankings made more urgent when it is understood that 1 woman a week is killed by her current or former partner and that intimate partner violence is the leading cause of illness, disability and death than any other factor for women 25-44.

The Global figures are mixed. The WEF reported a continuing average gender gap globally of 32% across the four indices. The largest gap lies in political empowerment at 77% which is reported to be widening globally. With respect to economic participation and opportunity the gap 42%, with labour force participation slightly in reverse. In stark contrast to these figures, major gains for women have been achieved in education, the gap being as low as a 4% and health at 5%.

Counter-intuitively, gender parity is improving for the developing world and slightly declining in Western countries.

Of particular concern is the extent to which women in the public arena are the subject of personal abuse and denigration by governments and by segments of the media. Whenever I speak about this issue, I have a fresh and disturbing example. Examples abound: of course

Julia Gillard, Christine Nixon; a few months ago it was the ignominious sacking of CEO of the ABC Michele Guthrie and the Alan Jones bullying of Louise Herron, CEO of the Opera House over advertising a horse race on the sails of the building.

I have of course had my own run-ins with the government of the day, attracting the ire of the Murdoch press, the shock jocks and commentators I now have over 40 cartoons of me :some funny, some quite vicious and some even flattering with thin ankles!... I look forward to describing them to my grandchildren.

My primary message for the future is that we should, each of us, stand up and speak up for the common law freedoms and human rights that have underpinned our relatively successful multicultural and democratic society; rights and freedoms that I believe have been gradually eroded over the last few years.

In conclusion, I have come to the view that we need a legislated Charter of rights at the Federal level in Australia, to build upon the leadership of Victoria in passing a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities over 10 years ago, and just voted for by the Parliament of Queensland.

We do not speak the language of human rights and need to infuse community expectations through a human rights lens.

While the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 is a vital foundational law in Australia, but we need to build a culture backed by more comprehensive human rights-based laws to give the courts the power to hold Government and the Parliament to account for inequality of pay, access to affordable child care and maternity leave and the maintenance of superannuation payments while on carers leave; the right of every person to affordable and safe housing. Such laws will help to address the inequality and, in turn, to give women greater power to stand up to bullying, harassment and sexual harassment.

I believe that Her Place will help us understand the contribution women have made and inspire us to continue to think independently with a healthy measure of scepticism to challenge power and conventional ideas and to explore how we can achieve a fairer and more just society in Australia.

Professor Emerita Gillian Triggs was the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission from 2012 -2017.

She is currently President of the Asian Development Bank Tribunal and a Vice Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne. She was recently appointed Chair of the United Nations Independent Expert Panel on Abuse of Office and Harassment in UNAIDS.

Gillian was Dean of the Faculty of Law and Challis Professor of International Law at the University of Sydney from 2007-12 and Director of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law from 2005-07.

Gillian graduated in Law from the University of Melbourne in 1968 and has combined an academic career with international commercial legal practice advising the Australian and other governments on legal and trade disputes.

Gillian is the author of many books and papers on international law, the most recent, "Speaking Up", was published by MUP in October 2018.