

# INTRODUCTION

Pat Giles was an Australian Labor Party senator during the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s and early 1990s. When she entered parliament, she was fifty-two years old. She came to the Senate not as a raw recruit but as an experienced trade unionist, Australian Labor Party policy maker, feminist campaigner, and grassroots activist in the education and women's health arenas. In a public life spanning five decades, beginning in her early adulthood in the 1960s with community-based education campaigns, and continuing into the 21st century with an ongoing commitment to women's health issues locally, nationally and internationally, Pat Giles earned a reputation as a determined and intelligent campaigner and lobbyist. Hers was a life dedicated to improving the status of women and others who experience disadvantage. Ironically, although her activities within the trade union movement, the ALP, the Senate and the United Nations were to have a profound impact on the lives of ordinary Australian women and men, her story is not widely known.

In the context of the world of social and political protest, there are two unusual features of Pat Giles' activist engagement. The first concerns her desire to work within existing institutions (specifically, the trade union



The Hawke Labor government, 1987. Pat, fourth row back, far left.

movement and the Australian Labor Party) to enact the processes of social change. Unlike separatist feminists who saw engagement with existing patriarchal structures as something of a betrayal of feminist integrity,<sup>1</sup> she sought the reform of those same institutional structures through the introduction of practical policies to benefit women in particular and the disenfranchised in general. Australian feminism is noted for its diverse approach to enacting social change<sup>2</sup> and Pat was one of the women who saw the value of working inside the institutions whose patriarchal values she contested. Not surprisingly, her methods were not always appreciated by her feminist sisters.

The second unusual feature of her passionate commitment to the political process is the quality of that passion. Rather than taking the form of a dramatic conflagration that one might normally associate with passion, Pat's commitment can be viewed as a steady, quietly burning flame. This is entirely consistent with her approach to life. Hers is not a flamboyant personality. She is not known for charisma. Heads do not always turn when she enters a room. But as everyone who has worked with her will attest, her determination is unflagging, and her energy indefatigable. People love and admire Pat Giles not for any quicksilver quality but for her steadiness, her even-temperedness and her practical approach to life. She is known for her ability to work with people who are different from herself, and widely admired for her capacity for sheer hard work.

The writing of this life story began with a long conversation at a gathering of women in December 2004. The occasion was the annual Christmas dinner of the Patricia Giles Centre in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. The Centre, established in 1992, is a feminist, non-profit organisation committed to providing accommodation, counselling and education services to women and children who have experienced or witnessed domestic violence. To her great delight, Di Lesley, a counsellor at the Centre, found herself seated beside a 75-year-old Pat Giles. Di was curious to find out more about this gracious, white-haired, short and sturdy woman for whom the Centre had been named, and opened the conversation with a leading question about her life. Two hours later the stories were



At the Pat Giles Centre with Sue Ellery (left) and Kedy Krystal, 2006.

still flowing. Di left the dinner with mixed emotions: admiration for Pat's activism and energy; gratitude at having had the chance to talk with Pat at this stage in her life; and indignation that so few people, herself included, knew the story of her five decades of activism. A few days later Di approached Kedy Kristal, the Chief Executive Officer of the Centre, to discuss the possibility of writing a biography of Pat. Kedy called Pat to ask if this were already being done. 'No,' she replied, 'but my daughters are always telling me that someone should do it.' Kedy supported Di's involvement in such a project on behalf of the Patricia Giles Centre and approached her friend and colleague Sherry Sagers for further research and funding support. Sherry agreed to head the project and assembled a research team comprising Lebbie Hopkins, a feminist scholar, oral historian and archivist from Edith Cowan University; Lynn Roarty, then research officer in the Centre for Social Research at

Edith Cowan University, who was also completing her PhD in women's studies at Murdoch University; and Di Lesley. And so the project was born.

Interviewing of Pat Giles and of her family, friends, colleagues and contemporaries began in November 2005, and continued into 2006. Archival research was carried out during 2006 and into 2007. To satisfy the funding bodies, the research team was required to research and write at least one scholarly paper for publication in an academic journal. Accordingly, papers have been published by the feminist journals *Women's Studies International Forum* and *Outskirts*, and by the *Forum on Public Policy*.

In contrast with the academic papers, the life story that has emerged is not intended primarily for an academic audience, but rather for a general readership. We wanted to create an accessible account of Pat Giles' life and activism, set against a background of the social and political upheavals that characterised the last four decades of the 20th century, and the conservative resistances that accompanied them. We wanted, too, to document this life for those younger readers unfamiliar with the stories of feminist struggles in the recent past. And what of the woman behind the public figure? We wanted to look behind what she did to find out who she was, what she represented, how she lived her life. What kind of woman finds herself swept up into feminist activism and party politics in Australia in these decades of rapid social change? We wanted to uncover a personal context for her public life and a public context for her personal life.

Creating this book was a genuinely collaborative enterprise. Sherry Saggars led the project. Di Lesley interviewed, transcribed, pored over photographs, and researched and wrote the first draft of Chapter 1; Lynn Roarty researched and wrote the first drafts of the chapters on the Senate years and International Work, and provided the administrative support for the project; and Lekkie Hopkins interviewed, transcribed, researched and wrote the remaining seven chapters. Lekkie then wrote a draft of the entire book, which Lynn and Lekkie together adjusted in response to publishers' comments. What better way to celebrate the life of a woman so accustomed to working collaboratively herself?

# PAT GILES' CURRICULUM VITAE

## *Personal details*

Patricia Jessie Giles

Born 16 November 1928 at Minalton, South Australia

1952 married Keith Emmanuel (Mick) Giles

1953–1960 five children (Anne, Timothy, Penelope, Fiona, Josephine)

## *Education*

- \* Woodville Primary School (South Australia)
- \* Croydon Junior Technical School for Girls, Adelaide
- \* General Nursing Training, Renmark District Hospital
- \* Royal Adelaide Hospital (honours certificate)
- \* Midwifery Certificate (honours), King Edward Memorial Hospital, Perth
- \* Infant Welfare Certificate, Sister Kate's, Adelaide 1953
- \* Mature-aged matriculation, 1970
- \* BA (Industrial Relations, Political Science), University of Western Australia 1971–1973
- \* Awarded Honorary Doctorate, Murdoch University WA, 1996

## *Employment*

- \* Employed by the Hospital Employees' Industrial Union of WA as Industrial Organiser (private hospitals and nursing homes) 1974–1981
- \* Senator for Western Australia, 1981–1993

## *Voluntary and community work*

- \* Voluntary work associated with education at public schools, disabled children, and with aged care services, 1959–1973

## *Political, Perth and Trade Union*

- \* Joined Australian Labor Party 1971
- \* ALP policy committees on social security, community services and status of women

- \* Inaugural convenor of Women's Electoral Lobby, Western Australia, 1973
- \* Appointed by the federal government to chair WA State Committee on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, 1974–1976
- \* Member of Australian non-government delegation to the First United Nations World Women's Conference in Mexico, 1975
- \* First woman elected to executive of the WA Trades and Labour Council, 1975
- \* Member of delegation of Australian and New Zealand trade union women to Bulgaria, 1977
- \* Appointed to chair the first women's committee of the Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU), 1978
- \* Appointed to the ACTU/Australian Government Consultative Council, 1979
- \* Nominated by the West Australian branch of the Australian Labor Party as candidate for the Senate and subsequently elected (1981–1993), 1980
- \* Delegate to ALP National Status of Women Committee
- \* Delegate to ALP National Conferences
- \* Member ALP National Executive, Junior Vice President

*Parliamentary and International*

- \* Member, Women for a Meaningful Summit, from 1986
- \* Inaugural member, World Women Parliamentarians for Peace, 1985. President 1988–1990
- \* Led Australian Government delegation, UN End of the Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi, 1985
- \* Special Parliamentary Advisor to Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Violence Against Women, 1990
- \* Australian Government delegation to meeting of Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs – Nairobi 1985, Harare 1987, Ottawa 1990 and Cyprus 1992
- \* Led Australian Government delegation to meeting of Commonwealth Ministers for Health, Cyprus 1992
- \* Representative of Australian Government to UN General Assembly 1992
- \* Appointed chair, World Health Organisation's Global Commission on Women's Health 1993–1996

### *International Alliance of Women (IAW)*

- \* Attended IAW Congress Helsinki. Elected board member, 1992
- \* Elected President IAW 1996, 1999
- \* Delegate, Beijing UN Conference, 4th World Conference on Women, 1995
- \* NGO delegate, UN Commission on the Status of Women, New York 1999–2003
- \* Delegate for IAW to International Symposium on Domestic Violence, Nicosia, Cyprus, 2000
- \* Contributor, IAW Symposium on Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW), Odense, Denmark, 2000
- \* NGO delegate, UN Conference Beijing+5, New York, 2000
- \* Participant, Regional Initiative Against Trafficking of Women and Girls, Manila, Philippines, 2001
- \* Participant, Conference on Violence Against Women, Valencia, Spain, 2000
- \* Participant, Conference on Violence in the Home, Nicosia, Cyprus, 2000
- \* Rights and Humanity, London select group, consultation and drafting amendments for document, UN Conference on Racism, Durban, South Africa 2001

### *Local*

- \* Inaugural convenor, Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), Perth, 1973. Life member of WEL
- \* Convenor, Women's Health Care House 1993–1999
- \* Patron and Treasurer, Women's Health Care House, 1999–present
- \* Member WA Centenary of Women's Suffrage Committee (1999), 1997–2000
- \* Convenor, Committee of Management, Women's Legal Service WA, 1999–2001
- \* Member, Committee of Management, Patricia Giles Women's Refuge, Joondalup. Awarded life membership 2001
- \* Participant, Constitutional Convention Celebrating 100 Years of Australian Women's Suffrage, Canberra ACT 2001

# 25 NORTH ROAD

Pat Giles first emerged as a public figure in 1969, when she stood for federal parliament for the seat of Perth as an independent candidate for the pressure group with the unwieldy title of Council for the Defence of Government Schools – more affectionately known as DOGS. There’s a photo to mark the occasion, published in *The Sunday Times*.<sup>1</sup> The sight of it still makes Pat chuckle. A comfortably maternal Pat in early middle age stands at the garden gate surrounded by four children, three horses, a bicycle and a goat. Beside her is a sign reading

**Save Our Schools. VOTE GILES 1**

In Pat’s memory, the children have been skylarking. She recalls it as a photo of a hurly-burly, roisterous sort of family, evocative of a Perth that has long passed. When she speaks of it, you can almost hear the din. In the actual photo, Fiona, Tim and Penelope sit rather demurely astride their horses; nearly-nine-year-old Josephine, the youngest, is riding the bike. That afternoon, only Anne, the eldest at sixteen, is missing, probably still on her way home from school. In the background, through the trees, past the horse-float, you can glimpse the roof of the sprawling family home that sits in a paddock on the



Pony express – standing for federal parliament in 1969.

banks of the upper reaches of the Swan River. Some say that 25 North Road, Bassendean was itself a character in the drama of the lives of this extraordinary family. There is no suggestion in this photo that even then those lives were beginning to unravel.

It is fitting that Pat Giles should make her public debut in the company of her children. Since her marriage in 1952 she had devoted herself almost exclusively to the care of her growing family.<sup>2</sup> She was a trained midwife and was by her own admission ‘daft about babies’.<sup>3</sup> She willingly had five children in seven years.<sup>4</sup> At 25 North Road she set about the running of her household with a brisk and almost military efficiency. She was a practical woman who loved routines. She baked and sewed and knitted. She gardened and sang and kept order at the dinner table. She rostered the care of the family pets to