

CPM Reviews

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Identifier	Name / Position	Role
Mr Haggar:	Mr Clive Haggar, Researcher	Interviewer
Ms Corbett:	Ms Joan Corbett, Former Secretary	Interviewee

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Mr Haggar: It's the 26th November 2019 and I'm meeting with Joan Corbett. Joan was the General Secretary of the ACTTF following a period as Liaison Officer and eventually moved on to be the AEU Federal Women's Officer. Joan was a very early activist in the '70s, and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to her today.

So, Joan, if you wouldn't mind, perhaps we might start by outlining your original history as a teacher.

Ms Corbett: Alright, thanks Clive, a good place to start, but I'll try and keep this bit short because there's a lot to talk about. I'm really pleased to be a part of this project. I think it's a good thing to see what we can draw together from the knowledge of the past and learn from some history.

So, my story is I think, in lots of ways, a Canberra story. But I was born in Canada and didn't move to Canberra until I was six or seven, at which point I

was fortunate enough to be enrolled at Turner Primary School, along with my older sister. And we got a great public education at Turner Primary School and went on to Canberra High School. For me only briefly, as the family moved to Adelaide. My sister was at Canberra High for first four years of high school. We moved because our father had a job as an academic, first at ANU, which is what brought us from Canada to Australia (and our mother also worked as a researcher at ANU), but then they had two more children and dad won a better job at Flinders University. When the family moved to Adelaide that meant that mum had her hands full with two little ones and two teenage girls, and so her career was one of those interrupted careers, very much a story of her peer group of women. But she was always a role model for my sister and myself, and quite an advocate for women.

So public school here and I finished high school at Marion High, public school again, in South Australia. Very big school, very different, and interesting for me to see the contrast. Marion High had at that point some 1,500 kids in very much an industrial, working class area of Adelaide, right near the Chrysler factory. A lot of my mates and peers at school were from families with a non-English speaking background and lots of manufacturing workers in the scene.

Mr Haggart: **We're talking about 1970/1971 at this point?**

Ms Corbett: Not even – no, even older I'm afraid than that Clive. I finished at Marion High in 1969 and then came back to Canberra to go to ANU, as my sister had done before me. So, we both had friends and associations with Canberra that made us really keen to come back here. So my sister was studying economics and Japanese and I started studying maths which I was very keen on and did quite well with in the first year, but I then decided to shift more focus to the economics side and ended up with an economics degree.

However, then the – at that time, as almost always since, the system here was short of maths teachers and there were scholarships on offer to do one's Diploma of Education at what was then the CCAE. And so in 1975 I took up a scholarship to do my DipEd in maths teaching – secondary maths teaching, and that was fun.

Mr Haggar: **With the Commonwealth Teaching Service.**

Ms Corbett: With what was the Commonwealth Teaching Service, yeah, exactly. And when I was doing my DipEd year I got to do some practice teaching at the Woden Valley High School, and it was a great experience. I did a little in the social sciences area but mainly it was with maths. At that stage I had some great senior teachers, so I had the benefit when I did come to the union of understanding the importance of the mentoring role and prac teaching combination. And, yeah - I think it was something that worked quite well for a lot of us.

So when I finished my year of DipEd I went to teach and was placed back at Woden Valley for a year, taught there in maths, and can tell you hair raising stories that I will probably never forget of teaching Year 8 and 9 boys who had no interest in maths. Boys particularly, some pretty feral girls as well, but classrooms that required a firm hand and a no nonsense approach to getting on with the task and probably, again, good learning for me – I was only a few years older than these kids, to be fair, and to stand up and make sure we got the job done was probably one thing that stood me in good stead in the trade unions later.

Mr Haggar: **This was – this was of course under the Interim Authority – interim Schools Authority, and the New South Wales Department of Education?**

Ms Corbett: Absolutely, that's right. From the time they started in '76.

Mr Haggar: **That marks a significant transition in terms of employment for people from the New South Wales department – not lamented at all, to the Commonwealth.**

Ms Corbett: That's true. What was the first year of that? Earlier in the '70s, '80s?

Mr Haggar: **Well, you're looking at effectively '73, '74.**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, because the commonwealth scholarship that I took up for 1975 was a fairly new thing I think, because of – I mean, there may well have been similar scholarships but the fact that they were now recruiting for the

Commonwealth Teaching Service was probably to my advantage. Yeah, good stuff.

By the time I got to the end of my first year at Woden Valley High they were looking for a good cohort of teachers to take up the second year of the secondary college system. So the secondary colleges had kicked off with their Year 11 cohort in '76, which is when I was at Woden, but in '77 they needed to double staff and students, and I put my hand up and was very, very pleased to have then won a position at Hawker College.

Mr Haggart: **And had you been involved in – during '76 in curriculum development, that sort of thing?**

Ms Corbett: No. It was just that there was a pretty open approach and then they, I think, made the assessments on merit. And again, I may have been advantaged by the fact that they were short of maths teachers. I may also have been advantaged, though I don't know how much say the college senior teachers had. But Kevin Martin, who became my senior teacher at Hawker College had been my high school teacher of maths in Year 7 and knew, I think, from the people I'd done my prac. teaching with at Woden Valley High, that I was doing okay. So, he – if he had a say, I think would have ticked my name on a list. Anyway, however I got there, I'm thankful, and I hope it was a fair and reasonable process.

And that was really the start of my involvement as an activist and in curriculum development. Both are things I really look back on with a great deal of appreciation and pride. I mean, we learned a lot, we changed a lot, we did a lot in those years, and there were some very bright folks to get to know, and some very stubborn ones to get to work with.

Mr Haggart: **With the existing staff that was at Hawker in those early years, because you had – in Sandra Lambert you had somebody went on to run a government department, and other people went into consultancy and, you know, had a major impact in terms of curriculum. But yes, I get your point. Those early years at the colleges often had very, very able, committed people.**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, we had John Edmonds as our Principal at Hawker at the start – in fact all the time I was there, I think. And Lance Chapman was the deputy with the curriculum leadership role and showed a lot of guts and innovation in his approach to curriculum development, so some – yeah, we had some great leaders and some great senior teachers, and quite a lot of good, young classroom teachers who were pretty happy to pitch in and make things work differently and better.

Mr Haggart: **So, you're at Hawker College and you say developing an activist role there, you became in those terms a branch president because each workplace was a branch (rather than a subbranch) of the union in those early days. And also, too you started to involve yourself with women's networks, both across the system but also outside the system as well, from what I understand. Perhaps if you could talk a bit about that because, you know, with the start of the system we had males dominating the principalships, the administrative positions in what became the Schools Authority. We had them dominating the senior positions in the union. What drove you yourself in particular, but women generally, to start to organise to address what you saw as disadvantage and discrimination in terms of women's employment?**

Ms Corbett: Well it was partly – there was a groundswell of this kind of conversation happening amongst lots of professions and in lots of academic and other circles. There were bright women everywhere who were not getting the sort of jobs that we could all see they should be bringing in. So, it was going to happen whether it was us leading it, or it was another group.

And actually, I just was reminded as we were talking about others from that Hawker College period - Sandra Lambert was another one who was a classroom English teacher at that time.

Mr Haggart: **And became a departmental head.**

Ms Corbett: Became a departmental head in education and went on to do other very important roles in ACT government. She was just a good example from the women's cohort in that group of absolute star leaders, but it would have taken – if things had stayed as they were then, it would have taken an eon

for those people to get their chance, so I think it was that motivation of the late 70s. And we were reading about the women's movement, and very, very influentially for me, there was proposal that very well supported by Lance Chapman, Jenny Neary and others who were at Hawker, to run an interdisciplinary women's studies course as a tertiary accredited program. It had not been done elsewhere in Australia. And there was a good women's studies program at ANU. But it took from ground up a good couple of years with students involved also in the curriculum development exercise, it took a while for us to get this up.

And then by that time I had been elected to the school board as a staff representative. It turned out to be very convenient to be in that role because once we launched the women's studies program and had our first students on board suddenly there was this huge outcry from the community that we were, you know, doing appalling social engineering, bending little minds and trying to turn people into radical feminists all over the joint. And we had terrible, terrible readings on our booklist, things like Anne Summers' "Damned Whores and God's Police". Can you imagine that we were expecting Year 12 students to read this "nonsense"?

Well, the Women who Wanted to be Women (sic), supported by a largely catholic membership of vocal folks around Canberra certainly thought we shouldn't be doing anything like that. And so, there was not only a campaign to win approval for this worthy interdisciplinary academic program, but there was a campaign to win friends and influence the community. And we had to do that with the support of the school board to get there, and with the support of a lot of senior leaders around the system. So that was for me a really good lesson in politics, and certainly from that point on, I was going to be passionate about issues that were about sexism in education, about opportunities for students to have good choice in curriculum, and about equal opportunities all across the board. So there were two things happening, that argument, and then in the union and in the selection of positions of leadership in the service, struggles going on to move away from seniority and towards merit, or to – in any number of any other ways start to get a bit of focus on affirmative action for women. So, really looking back, it was slow but important progress.

Mr Haggart: So, in '81 you get to the point where you're appointed as an organiser or liaison officer as they were called then, first female liaison officer in the union. And it was appointed, it wasn't from an elected position, interview panel and so on. And you move into the office as a full time liaison officer where your responsibilities largely were communicating union policy to the membership, school based meetings etc, and doing an awful lot of welfare work as well on behalf of members. So, you're in a situation of doing that and then very quickly you stand for an elected position, honorary, as deputy president.

Ms Corbett: I did – yeah, I did do that, and I didn't see that there was any problem with that. I think there were a few critics who thought you shouldn't try and combine those, probably including the other liaison officer, but I worked really well with him. And it was fine with Keith Lawler, who was president, he was quite happy to have me as deputy. And the role of deputy was a step for me that was probably a very useful one, and it certainly was great learning, though it wasn't as influential as it might sound, really. It was the alternate to chair meetings if Keith could not be there, and that didn't come up a lot, but it was a role on the executive and it meant I was sitting at the executive table as well as at the council.

Mr Haggart: And had a vote on the executive.

Ms Corbett: And had a vote on the executive, yeah, yeah.

Mr Haggart: So you're in that situation and building a profile both in terms of your school based meetings and on council as the deputy president. In terms of the sorts of issues that were coming up in those early years, one of the most significant of course was the end of wage indexation and a transition period and we find ourselves waiting for a salary offer from the Public Service Commission in '81, an offer that doesn't come. And at the beginning of '82 you take – or the union takes industrial action. Not a common thing so much, particularly on salaries, the first teachers strike in Australia was 1968 in New South Wales. But that dispute with the commonwealth government through the Public Service Board winds up with some 2,800 members being suspended from duty.

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Ms Corbett: Indeed.

Mr Haggar: And, you know, given that you had both those roles at the time as – I'm very interested in your perspectives. I know it's a long time ago, but what it was like to be in the absolute thick of situation where your membership gets suspended, gets locked out of work by the commonwealth government under Malcolm Fraser.

Ms Corbett: Yeah, yeah. Oh, look it was heady stuff and scary stuff. You know, we were really, really determined that we really – we had to win, we had to get better than just an end to this drama, we had to get that wage increase that made it acceptable, and we had to break through the stupid legislation that had come in that entitled them to stand down a whole group of employees under commonwealth employment who had taken industrial action. It didn't – I mean, the legislation was so wide they might have applied it without even strike action, for example doing stop work meetings. . So, the CEEP legislation was an ugly thing and there were many, many other unions watching what happened to us because they were hoping that some leverage underneath that dreadful rock would – would be achieved.

Mr Haggar: Because you were faced with a situation where some 400 members – because we were undertaking rolling stoppages, 400 members were suspended first as the group in part of Belconnen undertaking a rotational stopwork and then everyone else made a conscious decision the next day to go on strike when it was called, and get suspended.

Ms Corbett: That's right, that's right, yep. And that was – yeah, that – yeah it did. My heart rate's just gone up a couple of jumps thinking about that. And we were really worried for those members who we thought might well be out of pocket for months, you know. It could have been for some folks a pretty dire situation in their personal lives, and it certainly put stress on relationships within schools and all of that stuff. It – so it was – it was high stakes.

But yeah, the union voted, the union voted we cannot let these 400 people be the story. This is the absolute moment when there has to be solidarity around this, and that's the only thing that's going to break the back of the deadlock that we were in. So, we did it and there were those gatherings in

Commonwealth Park and lots of media coverage. And I remember Bill Leslie's role, because Bill was able to come to Canberra in support because he was then with the ATF (forerunner to the AEU).

Mr Haggar: **And Bill of course at the time was the ATF, Australian Teachers Federation, secretary, from memory, or assistant secretary?**

Ms Corbett: No, I think – I think he had the international officer role, but he was available to come and be a voice for the national body. And he was also by then quite an important mentor to me, and to Cathy. He'd worked with Keith Lawler and so he knew the ACT Federation history – but he also knew the national significance of this strike and campaign, and he helped us a great deal. Not only did he come with us to a couple of key meetings, if I'm recalling it correctly, but he certainly was great on the "how to handle media" side, and we had to do that really, really well. And we had to throw some money at it that we wouldn't normally throw at things like full page ads in the *Canberra Times* and so on, but Bill was right there saying, you know, hit them now, hit them hard, this is your message, and we would toss that around and figure out what the best thing to do was.

Mr Haggar: **And of course, you were in a situation when the federal government had also cut off your income through cancellation of deductions from members' salary.**

Ms Corbett: That's true, yeah. So, the union was going to lose its regular deductions as well, yep. And of course, all the union officials were also putting our pay into the campaign for that period, we weren't going to draw salary while everyone else was stood down. So, there were a lot of other organisational issues in the background running along, yeah.

Mr Haggar: **And ultimately of course you had the intervention of the Industrial Relations Commission in the form of Judith Cohen who wound up as deputy president of the commission but she was the first female commissioner. And her intervention, with powers that don't exist now under the Fair Work Commission, I think was recognised as vital to actually getting a settlement and allowing people to return to work with an acceptable pay increase.**

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Ms Corbett: Uh hmm, yeah, yeah. I'm glad you reminded me of her role, I hadn't thought about that for moons. But yes, we were probably fortunate there. But it was a big win. I think it was a great moment in the history of the union in Canberra because it was such a public and obvious demonstration of the importance of solidarity.

Mr Haggar: And the *CEEP Act* itself was never used again.

Ms Corbett: That's right, indeed. Did they eventually repeal it?

Mr Haggar: Yes, it was repealed subsequently.

Ms Corbett: It was repealed, but – subsequently – by that government, or later – or after they lost?

Mr Haggar: No, I think it was after they lost the election.

Ms Corbett: The next government took it out. I think that's right, yeah.

Mr Haggar: I think what was demonstrated at the time of significance was that if you stuck together the *CEEP Act* was unworkable. The thing of course is that people in those days would have had in mind the SEQEB dispute in Queensland where Bjelke-Petersen sacked the electrical workforce, and the numbers involved weren't dissimilar. He sacked something in the range of 2,000 workers and then cancelled their superannuation.

Ms Corbett: Mm, yeah.

Mr Haggar: It was a different story.

Ms Corbett: Yeah, yeah.

Mr Haggar: But, okay, so you're in a situation still at that point as an organiser, but then become secretary with the election of Cathy Robertson as president, and Keith Lawler, who'd been president for some eight years, becomes deputy president. And, yes, that's sort of a watershed in terms of Keith being only the second full time president that we had, and he'd worked for much of the time with Peter O'Connor, the first secretary. But the youth of the people leading the union at that time

was quite extraordinary. I think Keith, when he became president, was 33. Cathy was around the same age. Peter O'Connor was 26 when he became secretary. So, you became secretary at...?

Ms Corbett: I guess I was 31 or 32, was I? Yeah, so we're talking '83, '83 I was 31.

Mr Haggar: 31. So you and Cathy take on the leadership roles. There's a contested election with numerous candidates for both positions, but I think from memory fairly substantial wins on both your parts.

Ms Corbett: Yeah.

Mr Haggar: And you move quite rapidly to change not simply policy direction, but also to the administrative operations of the union as well. And I might jog your memory there in terms of computerisation in the office.

Ms Corbett: Oh right, yes, of course we did, yeah. Function of the newspaper and membership stuff, all of that stuff, yeah, that's right, yep.

Mr Haggar: But at the same time you're lifting the profile of women's issues in the workplace.

Ms Corbett: Yep, yep.

Mr Haggar: So, can you talk to me a bit about that element?

Ms Corbett: Okay. Well, there were a number of industrial issues that were really important, including winning awards for part time work, and talking up child care in or near the workplace and the need for good child care generally in the community, but also doing something about child care for women – unionists and women attending – whether council meetings, annual conferences, whatever. So, there were those sorts of things. There were all kinds of administrative issues right down to changing the language in our constitution to – do you remember this one?

Mr Haggar: Yes, I do.

Ms Corbett: People almost ripped their hair out at the tediousness of this, and yet they accepted that it was consistent with other things that we were saying that we should change, all of the language, and we had a long and silly debate, I

think, looking back, on whether we should put into the constitution he/she, or she/he, or whether we should alternate them. And I think we ended up with she/he, which is kind of – seemed almost trivial, it wasn't the biggest issue we were on about, believe me, but it was in a way an indicator of the times that we needed to shift our culture, get our act together, and live what we wanted to see more broadly applied. So, we wanted to see equal opportunity more generally. Inside we wanted to create better working conditions for the staff of the union. We wanted to make sure there were...

Mr Haggar: **From memory among the things that you did was to make the union staff permanent, the administrative staff who were mostly female. You provided them with superannuation.**

Ms Corbett: Superannuation for staff, yep.

Mr Haggar: **Which was almost unheard of for administrative workers outside of the public service at the time. And through changing that technology in the office, supported their upskilling to computing systems rather than the old stenographers.**

Ms Corbett: Yep, and we did – I have to admit, drag some of them kicking and screaming a little, but you know, we heard them out and we brought them with us and in the end, yes, I'm sure, not only the union benefited but they did in terms of personal skills and their job satisfaction.

Mr Haggar: **Well, it's interesting that at least three of them went on to work for the union for some 30 years.**

Ms Corbett: A long time, exactly.

Mr Haggar: **And being recognised for not simply the longevity of their service, but also for the very substantial upskilling that they undertook, going from a card based membership system to fully online computerised system producing – the Teacher's Journal that had once been produced in black and white on offset printers to a full blown colour journal, and you know, it's – these were the same people.**

Ms Corbett: Yep, the same people, yep. And eventually they also needed to come to grips, as many organisations did, with outsourcing some functions that they'd

always managed internally just because, you know, a payroll deduction system certainly this and that, didn't make sense for us to build our own when there were ways to do that – commercial solutions to that.

Mr Haggar: **Now one of the most contentious policy issues of the time was the issue of abortion. And, you know, you've mentioned some other specific working conditions such as childcare and permanent part time work that you achieved. But abortion was seen very much as a industrial condition affecting women's opportunities to work because they needed the full gamut of opportunities to control...**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, women's right to control their own fertility was the – certainly the thing that made it an issue that crossed over between social and human rights and into workforce – into the workforce context to a degree. It was a tough one because people had such strong views about it.

Mr Haggar: **And I've had a look at some of the correspondence of the time, letters, people focusing on their religious views etc, and very difficult in the end to get the policy through, which you did. But it was never contentious after that.**

Ms Corbett: No. And the same was happening more broadly in other unions of course, but also in – in the wider community and in the law. So in a way I think that even though people – the people who most passionately opposed us having anything to do with this issue, probably still regretted it, but there was so much else in the general shift in community attitudes to the question of women's rights to control their fertility, that they kind of faded into the background and we were – we were not seen as being such trailblazers on that at all. I think our timing was helpful to us in that.

We were seen more as trailblazers on the rights of gay and lesbian teachers, and on indeed the whole – the issue of gay and lesbian rights in schooling as well, students as well as teachers. But we started our public discussion of that by taking on the issue of gay and lesbian teacher rights, and we put a major policy together for the ATF to adopt, which was – yeah, which was another thing of which I'm really proud. In the end – at the annual conference at the ATF it was Bill Leslie who moved the policy and I seconded it. Bill was

gay and you know, proud but had been very, very mindful of not being very public about his sexuality through most of his career teaching and certainly for the majority of the time he worked in the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I mean, folks who knew him knew, but it wasn't something that there was any discussion of, it was – it was a closet thing for so many, but Bill moved this policy and I was seconding it. A proud moment.

And the women's caucus – because by then had a regular women's caucus at the ATF, which was quite an important voice. The women's caucus was well behind this and we'd done a lot of lobbying and a lot of talking to people before we took it into what was always quite a public domain when you have the annual conference of the national body. So, you couldn't let it – you know, it wasn't going to fail. There was no way we were going to have a significant voice voting against this by the time we got it there, and indeed we didn't.

Mr Haggar: **But interestingly enough, I mean, you had the opportunity subsequently to work for the ATF AEU and to represent the organisation on the ACTU conference. And you had a – yet another struggle at that national level for those sorts of policies.**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, there was – yeah, there were some campaigns that I still feel I was at a long arm's length from in that context, but they were very important campaigns. We had Jenny George in the executive of the ACTU in 1983, I think it was, probably '83 or '84. Jenny – first woman, I mean, for the ACTU executive, and replacing Keith Lawler, and still the only white-collar union voice in that room. Seems like we should have had them way before then, but we didn't.

Mr Haggar: **Of course Jenny then goes on to be president of the ACTU.**

Ms Corbett: Goes on to be the president of the ACTU for many years, yep.

Mr Haggar: **In the meantime also becomes president of the New South Wales Teachers Federation under the Greiner- Metherall years.**

Ms Corbett: Yep. And then following Jenny George, Sharan Burrows also as...

Mr Haggar: **President of the union and....**

Ms Corbett: President of the ACTU after having worked in New South Wales TF and she's gone on to an international role in the union movement where she still appears.

Mr Haggar: And a very successful period as a new president.

Ms Corbett: Yes, that's right. So, things were sort of, you know, things were moving all around. And some things I feel we were credibly in the lead on, but a lot of it we were really just riding a wave that needed to be – that needed to be ridden on those issues. And it was an important time. Just saying, there was a lot of change of culture and I think it was important for public education as a whole that we were doing these things. And the fact that the union was leading on these things was a source of pride to us but also an indication to the community that teachers cared about these things, you know. We weren't just going to let these things sort themselves out as policy positions of education departments, they were going to be seen as issues on which teachers, through the union, wished to be in national advocacy.

Mr Haggar: More direct issues, of course you were the senior officer when the Schools Authority as it then was, determined that there would be a period of six months to allow women to have the opportunity to undertake short term higher duties positions. And, you know, at that time there were no female secondary principals, there were no SES officers who were female within the authority. Yes, seems extraordinary today that we were in that situation. Can you remember the issues that people were facing in terms of those structural and cultural blocks for women's advancement within the system? I mean, salaries was an interesting one because of course primary parity of, you know, salaries at promotions level was a big issue for members in the early years.

Ms Corbett: Yeah. Yeah, what comes immediately to my mind is the strength and capacity of some of the women inside the bureaucracy as well as the women in the union and in teachers leadership groups, and there really were some brilliant people who were getting angry and organising, you know, "don't – don't stay angry, get organised". And so, there were a lot of ways in which pressure was being brought to bear to even up the – even up the story, and

certainly to break through some of the barriers. And, yeah, Sue Upton comes to mind, and others who worked inside – both on the curriculum, on the employment and promotion front. Yeah, there was a lot to be done, and a lot of conversations that bordered on the robust debate front, if not the yelling matches.

Mr Haggart: **Certainly, we faced special council meetings and conference debates and the like at the time, but as history has demonstrated that there were clearly both structural and cultural barriers to women advancing.**

Ms Corbett: Yep.

Mr Haggart: **And we're not that many years past, for example, the marriage bar where women – married women had to resign, they come back as temporary or casuals once they – they were married. You were in a situation in the early '70s still where women were paid less at specific salary levels for example, the commonwealth public service, simply on the basis of gender, not on the work that they were doing.**

Ms Corbett: Yep, that's true, yep. And I guess it was to – it was a good thing that Susan Ryan had the gig she had as education minister at around the time, in the Hawke government. Because of course Susan Ryan was always an advocate for equal opportunities, and very articulate about it, and she was quite prepared to crash through some things, and needed to crash through them internally in the Labor party as well as in the community, but she had guts and determination on that front.

Mr Haggart: **Which I think Peter Wilenski as Public Service Commissioner had a – a significant role to play at that time.**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, yes, he did, that's true.

Mr Haggart: **In the broader public service, but also within our own Schools Authority bureaucracy.**

Ms Corbett: Yeah, good point. Yeah. Interesting.

Mr Haggart: **So in terms of those early years, Indigenous policy was an important element for the union as well although the irony was I think we were**

represented in the early '80s by Ian Stewart who was down at Jervis Bay as a principal of the primary school down there. And of course, not Indigenous himself but it was an indication of our paucity in terms of Indigenous members that we couldn't find an Indigenous representative. That of course changed very substantially in subsequent years.

Ms Corbett: Yeah, true. And you're right, it was really important work. We had our own Aboriginal Education Committee of the union and they were active, but they were also very much connected to the Aboriginal Education Committee of the national union. And we had for some of that time the national body (the ATF) was still in Canberra and Margo Weir was the Aboriginal education officer for the national office, was a well-known face around town. And she was, in a way, a very powerful advocate. She was – she was quite an interesting character and when I got to work with her closely, I was often surprised by her story. But then when I went to work in the AEU, I was lucky to work with Pat Fowell – Pat Anderson as she is now. Fowell, was her married name that she was using at that time. We did some really important work around Aboriginal education.

In fact, we, at the 1988 – in the bicentennial year, we made our women's conference opportunity into an Aboriginal education conference, peopled entirely by women sitting in a camp ground in Alice Springs...

Mr Haggart: Yes, I remember that conference.

Ms Corbett: ...and we – and we made a communique coming out of that, which in fact was the bones of the first Aboriginal education policy adopted by the then Labor government with the support of key ministers. And after the conference we took a delegation to meet with Ministers. We had hoped, the education minister who didn't front, but – sorry, yeas, that's right, because that was Dawkins, Susan Ryan was not in that role at that point. But Margaret Reynolds (Minister for Women) came and various other people came and we presented this communique.

There was another bunch of months, probably nearly 2 years of work that Pat Anderson then led to get that policy into shape. But it really did start by a

solid conversation amongst activist women with our Indigenous partners, some of whom had not had any sort of involvement with a political discussion like that before, but who came because they took us as being in good faith and wanting to hear from their own experience. It was good – good to be involved with that.

Mr Haggar: **In the '80s too, of course it was a period of high levels of international disquiet, conflict, and there was a significant peace and disarmament movement that developed within the union movement. We had our own little committee as well. Can you just talk, if you can, a little bit about that and who was involved?**

Ms Corbett: Well, Janet Hunt comes to mind straight away. There was a lot going on around those issues and I'm not remembering as clearly as I have on some of those other issues, what happened in terms of sequences of debates and resolutions and so on. But I know a lot of us were active in the broader peace movement and we were taking stands on – in public rallies and so on, around those issues.

Mr Haggar: **This was a tradition that was continued right through, at the national level for example, the union's opposition to the first Gulf War, second Gulf War.**

Ms Corbett: True, yeah. Bill Leslie was very connected to not only international discussions like that, but also from his own experience, some of the middle east issues – he'd worked in Haifa with Palestinian kids, primary school kids, for a number of years and so he paid attention to a lot of conflicts there. And oh wow, yeah, the Pacific Islander issues that he brought to us as well. But, yeah, generally the whole peace movement and its causes were a part of what we put effort into at both the national level and occasionally at the ACT level. The ACT Labour Council was not bad on those debates either. It – it could have spent its time entirely on resolving industrial and local disputes and staying on that kind of local government level of issues, but it didn't. It chose to have a voice on quite a lot of issues around peace.

Mr Haggar: **Certainly, in terms of long term secretary of the Labour Council - that was Charles McDonald. President for a number of those years. Peter**

O’Dea who of course was secretary of the BLF and people would know about the contentious history there. I was just thinking too in terms of another issue that – within this context that we can recognise significant union involvement was East Timor and the campaign that we participated in to support the East Timorese in terms of their independence.

Just getting back for a moment to local issues, you remember our concerns about the support for privatisation of education, and there were a couple of obvious examples while you were an organiser, which was the picket line that existed outside Wanniasa High School when there was an independent Christian school being put into that public building which was not yet available to public school students. And the third grammar school, which the third grammar school of course became Radford College but there was a Labour Council picket involving the union there. At the same time, because of funding constraints and pressure on smaller schools we were seeing the threatened closure of places like Watson High School.

Ms Corbett:

And Belconnen High School, for a while they were talking about that, yep. Yeah, that was – yeah, it – I can still get angry thinking about the huge advantages that were given to the third grammar school. I mean, roads were rerouted, and a huge tract of prime land was handed over holus bolus and meanwhile there were these discussions about how unsustainable it was to run the local high schools. People were so crabby and the Labour Council was prepared to run that picket line but only if we, as the ACT TF, took the lead on organising the picket. It was a good challenge for us, so we did it and we did delay earth moving because transport workers were willing to support us by not crossing the line – and we got a lot of publicity about it and we did delay the start of the build for a while. I mean, Radford’s now very much a part of a ACT education system’s set of options and I know many people who’ve sent their kids there and so on, but it was not a good development in the context and it was a very clear case of unfair advantage being given to the already wealthy elite school movement. And that’s what it was, that’s what it was about. And it was about “defend our right to have that quality of schooling, thank you very much, for every ACT student!”

Mr Haggar: You retain the passion of those days in terms of those issues. Just finally Joan, because this has been largely structured around issues that I thought were significant. Were there any elements that you'd just like to record for the broader modern memberships that you felt were significant to you as a young teacher, or as a union officer?

Ms Corbett: Now there's an open invitation. Let me choose some words carefully. I think that ongoing union membership is really important and it's a challenge that you can't say – you can't stop talking about it, you must keep talking about. And it's – it's not okay to let others carry the load for the whole of a teaching community or for the whole of public education, wherever you are. It's actually a responsibility, if you're going to part of that system, to contribute to a collective voice for that system. Because without that, too much gets eroded, and it's already clear that in some parts of the Australian community, in industry and in other places, that unionism is being frayed really quickly. But it's not a good thing. It's not a good thing for individual workers. It's not a good thing for the opportunities for the kids that we're teaching now, or their kids, or the next "x" number of generations.

Standing up for public education is, in a way, just a very important piece of a puzzle which is about standing up for social justice. And I think I've always seen those things as tied, and I've always seen the union movement's role in those campaigns as a critical role. I do think that will continue in Australia.

There are other voices for that and I don't mean to undermine them – by saying that the union movement is very important. Unions need to work with the voices of very good other non-government organisations and advocacy groups. We need – we need the lot, but we shouldn't ever let advocacy for public education drop.

Mr Haggar: Well thank you very much Joan for giving us your time and your thoughts today it's been really appreciated. And I'll bring the discussion to a close.

Ms Corbett: Thanks.

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