

## **Well, Here We Are, Ninety-four Years Later.**

### **WILPF Triennial Meeting, 22-24 May 2009, Brisbane Felicity Hill**

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet; thank you for such a warm welcome here today.

Thanks also to her Excellency the Governor, who I remember well as our excellent Ambassador in New York. Ambassador Wensley was someone who was held in high regard among her colleagues and NGOs, and who inspired the same response here today when she read a portion of the speech she delivered in the Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security. At the conclusion of Ambassador Wensley's statement and the applause that ensued thereafter, I recall that the US representative said that she had never before heard clapping in that chamber. It was certainly rare, and it was certainly deserved for that clear and strong statement.

I have called my statement for this meeting, "Here we are, ninety-four years later".

And here we are, ninety-four years later, struggling with the same forces that the initial WILPFers faced, forces that put profit before people and planet, that profit from war either financially, psychologically or politically, and that profit either financially, psychologically or politically from women and people of colour being kept poor, down and out.

Here we are ninety-four years later, WILPF women meeting once again in times of crisis, thinking about and acting to prevent things getting worse. Here we are extending arms of solidarity and support to each other as we go through these times of crisis, where military security absorbs more and even more of our human and economic resources, where oil has peaked, and the planet is cooking, where food is scarce and water even more so, where more women are in burkhas in an increasingly violent and dysfunctional Afghanistan and blood is on our hands, where Palestinians are tortured in cages, where Fijians are under military dictatorship, and where a third of women in our country experience violence since they were 15, where an epidemic of violence against women rages, where drunk violent men are a plague and pox on our houses.

Margaret Atwood says (in an essay called 'Encouraging the Young' in a book called *The Tent*), "Things look bad: I admit it. They look worse than they've looked for years, for centuries. They look the worst ever. Peril looms on all sides. But it could still turn out all right. The child fell from the eighth-floor balcony, but there was a sheepdog underneath that leapt up and caught it mid-air. A bystander took a picture, it was in the paper. The boy went under for the third time, but the mother-although she was reading a novel - heard a gurgling sound and ran down to the dock and reached into the water, and pulled the boy up by his hair, and there was no brain damage. When the explosion occurred the young man was underneath the sink, fixing the plumbing, and so he was not injured. The girl survived the avalanche by making swimming motions with her arms. The father of two-year-old triplets who had cancer in every one of his organs watched a lot of comedy films and did Buddhist meditation and went into full remission, where he remains to this day. The airbags actually worked. The cheque did not bounce. The prescription drug company was not lying. The shark nudged the sailors naked, bleeding leg, then turned away."

And we can add to Margaret Atwood, "after courageous people stood up governments saw the sense in outlawing slavery, after limbless people stood up governments saw the reasons to ban landmines, and

in Copenhagen, government's resolved to prevent catastrophic climate change, they said YES to what was so obvious, the fascinating and inspiring technology that ingeniously makes clean energy from waves, sun and wind, phasing coal and nuclear out creating jobs for all. Instead of investing in submarines and other weapons good only for killing and mutilating, they said lets have some free education and trams instead, lets have public transport and communications technology to make our cities breathable, and our regional and rural areas liveable. They said gosh, when we systematically build up the institutions of international law and cooperation we systematically reduce our addiction to weapons and now there is plenty to go around; we do not live in a world of scarcity, not at all, poverty can be abolished, population can be kept sustainable. They said there is so much real work to do; unemployment is abolished. And so are nuclear weapons, and misguided missiles, and lets ban Celine Dion while we're at it."

We don't just want to prevent things from getting worse, we don't just want to help each other cope in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; we want to build a different world. That's what we're about. Not just the No, but the Yes, because it can be done. For WILPF's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary Bobi Meyer of the ACT branch wrote a song celebrating WILPFers saying no, but also put a whole of what we say YES to in that song. She was voicing what WILPFers have always said, and what Arundhati Roy said so beautifully, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

And gee we have a lot of work to do. But there are very clear action plans of exactly what we need to do to preserve our environment, to achieve equity between men and women, to make development sustainable, to end racism— that's what the UN conferences of the 90s produced, action plans, outcome documents containing analysis but also action plans of what needs to be done first, second, third, now, in the short term, and goals, clear goals were set. Millennium Development Goals – totally achievable, totally reasonable, practical and achievable – were set. There is no need for anyone to say, "they know not what they do," because we know damn well, and we also know what we need to do as the human race. Future generations will look back at this time of hesitation and prevarication as a kind of twilight zone. They will ask what stood in the way of evolution, what kept them hovering, in denial, before they got busy?

And the answer to what stood in the way of evolution is the one identified by the first WILPFers, it is the forces that put profit before people and planet, that profit from war either financially, psychologically or politically, and that profit either financially, psychologically or politically from women and people of colour being kept poor, down and out. And the time it took for people to find courage, to overcome denial, and to change, to withdraw their consent and participation.

In 94 years there has been an enormous growth in voices and non-government organisations working to challenge and erode the power of these forces. Take a look at the poster series the International Secretariat has developed for this 94<sup>th</sup> anniversary and you can see that we have been part of the history of NGOs, activists, learning to reset agendas and reframe issues and norms by coordinating international actions, and mobilizing public opinion, capturing the attention of political decision-makers through the media, providing independent information, ideas and draft language to governments, either in direct one-on-one meetings in which relationships are built over time, or by lingering outside closed doors and at the gates of buildings to lobby and interact with delegates and increasing public pressure on decision makers. And in that time the celebration of wars and warrior virtues have decreased, we have seen large-scale public opposition to war as such, revulsion at mass bloodshed and carnage, wartime military activities have been limited, there have been increasingly stronger, broader and more numerous efforts to control armed violence, to constrain it, to reduce its

frequency and duration, and we have seen intergovernmental agreements on armaments. And a major reason for this evolution is the cumulative effect of the work of civil society movements and organisers, their endurance and persistence.

So yay for us. Yay for WILPF meetings like the one I attended in Canberra a little while ago, old friends, new friends, fresh figs, book recommendations and swapping, Turkish bread and dips, annual meeting planning, decisions on money, good cheese, three subs paid on the spot, a cup of tea, agenda complete, stories shared, a couple sad, a couple happy, a total restoration of faith in WILPF-kind. And that's not how every WILPF meeting goes. In Brissy there is a library, a reading group, theatre workshops and performances. Emma Goldman would definitely be in WILPF Brisbane because there seems to be a lot of dancing going on in your wonderfully talented and warm branch. I've been to WILPF meetings in many countries and really, we have something good going here.

Which is why I remind you of the message in the latest letter from the Presidents, who say, " Did you know that if every single WILPF member got only one new person to join, each year, we would have a million members by 2015?! Imagine WILPF, one million strong. Imagine WILPF, three million strong. Imagine WILPF 10 million strong." Please do some of this imagining, and if you can, buy memberships as presents and do something that I have found very effective, read out our aims and principles, "we bring together women of different political beliefs and philosophies who are united in their determination to study, make known and help abolish the causes and the legitimization of war; we see as our ultimate goal the establishment of an international economic order founded on the principles of meeting the needs of all people and not on those of profit and privilege, this would enable the establishment of economic and social systems in which political equality and social justice for all can be attained, without discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, or any other grounds whatsoever, we believe that under systems of exploitation our aims cannot be attained and a real and lasting peace and true freedom cannot exist, so we make it one of its missions to further by non- violent means the social and economic transformation of the international community." ALRIGHT people say, and they join. We will talk more this weekend about a membership drive – we need one, we need to get busy in promoting WILPF because we have a lot to promote.

We will talk this weekend about the programme for the next three years. The International programme can be our guide – it has four pillars – and one is to build WILPF towards our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. The idea is to invite women to join WILPF, to inform, excite and integrate new members by highlighting our significant contribution to many political advances made in the last century, by attracting and influencing more women to join our work for peace and freedom. The idea is to use our birthday 28 April as a routinely celebrated date on the political and NGO calendar in our countries, cities and communities.

The idea is for WILPF groups to honour and award women in their community, in their cities, in sister organisations, known and unknown individual PeaceWomen. By organising events, a dinner, maybe for 30 people one year, 60 people the next, a bit like the IWD breakfasts, we can start an institution during which we take stock and celebrate achievements, the good news stories, showcasing and making the peace women visible, and providing vitamins and recognition for women's work for peace and freedom which often goes unnoticed, a bit like doing the dishes. And WILPF women are very often well placed in activities communities, we know who is plugging away at something for ages, we know the greenies, we know the peace people and the human rights activists, the Burma crew, the Bougainville solidarity workers. I think there is real merit to this idea of WILPF taking it upon themselves to say GOOD ON YOU, your work is peace work, and we want to honour you. Those women's family, friends and importantly the members of

their organisations will come to see them being honoured, it will build solidarity between WILPF and other organisations, and it will increase the visibility of WILPF and what it stands for.

I reckon it's a winner. I reckon the WILPF birthday can be a countdown to our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which needs to be huge, in The Hague we are planning a very large event, but linked with events in national and local centres by video conferencing and other means, everywhere. The WILPF 100<sup>th</sup> birthday needs to be a really big bash, but it won't be unless we do this cumulative building. Any what's so bloody awful about having a party once a year? Start as small as you need to, chuck a dinner party one year, but get bigger, be a bit more confident, think a bit bigger, there is no virtue in humility when it comes to peace, be proud and arrogant about peace, think big, think about taking over the world with it– when it comes to peace, it's okay. And when it comes to parties, it's also okay. Okay?

The second pillar of the programme is about challenging militarism, military budgets, and military security concepts. Oh just that. Military spending is an abomination, counted last year as at 1339 billion per year, the equivalent of 600 years of the UN's budget. In just one country, the US, there has been a staggering 53% increase in military spending since the events of September 11 in real terms. The money used to occupy Iraq for two weeks is the equivalent of what the OECD countries allocated to gender empowerment projects for the last 5 years on 1996 figures. We can buy one combat ship for the same cost of sending 6.8 million children to school in Afghanistan for 9 years. Well, that's enough. On this issue, a lot of people are watching TV while the kitchen is on fire.

And our government has just announced some staggering and some shameful figures, insane figures. Over the decade, Defence will receive approximately \$308 billion under the government's new financial plan. I'm displeased at the cuts that DFAT continue to endure while Defence gets fatter. **DON'T GET ME STARTED ON 35 BILLION DOLLARS WORTH OF SUBMARINES.** I'm furious, and so should we all be furious that they are ordering 12 submarines, 12 more submarines, we already have 6 but can only staff 3 of them. And as I sent on the WILPF email list, the Minister for Defence affirmed on budget day government would invest approximately 30 billion over the decade to fill the holes in the defence budget that have been inherited from the former government. The former government wasn't exactly starting the military. Just there in those too allocations we can pay for the deficit.

We need to discuss the government's White Paper this weekend and what it means for our campaign work. It has been recognised as a deeply contradictory document that has chunks in it to please everyone. The financial aspects displease me greatly. The fact that it recognises the beginning of the end of the US empire is mildly pleasing, but that it posits our slight inching towards an independent foreign policy in a context of increased military equipment isn't the kind of independence I was hoping for. I'm particularly displeased about the Community Consultation paper – I really liked that the community consultation happened, kudos and praise for that, but why did everyone on the panel have to have once worked for the Department of Defence, and why did the chair have to be on the board of a major arms corporation, how that isn't a conflict of interest I don't know. I also very much reject that the views of people who took the effort to write submissions and appear who had a non offensive defence position were diminished against some kind of standardised survey, summarily dismissed in a couple of sentences as non-representative and ill-informed.

And the reaffirmation of nuclear weapons in our security policy is preposterous in this White Paper. I was getting a bit proud of Kev Chev on this issue. I was proud that Australia's Prime Minister was the first serving western leader to ever go to Hiroshima. That's a big deal. I was very happy that when he was there he announced that Australia was going to try to use some of its diplomatic effort to get the

conversation going about disarmament. That's a big deal too. We have in the past, and Kev was saying lets get this party started again. When he was in opposition Kev Chev was strongly for a Nuclear Weapons Convention – we thought progress was coming. But we have seen the government backslide by saying that there is a role for nuclear weapons in our security policy, that we need and want the nuclear umbrella.

By linking our sense of security and our security policy to US nuclear weapons – we are valuing nuclear weapons, we are using nuclear weapons, and we are giving credence to the idea that these things bring security. We are also lending our bases, our ports and our security infrastructure to the US nuclear war fighting machine, globally and in our region. We are responsible. Nuclear weapons are here, among us, within our political institutions. We are part of this death machine. Obama is talking about abolition – abolition, Obama is talking about lets get rid of these atrocity exhibitions of criminal imbecility, and instead of helping that dialogue along by saying, Yeah about that Obama we would like to take nuclear weapons out of this alliance of ours, Kev talks about how much Australia relies on them for our security. In fact, Kev Chev has made Australia an accessory to criminal activity.

Nuclear weapons are indiscriminate weapons and therefore illegal – we in WILPF said this fifty years before the International Court of Justice – but we were glad the Court finally caught on in 1996 when they handed down their advisory opinion that said these things are illegal and there is an obligation to get rid of them. There are currently 35,000 nuclear weapons in existence, enough to destroy our planet in an afternoon. What is growing is the call for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Again for WILPF, old hat, but the US President has caught on, so goodo.

The third pillar of our programme is Invest in Peace: Challenge corporate globalisation, divert military resources to economic justice & environmental sustainability – all that YES stuff I began with. We must urgently, fiercely, untiringly and immediately act on climate change, we have to wake up, and turn the resources and energy currently going into militarism and military security into climate justice, we must sound the alarm, make our government know just how clearly we understand what is at stake, we know we will be burning this planet at a stake if we don't end coal, if we don't feel great and deep shame that we are one of the highest per capita emitter countries, and do something about it, daily. We have to turn our joy that Kev went off to sign Kyoto first thing into rage that he is so thoroughly betraying us. He is better than 5% and so are we, we are so much better than that. We are better than that, and so is he, lets help him and Penny in their negotiations with the coal cabal by putting an unbearable amount of pressure on them. A group of women chained themselves to the parliament last week, shutting things down, and we need more of that. The one million women campaign, with 1 million women each saving one tonne of CO2, let's get behind that. And lets realise that the Australian military is the single biggest user of oil in this country, and the US Pentagon is the biggest single user of oil in the world (320,000 barrels per day), and generates 750 million tons of toxic waste per year. Bombs, guns and landmines cannot be eaten, will not hinder a tsunami, a hurricane, a flood, a bushfire, a virus, or a water shortage. These are our real security threats. We can face and address them, but only if we organise, cooperate and put the human and economic resources currently going into weapons and war into human needs.

The fourth pillar of our programme is strengthening the United Nations and multilateralism. Our organisation predates the UN, we were part of the conferences that brought it into existence, we anticipated the League of Nations and monitored it closely. International WILPF's objective in continuing to monitor and report on the UN is to stimulate discussion, awareness and a renewed commitment to the United Nations system. And we are recognised at the United Nations – the Reaching Critical Will and PeaceWomen projects starting in 2000 had the goal of educating more and

more people about what is going on there, and how they can contribute; the 10 year anniversary of RCW in New York was attended by about 100 diplomats and NGOs testifying to how much our work is relied on. Over the years WILPF has played a part in many resolutions and outcome documents of the UN, Edith Ballantyne was instrumental in constructing the modalities for NGO engagement when she was head of CONGO that remain until today. We have a constant stream of reporting coming out of our UN office and our HQ in Geneva.

For the 12 years I lived overseas, I worked around the UN and for the UN for the bulk of the time, and I could talk about its greatness, its contradictions, its enormous potential for hours, but there are 26 reasons for pointing out Article 26 of the UN Charter, just one of the unrealised parts of that very solid recipe for peace, Article 26 gives the Security Council a job which they have failed to do. Instead of giving the world a plan for the least diversion of human and economic resources to armament the P5 have conducted arms races and military profiteering, gun running and war making, and they bear a huge proportion of the guilt for the failings and shortcomings of the UN for failing to give us the Article 26 plan. It's not too late, and the pressure must be kept, the demand must be made, and Costa Rica made it most recently when conducting an open debate on implementing this crucial part of the UN's mandate.

I'm looking forward to this weekend very much. We have a lot of work to do build WILPF, challenge militarism and invest in peace and a strengthened UN. But we bring a lot of hope and humour to this work, and WILPFers also bring fresh figs to meetings, which reminded me of that fabulous quote from Alice Walker which I will finish with.

"Fatally irradiating ourselves may in fact be the only way to save others from what Earth has already become. And this is a consideration that I believe requires serious thought from every one of us. However, just as the sun shines on the godly and the ungodly alike, so does nuclear radiation. And with this knowledge it becomes increasingly difficult to embrace the thought of extinction purely for the assumed satisfaction of it from the grave, achieving revenge. Or even of accepting our demise as a planet as a simple and just preventative medicine administered to the Universe. Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it. In any case, Earth is my home-though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe. So let me tell you: I intend to protect my home. Praying – not a curse – only the hope that my courage will not fail my love. But if by some miracle, and all our struggle, the earth is spared, only justice to every living thing (and everything is alive) will save humankind. And we are not saved yet. ONLY JUSTICE CAN STOP A CURSE."

Thank you.