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Re-gendering labour: class and gender determinants of New South Wales electoral behaviour 1930–32

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Historians have neglected the impact of female enfranchisement on Australian electoral outcomes. This paper employs multivariate analysis to explore electoral behaviour in New South Wales during the Great Depression. It argues that women were less prone to support Labor than men, but that women in paid employment constituted a partial exception to this pattern. In 1932 the conservative parties significantly eroded Labor's working-class support. Part of this success was due to the ability of employers to coerce workers with the threat of dismissal. Female wage earners were particularly vulnerable to this coercion. Conservative electoral appeals recast masculinity in terms of family responsibility rather than class assertion. Conflict in the household economy possibly influenced women to vote against Labor due to its identification with the cause of male breadwinners. Overall female voting behaviour was more stable than that of men and this despite the high profile of issues that would have been expected particularly to influence female voters.

INTRODUCTION

After 1908, white men and women had equal electoral status in Australia. Historians have given little attention to the electoral impact of female enfranchisement. The analysis of “women and politics” has been interpreted to mean either a review of female parliamentary representation, or more recently the feminist impact on public policy (Lake 1999). However only a small minority of women voters were members of feminist organisations. In their unrepresentative character, feminist organisations were not unique, only a small minority of manual workers were Labor Party members and many were not even trade union members. The major form of political participation for most men and women was voting. The identities expressed in the act of voting were never just simple reflection of physical sex characteristics or economic position, or even a combination of these. Political identities, as much as those of gender and class, were subject to constant reconstruction. This paper examines the recasting of class and gender identities in New South Wales during
the early 1930s and their impact on electoral behaviour at the state elections of 1930 and 1932 and the Commonwealth election of 1931.

The years 1929 to 1932 were ones of unprecedented political upheaval in New South Wales. At the federal election of October 1929 and the state election a year later the Australian Labor Party (ALP) substantially outpolled the conservative coalition of the Nationalist and Country Party in New South Wales. The political balance rapidly reversed as the new federal and state Labor governments foundered in the face of the depression. During 1931, the Labor party split, due to disputes on economic policy between the state Labor government of Premier Jack Lang and the federal Labor government of J. H. Scullin. At the federal election of December 1931, there were two competing Labor parties in NSW: State or Lang Labor and Federal or Federal Labor. In New South Wales the coalition of the United Australia Party (UAP) (effectively the renamed Nationalists) and the Country Party routed the divided Labor forces. In May 1932 Lang's government was dismissed. The June 1932 state election was a landslide defeat for Lang. Most of those who had supported Scullin's party in 1931 probably rallied to Lang six months later as shown by the substantial increase in the Lang vote from 30.8 percent to 40.8 percent but a significant portion did not and their failure to do so ensured that Lang's defeat was a landslide.

Table 1: New South Wales elections 1929-32²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October 1929 Clth House of Representatives Election</th>
<th>October 1930 State Election</th>
<th>December 1931 Clth Senate Election</th>
<th>June 1932 State Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State (Lang) Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Party</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist &amp; United Australia Party/ Country Party Coalition</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Government & Politics Database: http://...tions.uwa.edu
Australian political historians have generally taken for granted the equation of "middle-class" with "anti-Labor," and have also argued that women were more prone to support the conservative parties. The first generation of Australian political historians tended to explain this behaviour in negative terms, as a product of the isolation of women and the middle-class from the real world of material production and wage labour. The recent revival of Australian political historiography has cast the experience of women and the middle-class in a more positive light, as a manifestation of their own active subjectivity (Turner 1978, 3; Crisp 1978, 143; Martin 1998, 116–26; Brett 1992; Hancock 2000, 89–118).

Popular history and memoir has often presented the Depression as a period of class polarisation. The downfall of Labor governments was attributed to the desertion of the "suburban" "swinging" "middle-class" voters who had voted Labor in 1929–30 (Baker 1982, 74; Waten 1971; McWilliams 1989, 18; Head 1978, 24; McCarthy 1974, 113). Contemporary Labor observers took a similar approach (Australian Worker, 4.2.1931, 3). The first historians of the Depression wrote before feminism entered the academy and gave little attention to the electoral significance of women. With the decline of political historiography and the turn towards social history, the issue was left unaddressed. The recent revival of Australian political history has neglected the interwar years and the analysis of voting behaviour.

An adequate explanation of the political upheavals of the Depression should go beyond highlighting the active subjectivity of "women" or the "middle-class." This paper adopts the approach of "anti-essentialist Marxists" such as Stephen Resnick, Richard Wolff and J. –K. Gibson–Graham. Resnick and Wolff argue that "society" is an over-determined totality of multiple processes, economic, political and cultural that all determine each other (Resnick & Wolff 1987, 19–25). The production of gender and class identities is never a simple reflection at the cultural level of other processes. This paper uses quantitative techniques to describe this process of over-determination in a particular historical context.

CAPITALIST AND DOMESTIC CLASS PROCESSES IN AUSTRALIA

Resnick and Wolff define class as a social process rather than a category so that an individual can be engaged in several different class processes. Economic class processes are about the production, appropriation and distribution of "surplus labour." This is defined as labour-time undertaken by a producer beyond the "necessary labour" required to produce their subsistence. They distinguish two class processes: "fundamental" class processes where the proceeds of surplus labour are appropriated from the direct producers and "subsumed" class processes in which this product is distributed to economic agents other than the immediate appropriator of surplus labour.
For this paper, I highlight two fundamental class processes and a subsumed one.

1. Capitalist class process: wageworkers produce commodities that embody more labour-time than that required producing their wages.

2. Domestic class processes: domestic workers (predominantly women) undertake greater labour-time on domestic work than they would if they were single.

3. Interest payments by capitalist enterprises. This is most significant for government enterprises where a large portion of the surplus value produced by workers is paid over as interest on public bonds. A significant portion of the male manual workers and union members are in this sector. Lang’s policies of debt repudiation intervened in this class process.

The production of political and cultural class meanings is related to economic class processes but cannot be reduced to the economy. The relation between economic class and political behaviour becomes “something to be theorised rather than assumed” (Resnick & Wolff 1987, 115; Resnick, Wolff & Gibson, 4, 9; Gibson–Graham 1996, 63–69).

In the 1930s, most female wage earners were young and unmarried, although many were domestic labourers in their parents’ household. In 1933, 54.6 percent of female wage earners were under 25, compared to 17.0 percent of male wage earners (Commonwealth Bureau of Census & Statistics 1936, 1663, 1665). Most male wage earners participated in at least two class processes, employers appropriated their surplus labour at the workplace but in the household, they appropriated the surplus labour of female domestic workers. In 1931, around 45 percent of Australian gross community income and 20 percent of gross community capital formation was accounted for by household services (Snooks 1994, 167, 177). Married women were the major contributors to this production, particularly once the burden of child-rearing is taken into account. In 1933, there were 543,768 married women in New South Wales. The 1933 census recorded that the total of married men and women in the state was 1,022,492. The census distinguished between employers, employees and the self-employed, but it defined 95.72 percent of married women as outside these categories (Commonwealth Bureau of Census & Statistics 1936, 1663–66). As Desley Deacon has shown this classification of female labour originated in the concern of some nineteenth-century statisticians to classify women’s labour as non-productive (Deacon 1989, 133–45). Most of these 488,871 married women undertook surplus domestic labour to the benefit of their husbands. If these women were the spouses of manual workers labourism defined their interests as identical to that of their husbands. Despite this appeal labour parties have usually found that working-class women have been less likely to support them than working-class men (Hart 1989, 37–38; Mann 1995, 44–45).

In the 1930s, women’s employment shifted towards the paid economy.
Across Australia participation rates by women in the paid workforce rose from 1921 to 1933 (Keating 1973, 326). Michael Keating estimates that from 1928–29 to 1932–33 the number of females in the paid workforce rose 11.9 percent but for males only 1.9 percent. The only section of the workforce where female employment increased in absolute numbers over the worst of the Depression was domestic service: female employment in this sector rose 13.2 percent from 1928–29 to 1932–33. But female employment in manufacturing, after an initial slump, began a rapid recovery from early 1931, encouraged by higher tariffs, lower wages and currency devaluation. Female manufacturing employment increased in 1931–32 when that of men was still in decline. From 1930–31 to 1932–33 male manufacturing employment rose 5.6 percent and that for women rose 17.6 percent (Keating 1973, 178, 299, 326, 343–44). In the early 1930s women had electoral equality with men when the impact of public policy on the viability of employers was a central issue of political debate. In New South Wales this debate was at its most intense. Capitalist employers complained that Labor’s policies threatened their viability, but in addition Labor’s employment policies for regulation of domestic service employment brought this significant sector of the economy to the forefront of public debate. At the same time male manual workers, the core of Labor electoral support, feared the competition of lower-paid women in the labour market.

**A MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF DEPRESSION-ERA ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR**

No surveys of voter behaviour were conducted before the 1940s. What we do have are voting statistics by geographical areas (electorates and subdivisions within them) and information on the social composition of local government areas from the May 1933 Commonwealth census. The only means to examine electoral behaviour by different social groups are the statistical techniques known as “ecological regression.” These techniques vary in complexity but they all construct equations that reveal the relationship between the social characteristics of an area and the aggregate electoral behaviour of the electors in that area. The strength of the relationship between the proportion of voters of a particular social group in an electorate and the vote for a particular political party by all the voters in that electorate is then taken as evidence about how that particular social group voted. In 1930 the Labor vote on average in rural electorates increased by 6 percent for every 10 percent increase in the portion of manual workers in an electorate. This does not mean that we can assume without question that manual workers strongly supported the Labor party. It is a well-established proposition that we cannot assume that just because there is an aggregate relationship between the social composition of an electorate and its voting behaviour that this relationship holds at the level of individuals. To assume this is known as the “ecological fallacy.” However
this should not lead us to reject the use of ecological inference completely. Rather results should be considered in the light of other evidence and the conclusions of theory. To return to the case of manual workers, we know that survey evidence from the 1940s showed high levels of Labor support among manual workers and that there is qualitative evidence from the 1930s of high levels of class-consciousness among manual workers. It is therefore reasonable to take the results of the regression as evidence for high levels of Labor support among manual workers.

Even before we encounter the ecological fallacy there are other problems with the application of ecological regression to Australian political history. One is that women electors are disproportionately enrolled in conservative middle-class suburbs. An analysis that only compares the Labor vote against the proportion of female voters is misleading. We should examine how a range of variables, not just the portion of female electors, influences the Labor vote. In the United States, census and electoral data are both reported for counties. In Australia this is not the case. Electoral statistics record total female voters by electorate but census data is reported by local government areas that do not coincide with electoral divisions. The construction of a database for regression analysis requires a massive recategorisation of data. A failure to undertake this task renders largely valueless the historical analysis of the “gender gap” in electoral behaviour undertaken by Christian Leithner (Leithner 1997). His work correlates voting behaviour by electorate only against the portion of female voters in each electorate. Not surprisingly his analysis identifies large and variable gender gaps in electoral behaviour. This paper is based on a multivariate regression of electoral behaviour in 1930–32 against the social data from the 1933 Commonwealth census. The two previous Australian exercises in such analysis employed regressed measures of gender, religion, ethnicity and occupational status against electoral returns for 1914–17 (Withers 1982; Thornton–Smith 1987). I used similar explanatory variables but I also included the portion of electors who were women wage earners. I included this variable because these electors were in an anomalous position: unlike most women their labour-power was purchased in the market rather than undertaken in the domestic economy. To my surprise the portion of electors who were women wage earners was strongly correlated with levels of Labor support in this period, except in urban-mining areas at the 1932 election.

Even once census data have been transferred to electoral divisions there are further problems with the employment of the 1933 census for ecological regression. Citizens enrolled to vote are only a portion of the population, even of the population over 21. I assumed that the electorate is identical with the population over 21. The census reported subjects by “grade of occupation”: employee, self-employed or employer and by industry but not by the combination of these categories. We know how many individuals were engaged in the finance industry in an area but except at the statewide level we
do not know how many were employees. Outside of the agricultural sector however the overwhelming majority of breadwinners were employees. The analytical problems with ecological regression and my methodology are discussed in more detail in my doctoral thesis (Robinson 2002). Given the limitations of the data and the elementary linear regression technique that I have employed it would be an exercise in spurious precision to propose precise estimates of the voting behaviour of particular groups. The regression tables are best interpreted as telling two distinct stories. One is that of general shifts across the electorate towards and away from Labor. The shifts in the constant term reveal this. So large was this shift that it is plausible that all of the social categories employed in my analysis swung strongly against Labor in 1932, but the changes in the coefficients for different groups from election to election suggest that different groups moved against Labor to different extents.

THE POLITICS OF FEMINISM: MATERNALISM, CIVIL RIGHTS AND SEXUAL DANGER

Interwar feminists appealed to women, not only as the objects of discrimination in all aspects of public life but also as a group that shared the characteristics of potential motherhood and vulnerability to male sexual aggression. Marilyn Lake highlights feminist campaigns for measures to defend women and mothers such as child endowment and widow’s pensions, what she calls the “maternalist welfare state.” Meredith Foley argues that many feminists identified political radicalism with male sexual aggression, exemplified in the reports of the “nationalisation” of women in Soviet Russia (Lake 1999, 12; Foley 1985, 58, 62–71). Little separated Labor and the conservative parties on the rights of women in public life. The strongest support for women’s civil rights came from centrist groups such as Hughes’ Australian Party or the citizens’ movements of 1931–32 (Robinson 1998a, 38).

On the issues of materialism and sexual danger left and right had conflicting appeals. In the interwar period the Labor party identified itself with social welfare. This was particularly the case in NSW where Lang’s 1925–27 government introduced child endowment and widows’ pensions. At the 1927 NSW state election Labor highlighted its record as the defender of women and children. The conservative parties pledged to retain Labor’s reforms and won the election. In 1930 their government abandoned this promise and tightened eligibility for child endowment and the widows’ pension. Labor condemned this about-face and campaigned strongly on the issue in the 1930 election (Cairns 1957, vi–vii, 258–62; Cosgrove 1996, 4–5, 40; Robinson 1998a, 4, 37–38).

Even in 1930 however Labor’s association with class conflict and industrial militancy on the part of a male workforce probably undercut its maternalist appeal. In part this was because class conflict evoked images of sexual danger but it was also because any social conflict challenged the mater-
nalist vision of social conflict as undesirable. In a capitalist economy where the legal system enforced workers’ separation from the means of production any challenge by workers was necessarily conflictual. Lake emphasises the “non-party” nature of interwar Australian feminism. But Louise Asher, currently an anti-Labor politician herself, has highlighted the fact that although Labor governments, with their support of social welfare and public education and their pacifist rhetoric, seemed closer to the policy preferences of feminist organisations, it remained the case that leading feminists were identified with the anti-Labor cause. As both Asher and Judith Brett have argued the feminist concept of non-party politics did not imply neutrality between conservatism and left radicalism (Asher 1980, 145–47; Brett 2001, 430). An analysis of the 1930 election suggests that feminist sympathy for the non-Labor cause echoed the views of women voters. Despite NSW Labor’s strong maternalist appeal to female voters there was still a strong negative correlation between the portion of women in an electorate and the Labor vote. This correlation remains after a multivariate analysis. This suggests that the tendency of women to vote against Labor was deeply entrenched and could resist even the high profile of issues that would be expected to undercut the anti-Labor appeal to women. It is even more striking when it is considered that in 1929–30 it was employers and conservative governments rather than workers who appeared as the aggressor in industrial relations.

ORGANISED FEMINISM AND LANG’S GOVERNMENT

In February 1931 Premier Jack Lang announced that his NSW state government would suspend payments on overseas loans. This policy inspired a storm of opposition that raged until Lang’s dismissal in May 1932. Leading feminists were active in opposition to Lang. Mildred Muscio, president of the National Council of Women, assisted in the organisation of one of the first protest meetings against the suspension of overseas interest payments. She declared that it was not a party but a national question (SMH, 17.2.1931, 9–10). Two years earlier, in a demonstration of Asher’s argument for policy congruence between Labor and feminist interests, Muscio had joined with Labor’s John Curtin to argue for child endowment against other members of a Commonwealth Royal Commission into the subject (Royal Commission on Child Endowment 1928). Millicent Preston Stanley, the first female MP in NSW, may have believed that women had a unique vocation to advocate measures of social welfare, but her Feminist Club said nothing about social welfare during the Depression and focused instead on the Communist threat (Lake 1999, 52. Feminist Club. Executive, 2.12.1930, 9.12.1930). The Feminist Club refused to congratulate Lang on the appointment of women to the Legislative Council in 1931 and although the United Associations of Women (UAW) did so there was substantial opposition within the organisation to such congratulation (Feminist Club. Executive, 1.12.1931; UAW. Executive,
26.11.1931). The UAW eschewed the overt partisanship of women's organisations to its right, such as the Australian Women's Guild of Empire, but it was willing to co-operate with the Guild on a meeting to support industrial peace (UAW. Executive, 5.11.1931). The major feminist intervention into electoral politics during Lang's government was the candidacy of feminist Margaret Simpson in the April 1931 Annandale by-election. Simpson upheld the maternalist cause in her support for public health improvements, particularly better milk quality, but she also condemned public debt repudiation. Her evocation of Queen Elizabeth and Joan of Arc evoked derision from a trade union cartoonist (Feminist Club. Executive, 20.4.1931; UAW. Executive, 23.4.1931, 14.5.1931; SMH, 14.4.1931, 8, 10; 15.4.1931, 13–14; 21.4.1931, 8; 22.4.1931; 12. 27.4.1931,10. LD, 15.4.1931, 7. Railway & Tramway Officers' Gazette, vol. 7, no. 5 (1932), 2).

The best explanation of the linkage between women's experience and anti-Labor politics is provided by Judith Brett. She argues that women generalised from their experience as household managers where they dealt with other family members as individuals working towards a common end, rather than as members of potentially opposed categories (Brett 1992, 51–59). This was a functional view of social division in which different social groups were considered to be mutually dependent on each other (Ossowski 1963, 58–68). Survey data suggests that women are more favourable to consensual models of decision-making than men (Sawer & Simms 1988, 25, 47). Muscio argued that political conflict was an obstacle to rational decision-making (Muscio 1929; SMH, 4.4.1931, 6). Social relations within white-collar workplaces had a quasi-familial aspect, salaries and conditions were often subject to arbitrary adjustment but relationships between supervisor and employer remained personal (Layman & Reekie 1987; Gunn 1995, 123–44; Blainey 1999, 201–06, 270–72). Leithner has argued that lower levels of Labor support among women reflect their lower levels of trade union membership, and that this lower membership is because women are disproportionately employed in smaller enterprises where the relation between workers and employers is less formalised, bureaucratic and adversarial (Leithner 1997).

This familial understanding of economic processes established a strong point of connection between feminism and the political right, but also opened points of divergence. Feminists usually blamed workers for class conflict, but sometimes hinted at a critique of employer actions. Lucy Gullet, later feminist independent candidate at the 1932 election, called for an end to the conflict between capital and labour (SMH, 18.9.1931, 10). The president of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, called for an end to the war between anarchism and greed (SMH, 12.9.1931, 5). Even the president of the far-right Australian Women's Guild of Empire believed the current economic system did not provide for "mutual inspiration and health" and supported profit sharing (SMH, 1.12.1931, 6). The NSW All for Australia League, which presented a centrist appeal between the extremes of Langism and reac-
tion, attracted substantial feminist interest (Robinson 2002, 211, 219–21). At the 1931 federal election Federal Labor in NSW appeared to voters as the centre party opposed to both conservatism and Langism. Unlike Lang Labor, it probably drew support evenly from men and women.

Analysis of the 1931 election suggests that women’s voting behaviour was less volatile than that of men. In the context of a heavy overall swing against Labor, the negative correlation between female voting and the overall Labor vote declined. This is despite the fact the image of Joseph Lyons, the non-political family man, together with his high-profile spouse Enid Lyons, might have been expected to be particularly attractive to women. This feminine image of the UAP contrasted with Labor rhetoric and imagery, which (particularly for Lang Labor) prioritised masculinity and strength and presented its opponents as effeminate. Joseph Lyons was the object of misogynist comminatory in the Labor press as subordinate to Enid (Socialisation Call, vol. 1, no. 3 (1.6.1931), 2. LD, 14.4.1931, 5. 16.4.1931, 4. 1.5.1931, 7. 2.7.1931, 1).

In the explanation of Lang’s landslide defeat in 1932 the most useful comparison is between the predictors of the total 1931 vote for both Labor factions and the 1932 vote for Lang Labor alone. The voters that made 1932 a landslide defeat for Lang were the one third of Federal Labor supporters in 1931 that did not rally to Lang in June 1932. These voters either supported the conservative coalition or supported Federal Labor whose preferences favoured the conservatives. In June 1932 state election Lang Labor seems to have held its relative ground among female voters in urban-mining areas but lost ground in the countryside. There were issues in 1932 that might have been expected to reduce the relative attractiveness of the non-Labor parties to women. In 1932 Lang Labor sought the maternalist ground. It presented itself as the defender of the home and highlighted the Lang government’s introduction of a moratorium on debts, and its record in child endowment and widows’ pensions. Lang Labor campaigners claimed that if elected the conservative parties would consign mothers’ unemployed sons and daughters to forced labour (Lang 1980, 191; NSW Election 1932, 68, 82, 85, 68. LD, 4.6.1932, 8). The state UAP lacked the distinctive non-party appeal that Lyons brought to the federal UAP. Many feminists had sympathised with the All for Australia League, but when a merger between the League and the Nationalists formed the state UAP in April 1932, former League members were marginalised. Many women members of the UAP, even some former Nationalists, were displeased with the marginalisation of the former League members (Robinson 2002, 231). No women contested preselection for the UAP. Stevens’ own appeal eschewed any feminist proposals and after the election the UAP journal commended women for having put their interests aside (Robinson 1998b, 40).

These were however, particular factors operating against Lang in 1932. Labor’s credibility on the maternalist welfare state was badly hampered
by the suspension of child endowment payments during the dispute with the federal government before Lang's dismissal (Lang 1970, 143–44, 152–53; Lang 1980, 191; NSW State Election, 82, 68. LD, 14.5.1932, 1. 4.6.1932, 8. SMH, 1.2.1932, 10, 7.5.1932, 13). The conservatives also highlighted their acceptance of the Lang government's debt moratorium about which they had previously been unenthusiastic (NSW State Election, 20). Labor had lost ground on welfare issues but it was attacked most strongly by the right as a threat to the sanctity of the home. Lang's government had introduced industrial relations legislation that extended arbitration coverage to domestic servants. Lang's critics presented this as a threat to the sanctity of the home. The image of trade union officials invading the home was a barely concealed evocation of sexual danger (SCICAB 1931, 24. NSW State Election, 22). In the early 1930s considerable press attention was given to the social position of Soviet women. Anti-communist campaigners argued the ease of Soviet divorce rendered women as the weaker sex victims of masculine whims (New Guard, vol. 1, no. 3 (1931), 7. SMH, 3.10.1931, 10. 15.12.1931, 8. 23.2.1932, 8). UAP campaign material against Lang in 1932 claimed that Bolshevism had destroyed the family and legalised "abhorrent practices" and that Lang Labor was committed to "Marxian" principles that would require mothers to surrender children to the state (NSW State Election, 3, 19).

The politics of emotional and sexual labour may have rendered women more resentful of male sexual and emotional demands and more hostile to Labor, the party of the male breadwinner. The early 1930s were a time of sexual tension and conflict within the domestic economy. Investment in household equipment per household more than halved from 1927 to 1932, and as a result married women experienced more fatigue and less leisure. Men did not undertake a fair share of domestic work. Many men reacted negatively to unemployment and the burden of emotional work fell heavily on women. Women had to negotiate the sexual demands of husbands and rates of pregnancy termination, particularly by married women, increased (SMH, 29.9.1930, 5. 4.10.1930, 7. Director-General of Public Health 1932, 31–32; McCalman 1998, 196–98; Maccarone 1981, 7, 12, 46–47; Lazarus 1981, 22; Potts 1987, 271; Snooks 1994, 57–60, 246; Grimshaw & Lack 1987, 198–200; Peter 1962, 137; Lowenstein 1981, 133–134).

The conservatives' campaign on the issue of sexual danger, combined with the experience of women, may have struck a chord with some female voters in 1932, particularly in the countryside where Lang was widely mistrusted as the voice of an aggressive urban radicalism. Nevertheless, the shift among female voters overall against Lang from 1930 to 1932 was probably less than among men. The elections of 1930–32 suggest that the determinants of the electoral divergence between men and women were deep-seated and not subject to alteration by issues that a merely qualitative analysis might suggest were significant, such as the maternalist welfare state issues of 1930 or Lyons' family centred appeal in 1931. Even the sexual danger campaign of
1932 had at most a slight effect. Women were mostly employed outside the paid economy, and Labor was the party of paid labour. Women had already rejected Labor before the dramas of 1931–32.

WOMEN AND PAID EMPLOYMENT

In the Depression female participation in the paid workforce increased. Except in urban-mining areas at the 1932 election the portion of electors who were women in paid employment is positively correlated with the Labor vote. Later survey data have shown that women in the paid workforce are more likely to support left parties (Aitkin 1982, 330). In the early 1930s feminists were concerned that young women in paid employment would be vulnerable to Communist appeals (SMH, 21.10.1931, 5; 7.11.1931, 13; 16.12.1931, 5).

The ALP was the party of labour in the paid economy. However, participation in paid employment does not automatically lead to workers concluding that they share a common class interest against their employers. As Michael Mann argues there are two alternative strategies to class mobilisation that workers can pursue: segmentalism where workers identify common interests with employers and sectionalism where workers identify not with the totality of wage earners but smaller groups defined by trade, or occupation (Mann 1993, 511). Segmentalist and sectional appeals undercut Labor’s appeal to workers. As the Depression worsened I shall argue workers, particularly women, came to privilege co-operation with their employers to keep their jobs rather than maintain wages. State employees however probably tended to support Labor as Lang’s government challenged the subsumed class process of public debt interest.

In the 1932 election campaign, employers and the conservative parties appealed to segmentalist loyalty. This campaign was most organised among manufacturing employers. They told their employees that NSW factories had closed due to Langism, and that industry would return after Lang’s defeat and that Lang’s re-election would endanger their employment (Robinson 1998b, 44–45; Lang 1970, 163–65; LD, 19.5.1932, 1. 20.5.1932, 1. 2.6.1932, 5. NSWP, vol. 133, 14–17, 51–53). The employers’ appeal recast masculinity and appealed to men as providers, who in their secret vote should consider the welfare of their family, rather the demands of unions to vote Labor. (Lake 1993, 14; The World, 10.6.1932, 5 (UAP advertisement). Thomas Mutch, a former Labor MP who had joined the UAP in opposition to Lang, argued that women were not irrational and emotional but were rational thinking electors who could defy their husbands’ blind loyalty to Labor (Mutch 1931?). In 1932 the Labor vote was cut back to its heartland, but it is noteworthy that the positive relationship between the portion of manual workers in an electorate and the Lang vote from 1930 to 1932 does not markedly increase. It does rise in rural areas, but in the urban-mining electorates where most manual workers were enrolled it is stable from 1930 to 1932 and the correlation falls from the
total Labor vote in 1931 to the Lang vote in 1932. Once the distinctive loyalty of miners to Labor is taken into account it is likely that non-mining manual workers were more likely to desert Lang in 1932 than non-manual workers.

In urban-mining areas Lang’s defeat in 1932 seems to have been associated with a distinctive move against Labor among women in paid employment. I believe that some of this swing resulted from the specific vulnerability of women to coercion by employers. The intensity and novelty of this coercion probably varied by industry sector.

Domestic servants were probably most subject to the influence of their employers, but the intensity of this influence may not have substantially increased in the early 1930s, whereas the campaign by manufacturing employers among their workers was a new innovation. Lang’s arbitration legislation was an appeal to domestic servants. The cause of their employers was represented in public by the proprietors of domestic service employment agencies who argued that domestic servants feared that wage regulation would cost them their jobs (SCICAB 1931, qq. 2789–2920). What domestics themselves thought is unknown. Drew Cottle’s account of domestic service in Woollahra 1928–34, based on interviews in the 1970s, claimed unconvincingly to discover radical distaste for the idle rich among his ageing interview subjects (Cottle 1984). More nuanced interviewers have found more ambiguity among their subjects (Pfeil 2001). A correspondent to Labor Daily claimed that as a domestic servant she was happy with her job and was concerned by advice from her mistress that Lang’s legislation would set a wage that would cost her her employment (LD, 10.3.31, 7). Questionable as this letter is, it is noteworthy that only two current or past domestic servants wrote to the government in support of the legislation, and only one was resident in New South Wales (Department of Labour & Industry, M. Boulton to Lang [June 1931]; K. Cobbald to Lang [April 1931]). A tentative conclusion is that domestic service did exercise a conservatising impact on employees but that this influence did not increase dramatically from its already high level in 1932. In rural areas domestic service was the major form of female paid employment. The persistence of the strong correlation between female employment and the Labor vote at elections for rural electorates bolsters the argument that domestic servants probably did not distinctively swing against Lang in 1932.

The pattern among non-manual female workers may have been similar. Employment in finance and commercial work probably did exercise a conservatising impact on young women from a working-class background and this concerned Labor women such as Kate Dwyer (LD, 25.1.1932, 7). However female employment in this sector fell markedly in the early 1930s. Commercial and financial employers did encourage workers to participate in anti-Labor campaigns (LD, 28.3.1931, 1; NSWPD, vol. 125, 2199–2200). However there does not seem to have been in 1932 a distinctive campaign by these employers against Lang. Indeed the small portion of white-collar workers who did support Lang in 1930 seem to have been distinctively loyal to
him in 1932 perhaps because their Labor allegiance reflected not economic interest but Catholicism. It was in manufacturing that the shift in workplace politics from 1930 to 1932 was most intense and this is likely to have had a particular impact on female employees. In the manufacturing sector female workers were younger on average than male workers, subject to a form of quasi-patriarchal authority in the workplace, and fearful of losing their jobs in a climate of male hostility. One Labor MP claimed that “girls were hysterical” at factories in his electorate after the manager’s election address. Many women workers were too young to vote but fears for their employment may have influenced their parents’ voting behaviour, as juveniles gave much of their income to their families (NSWPD, vol. 133, 15). Employers have often believed that young female workers will be compliant due to the dependence of families on their income (Cowie 1999, 118–20).

The power of employers over workers was bolstered in the case of women workers by particular reasons that may have made them particularly keen to maintain their employment. The collapse in male employment made many families dependent on the wages of female members. Nevertheless, other factors may have been operating. The domestic workplace environment was, as I have argued above, becoming particularly unpleasant for women to work in. In an analysis of the 1890s Susan Magarey suggests that the increased female participation in paid employment represented a “strike against marriage” by some women as they took advantage of new employment opportunities in manufacturing to secure an independent living. Some observers in the 1890s claimed that women took up factory work to escape housework (Magarey 1993, 97; Frances 1993, 23, 89). Something similar possibly occurred in the 1930s. The factory offered a women’s social space for young women. Social relations within a factory were less gendered than domestic labour, and in factories with their larger workforces women were less subject to the kind of direct control exercised in smaller white-collar workplaces (McDonald & McDonald 1998, 10. Trioli 1994, 93; Karskens 1992, 21–23, 28–29; Kingston 1975, 58–59, 96; Nolan 1992, 175–77). The gender gap between male and female pay was lowest in manufacturing. Female clerks were paid only slightly more than textile and clothing workers. With piecework some young women could come close to the pay levels of male tradesmen, and some even left clerical work for factory work (Labour Report 1932, p. 156. Tanner 1984, 14, 61). Women largely undertook emotional labour in this period, to an even greater extent than presently. A distinctive feature of emotional labour is that it expands to fill the time available (Fraad 2000, 71–74). Even if women did undertake a “double shift” of paid and unpaid labour, being outside the domestic environment for some of the day at least meant that less emotional labour was undertaken at home.

The increased relative participation of women in the paid economy during the early 1930s encouraged a negative reaction from many men, but also some women. Many voters, not just men, believed that women’s lower
wages meant that they secured employment at the expense of men. Women’s desire to maintain employment encouraged them to co-operate with employers against Labor radicalism that threatened the viability of their employers. Women workers also found that male workers sought to employ the state to defend their sectional interests against women (Frances 1993, 135–36). Labor policy supported equal pay for equal work (Australian Labor Party 1931, 10). In February 1931 Lang’s government introduced a major industrial relations reform bill to Parliament. The Bill enabled industrial tribunals to consider claims for equal pay and to determine whether persons of any sex should be excluded from any industry. It further provided that female wages should not be awarded as to result in women being employed in preference to males (NSWPD, vol. 125, 1761; SCICAB 1931, 26). The UAP argued equal pay provisions in the bill would evict women from the workforce (NSW State Election, 22). The Bill proposed to replace the current three member Industrial Commission by a single Commissioner. If the Bill had passed the government would have reappointed the current President of the Commission Albert Piddington. Both the government and feminists assumed that Piddington would increase the female state basic wage from 54 percent to 80 percent of the male basic wage (UAW Executive, 26.2.1931. NSWPD, vol. 125, 1762–63). Piddington had previously deprecated the tendency of young women to favour factory work over domestic service (Roe 1984, 216–17).

Lang Labor’s support of higher female wages was probably intended to reduce labour market competition for men from women (Frances 1993, 79, 91, 135–36). The Pastrycooks’ Union demanded equal pay to prevent the dismissal of men and their replacement by women (Department of Labour & Industry. E J. O’Grady to J. Cahill, 5.2.31). Feminists welcomed Labor’s moves towards equal pay (Department of Labour & Industry. E. Calridge (Secretary UAW) to Lang 5.3.31). Some feminists may have believed that equal pay would shift young working-class women out of factories and into domestic service, where they could fulfill their maternal role and be trained as future mothers (Ranald 1992, 276–77, 280–81; Foley 1985, 82, 92, 258). Some women in the UAP believed that equal pay would improve male employment (UAP. Women’s Co-ordinating Council. 1935, 8). Feminist advocates of equal pay admitted that some wage-earning women feared that equal pay would displace them from employment (Council of Action for Equal Pay 1937).

CONCLUSION

In 1931–32 the dominance of the economic base, in the sense of capitalist class relations, was secured by the democratic structure of the state, as voters privileged economic security in the sense of continued employment. Class relations were recast in a feminine and “middle-class” model. The first generation of Australian political historians presented women and the middle-
class as absence, recent historiography has rediscovered their own positive subjectivity, and this paper suggests that a further stage of analysis would be to deconstruct categories of class and gender (Southern 2000). Raelene Frances has argued that a focus on the labour process can illuminate not only patterns of workforce participation but also many aspects of social history (Frances 1993, 10). I have shown that electoral history can benefit from a focus on the labour process, both paid and unpaid.

NOTES

1. My thanks are due to the comments of anonymous referees on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank participants of the 2001 Interdisciplinary Gender Studies conference, at the University of Newcastle, and the 1997 Labour History conference, at the University of Western Australia, at which earlier versions of this research were presented.

2. Uncontested electorates slightly inflated the non-Labor vote in 1929 and the Lang Labor vote in 1932. I have used the Senate vote in 1931 because neither of the two Labor parties contested all electorates. There was no Senate election in 1929.

3. There was more to the nationalisation of women spectre than previously thought (Werth 1999, 103).

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