

The Purple Sage Project

From the wisdom of the people: Action for our times

Beryl Evans, Liz McAloon and Mary Crooks

For many people in Victoria in 1998, there was a sense of powerlessness as we saw our democracy being undermined by a series of executive decisions, eg the review and essential privatisation of the Office the Auditor General. In this context the Purple Sage Project was initiated.

At the same time, on a more global scale, others were seeing a threat to democratic process. For example, John Ralston Saul (1997) challenges two contemporary notions that he believes undermine democracy. These are the way in which we conceive of the individual and that capitalism fosters democracy.

Firstly, Ralston Saul believes that contemporary definitions of individualism are narrow conceptions of the original concept of the individual, which has come to mean "a single ambulatory centre of selfishness". His argument is that in our unconscious acceptance of corporatism, we sacrifice our active engagement as citizens. He maintains that without the vigorous participation of disinterested citizens, (used in the sense of that which makes a jury able to make a fair judgment - of taking a step back to look at the situation) the source of legitimacy falls to interest groups, for example corporations or trade unions. There is a feeling abroad that individuals are incapable of disinterest. Such a feeling leads to a profound pessimism about the human character and plays right into the hands of the elite. He questions how we can call our civilisation democratic when the individual is resigned to such powerlessness.

The second notion that capitalism fosters democracy is also challenged. Corporatist ideology reflects economic theory. The main tenets are the marketplace, technology, globalisation, and the money markets. The tenets masquerade as economic laws by being identified as inevitabilities and resistance to them appears futile. Ralston Saul places the failure of democracy in our weakness for ideology, arising from our fear of appearing ridiculous, and our passivity in speaking out when we feel there is a crisis. The passivity is based in the fear we have of speaking about matters in which we are not specialists. Hence by minding our own business, corporations and interest groups are able to dominate the decision making process, to enact legislation, to set standards and define policy in the way that serves them best.

The challenges outlined by John Raulson Saul could be applied to what was happening in Victoria. Many people were hurting and feeling pessimistic about their failure to do anything about the way in which the state was going.

The Victorian Context .

The Purple Sage story begins in tumultuous times. Throughout Australia there has been a period of profound economic restructuring. The changes are immense, brought on by new

developments in technology, the pressures of a global economy and far reaching changes in the pace and flow of capital markets. The technology of our time means change is swift. The era of a 'free market' is upon us.

In Victoria, we felt the full force of economic restructuring. Victoria's industrial/manufacturing base exposed it more sharply to the full force of this restructuring. Its experience of the late eighties recession was worse than other states. With the reduction of Commonwealth payments and the collapse of financial institutions, Victoria suffered and there was a deep concern about state finances. At the 1992 election, the Liberal/National coalition came to power with a promise of "better financial management". What this meant was a restructuring and reduction of Government services following an economic rationalist agenda.

As Webber (1996) noted, there was:

- a complete restructure and outsourcing of community services at state and local and government levels;
- the effective abolition of the award system for Victorian workers;
- a reduction of the public sector by some 50 000 public servants;
- the sale to private owners of significant public assets including the state's highly profitable electricity, gas and transport industries;
- the closure of 380 schools;
- and unprecedented levels of expenditure cuts in health and education.

The list goes on, and is too detailed to continue here. In education, the focus of this paper, public education has been recast to reflect the free market model of education in the Schools of the Future program (Crooks 1995, Blackmore 1999) and later, the introduction of self governing schools (McMurdo 1998). Competition between schools was expected to provide what was seen as a much needed stimulus for performance. In all, 8000 teachers were removed from the system, including 4000 special needs teachers and class sizes increased dramatically. Schools now had to manage their new global budgets and they were and still are expected to raise significant funds locally.

The changes were dramatic in scope and applied with great urgency. (Hannan 1995) They heralded a new era, language and focus. Concerns for social equity, people's rights, citizen participation, and consultation were rudely pushed aside by the relentless search for efficiencies. Competition was reified as the key dynamic - a virtue to be recognised everywhere- in the state's schools, hospitals, and local and state government services.

The mantra of fiscal necessity and 'no gain without pain' was intoned at every turn, inducing an uneasy community silence. People suspected that the Government's arrogance came in part from its unchecked political and legislative power. The opposition appeared ineffective and there was no obvious forum by which women and men throughout the state could channel their anger. The daily media seemed compliant. In some sectors of the community, there was an increasing mood of despair and a feeling that nothing could be done.

THE PURPLE SAGE PROJECT

The Purple Sage Project tapped into this mood. Commencing in July 1998, the project provided a rare opportunity for many people to claim a voice, to articulate what they saw as wrong with the state of things, to define an alternative public vision of the future, and to create a range of actions that citizens could take to address their issues of concern.

The capacity to give voice, to act on issues of concern was all the more important for women who are considerably underrepresented in political and other major decision making

processes. It is no surprise that so many women embraced the Project , gave it their energy, and made it work.

The Purple Sage Project seeks to draw on people's own wisdom and experience. It is foremost about civic engagement, about developing people's confidence as citizens and building their capacity for taking action.

'Sage' is in the title deliberately chosen because it denotes wisdom. The colours adopted are purple, green and white - the colours of the suffragettes, working for change and justice.

Fittingly the project was funded by a partnership of organisations concerned with social justice and people's welfare, namely The Brotherhood of St Laurence, The Victorian Women's Trust, the People Together Project, The Stegley Foundation, The Victorian Local Governance Association and the YWCA. The Project Management Team consisted of a representative from each of these organisations, including the Executive Director of the Victorian Women's Trust as the Project Director. Some six thousand Victorians from rural and urban areas participated as project staff, group leaders and participants, think tank members, and community agencies.

THE PURPLE SAGE PROCESS.

The process is outlined in Figure 1. Initially, project staff briefed as many non-government organisations as possible in eleven regional centres and metropolitan venues. People were invited to join the project as group leaders. Six hundred men and women nominated themselves. Briefing sessions for these group leaders were held in 23 venues around the state.

Between September 1998 and June 1999 women and men involved in the project, held discussions in kitchens, lounge rooms, church halls, bookclubs and workplaces and from rural and urban centres. Over a third of the meetings were held in regional Victoria. The task of the group leaders was for each to invite groups of up to ten people to participate in discussions about their concerns, their vision for the future and to

start thinking about actions which would help realise their vision. Each group leader was asked to write a report of the discussions and forward it to the Project Staff.

Members of the Project staff and of the Management Committee read the responses, summarized and cross referenced them. The depth and detail of people's responses gave us a profound insight and understanding of a number of important issues, namely, Unemployment, Job Security, Democracy, Public Education, Community Infrastructure, Privatisation, Environment and Gambling.

These responses were analysed and solutions proposed in a series of Think Tank sessions utilizing the wisdom and experience of 150 people working in fields of research, academia and the community sector. A summary of issues and proposed strategies, including the priorities for future action (Appendix 1) was then sent to all groups for their scrutiny and responses before inclusion in the Public Document which is being written as the project report.

We attempted to draft the public document in a way that would capture these understandings and identify a range of actions the members of groups could consider in generating a new energy for civic engagement around the issues in society that were troubling them.

The calling of an early state election changed this document in a number of critical ways. In sum total, many of the ideas for action that had been identified were matched in varying degrees by policy documents of the major parties. In these policy documents, for example, in public education and democracy many of the actions that we had identified were proposed.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

A number of significant concerns were expressed by participants about public education in their initial responses and were reflected in their second round of discussions. By far the most pressing concern was that of equity, of equal access for all children, and adequate funding for the public sector, while curriculum and teacher's work conditions and training also received significant mention. Strategies, which were developed by the participants during the think tanks, were articulated by the project staff. From each of the seven areas, two of these strategies were highlighted and proposed as emerging priorities for future action.(Appendix 1).

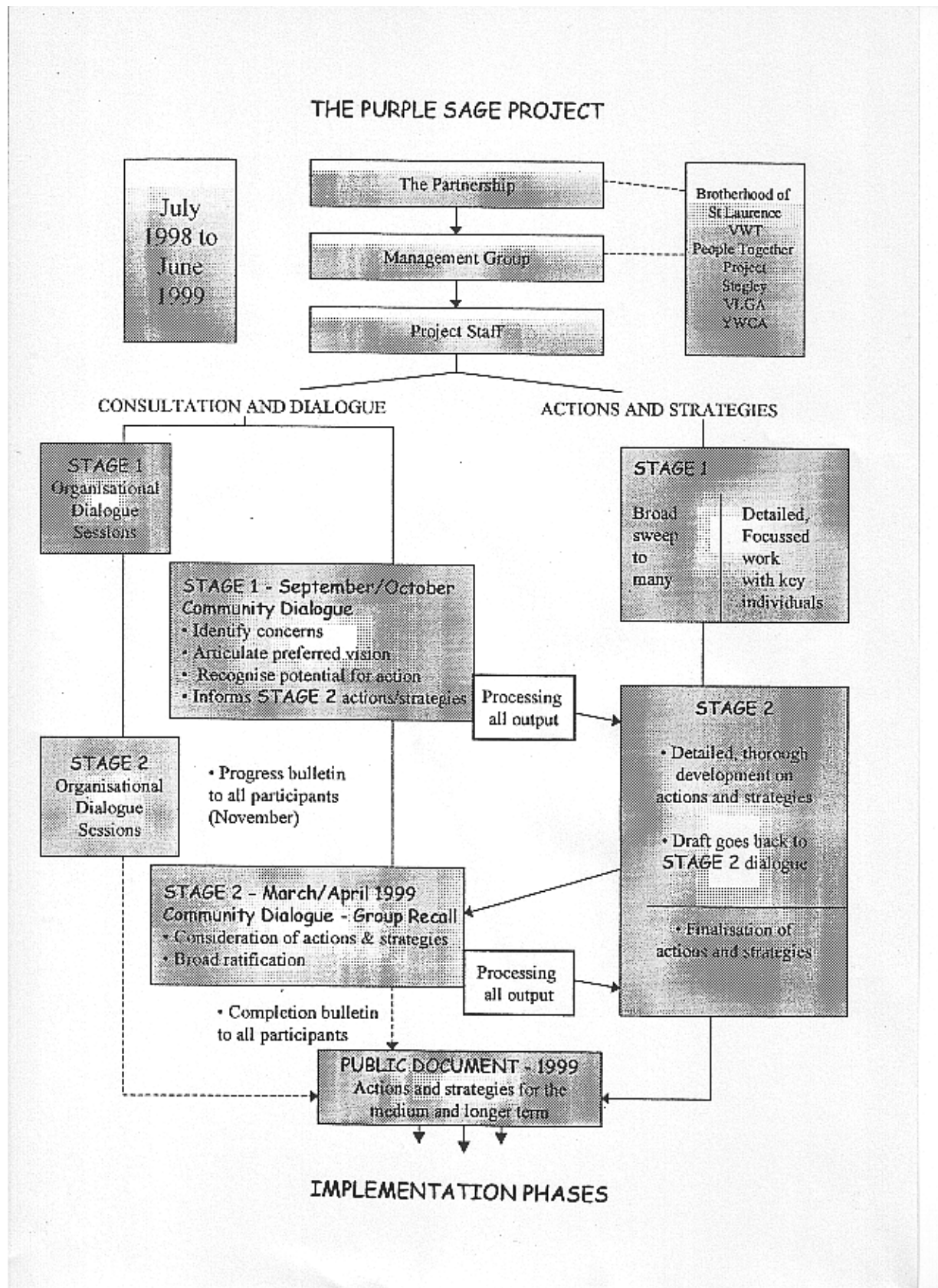


Figure 1

In a further round of consultation with the Purple Sage groups, each group was provided a package containing a list of these strategies. These groups were asked to focus particularly on the emerging priorities but also on the other strategies, and to provide any further comments.

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

Responses from these sessions in the area of public education are reported below. Ninety five percent of the responding groups indicated support for the strategy to lift parent and public awareness of the role of public education, while the other nominated strategy was to do the groundwork for a possible legal challenge to government failure to provide equitable access to education for all school age children in Victoria was 80.7%.

Many groups did not restrict themselves to these emerging priorities. Other responses showed the extent of participant's commitment to equity in public education, both in terms of **access** and **funding**. The majority of respondents felt that the Government should be responsible for funding as the following quotes illustrate:

Governments need to have a vision of inclusiveness and prosperity for all in education.

We need to ensure equitable access to education for all disadvantaged students including students with learning difficulties.

Our number one priority would be to enforce the equal distribution of resources to every school, by encouraging a public expectation that Government will accept this concept.

It is the Government's responsibility to maintain the efficiency and quality of education

The Government needs to maximise resources to ensure that education is a right for all citizens.

An Age Poll conducted at this time showed that 81% of Victorians thought that too little was spent on education.

Another concern raised was the effect of **sponsorship** on schools,

Business sector should not "use" our children through manipulative deals with schools.

Local business does not necessarily have the real interests of children at heart and should not have powerful role in new school structures.

The **Self Governing Model** was seen to emphasise the inequality in the present system.

We need to carefully monitor for negative impact of self-governing schools, including decline teachers' salaries and conditions.

We are concerned at the glaring inequity (long term) of Self Governing schools.

We are concerned about the self-governing models in schools, fearful of private tyrannies and fiefdoms, aware that censorship can take a virulent form in schools. Tension between national and local goals might become intense.

Everyone has a right to quality education at low cost. Self governing schools are seen as cost cutting. It disguises the Government's responsibility to see that all children get a good start.

These responses indicated support for one of the strategies proposed in the Public Education section, namely

- Challenge and publish widely the value shift being brought to the structures and financing for public education.

Among concerns identified in **curriculum** included:

The **social value of education**

Need broad humanities education to balance the technical and encourage critical thinking.

Education should be about learning to question, analyse, imagine and think.

Present education stimulates intellect but not compassion.

Should teach ethics and morals issues.

Restoring the balance between education for life and education for a career- this could bring in more emphasis on social justice issues and civic principles

.

Civic principles: how government works

Strengthen civic education in schools, especially for younger than eighteen year olds.

Education for all, especially re civics, human rights and the environment.

The need for self-education and suitable material to study, e.g. the constitution, the republic.

Education for all to provide thinking tools so that all can participate in democratic government.

Studies of cultures

*We agree with recognising indigenous culture in schools, but why just indigenous, surely **all cultural awareness** should be included.*

Who decides on curriculum in schools

Lobby for a curriculum based on broad community and not just employer needs. A curriculum focussed more on social justice issues, civic principles and how government works.

Teaching and learning

Introduce democratic principles through an innovative primary education program including role playing "democratically run classroom"

Emphasise the importance of life long education.

Not learning for any future purpose but for the interest and curiosity of learning. This produces a person who will continue to take a wide interest.

These comments support the following strategies,

- Promote public debate on the social purposes of education and public schooling as a vehicle for social cohesion.
- Publicise school programs that highlight the social value of education.
- Focus the curriculum more on social justice issues, civic principles and how government works
- Lobby for curriculum based on broad community and not just how government works.
- Promote pastoral care as a legitimate and valued function in schools.
- Recognise indigenous culture in schools.

The final groups of strategies suggested by the participants were related to teacher's work conditions, teacher training and professional development.

Teacher's work conditions.

Reduce class sizes and administrative support- reduce volume of paper work.

Teaching Service Order 165 must be withdrawn.

Support the maintenance of long term contracts for teachers.

At least long-term contracts for teachers are required but why not the old fashioned permanent employment?

Need to put more thought into the tenure issue. The idea of limited tenure of teachers is not all bad (we want to ensure teachers have some work experience outside teaching) but one year contracts are a disaster. Maybe five year contracts make more sense all round.

Reintroduce a real promotional/advancement system for teachers based on teaching, not only administrative, excellence.

Increase support services to former levels, e.g., speech pathologists, counsellors, integration aides.

Teacher training/Professional development.

Emphasise the importance of training and maintaining best teachers and practices - training the mind for independent thought may well need pastoral care, community input, inclusive curriculum, but all these should be part of best teaching practice rather than substitutes for intellectual development.

Teachers need training in alternative methods so that structure is flexible to cater for different needs.

Passionate teaching is important. Kids model the quality of the human being in front of them. Too many teachers are too financially afraid to leave when their heart is not in it.

Much professional development in contemporary system is 'glossy, expensive and superficial'

Greater strength needed in teacher/training and security of future- then the system is not so important.

Provide more on-site training for teachers.

These suggestions provide support for the following strategies,

- Support the maintenance of long term contracts for teachers.
- Press for the elimination of Teaching Service Order 165 which prevents teachers and principals from speaking publicly on education matters.
- Provide more on-site training for teachers.

Some Purple Sage groups have already taken steps to implement their strategies , and their stories will be collected.. Members of the groups have been energised and have begun to overcome their feelings of powerlessness in various ways as individuals, groups, community members and citizens. They have agreed with Marilyn Waring who said in July of this year

Citizens constantly ask if democratic control of local government can be at all meaningful when so much that matters to the welfare of citizens escapes the control of government. The suggestion is that it's all too big for us to do anything about the multinationals, war, poverty and waste. I totally disagree, I refuse to be disempowered - I refuse to relinquish my rights as a citizen.

Waring Public Lecture for the Victorian Women's Trust Melbourne, 1999.

The Locus of Power and Action in Purple Sage.

Diagrammatically, exercising our power in the Purple Sage Project can be represented in the following way

Figure 2

The power of one	The power of ten	The power of communities	The power of the citizenry
A parent	Clusters of likeminded people	Disability organisations	Institutions of governance
A person in small business	Parish committees	Business groups	Parliaments
A paid employee	Fellow shift workers	Geographical communities	Executive
A teacher	Ethical shareholders	Chambers of commerce	Elected representatives
A farmer	Book clubs	Faith communities	Statutory offices
A retiree	School parent groups	Welfare bodies	Local government
	Local business breakfast clubs		

We can exercise our power as individuals (the power of one) as a parent, a person in small business, a paid employee, a teacher, a farmer and so on. This might simply mean volunteering one's point of view or experience to family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, persons in positions of authority, or to a composite audience using the media or public speaking.

We can join with others in small clusters (the power of ten), groups of like minded people, parish committees, fellow shift workers, ethical shareholders and so on. In such groups members focus their collective efforts on agreed goals. The group can lobby on issues, inform the broader community, challenge the accepted understanding on a particular issue.

We can be part of a broader base of power (the power of communities), disability organisations, business groups, associations of ethical shareholders, and geographical communities. This means becoming involved in community networks and usually volunteering for tasks, eg spending sometimes considerable time in meetings, deputations, phone calls and correspondence.

When we elect people to represent us, we are effectively giving them our power as citizens to use responsibility on our behalf (the power of citizens) through parliament, government departments, statutory offices, and other institutions of governance. We need to devise ways of monitoring their actions more vigorously. At present it is mainly the media and public

opinion polls that perform this monitoring function. Some of the strategies listed earlier point to ways of increasing all citizens' roles in accessing, monitoring, and providing input into these institutions.

We are not claiming that actions taken as part of the Purple Sage Project are new initiatives. Community action groups have been successfully conducted in many areas, particularly in relation to the environment, and the recent successful move by parents and teachers at Blackburn High School to reject the former State Government's offer to become a self governing school. What we can say about this project so far is that the values and principles by which it was informed have reached many people who have not been active in community action before. These participants have been energised to do something about their feelings of powerlessness and take an active part in their community.

The purple sage action agenda.

As indicated earlier, many voters, at the recent state election, signalled the need for a redirection of public policy and governance by indicating their acceptance of policies which promised a more democratic form of government and in education, a change in policy which related to access, funding, school structures and teachers work and conditions. The resulting minority government reflects the divide in the community about which direction to take.

A Watching Brief for the Purple Sage Project.

There are now three tasks which might be considered as a watching brief to be conducted in the Purple Sage Project - comparing the actions already proposed in the project with the policy commitments of the incoming government, identifying the gaps that remain, and articulating the actions that people might consider in contending with the aftermath of a massive change in proposed public policy.

In its election statements, the Labor Party presented a broad policy on education and indicated its intent to reverse many of the arrangements which had been introduced into public education by the former government. In broader terms, Labor indicated that it wanted to work with school communities in a system based upon cooperation rather than competition. Under Labor the schools would be supported to encourage excellence and diversity, while being able to respond to the special needs of students. Specific items in the first four years included:

- Cut class sizes in Prep and Yrs 1 and 2 to 21 or less
- Provide \$36 million extra funds for the education of children with special learning needs.
- Provide \$17.5 million extra for programs directed at students with disabilities and impairments.
- Provide \$8.7 million for extra specialist teachers.
- Establish an independent, education based review panel which would represent student input into proposals for school's reorganisation and closures.
- Lift the restrictions on teachers and principals participating in public debate.
- Over time, ensure that the standard mode of employment for teachers is permanent.
- Increase school retention rates through provision of enhanced student welfare and support services and school to work transition programs.
- Increase funding to the TAFE system with special emphasis on TAFE centres in regional Victoria.

Victorian ALP
Education Policy
1999

Specifically the watching brief in education can be established to monitor these policy proposals and see that they are translated into provision of a more democratic society and for reform of the education system using the strategies developed in the Purple Sage Project.

References

Australian Labor Party Policy Document (1999), Education Labor's Commitment to the Victorian Community.

Blackmore, J (1999) Shifts in Governance: Schools of the Future in Linda Hancock (ed) *Women, Public Policy and the State*. Linda Hancock (ed) Melbourne, Centre for Public Policy.

Crooks, M. (1996) "To market, to market! The radical right experiment with Victoria's In *Putting the People Last Government, services, and Rights in Victoria*. Melbourne, Hyland House.

Hannan, B (1996) Lying low: Education under Kennett. In *Putting the People Last* Melbourne, Hyland House.

McMurdo, G (1998) Will there be Public Schools in the Next Millenium? *The AEU Victorian Branch Professional Magazine, Vol 1, No 1, Introduction*.

Ralston Saul, J (1995) *The Doubter's Companion A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense* New York Penguin.

Ralston Saul, J (1997) *The Unconsciousness Civilisation*. New York, The Free Press.
Report of the Steering Committee for the review of Commonwealth / State Service Provision (1998). Canberra, Government Printing Office.

Waring, M. (1999) *Women, Politics and Community Activism* Public Lecture for the Victorian Women's Trust Melbourne, Frankston and Ballarat July 19.

Webber, M (1996) Introduction to *Putting the People Last Government, Services and Rights in Victoria*. Melbourne Hyland Publishing