

## *Suffrage Exhibition Opening, Sally McMillan, 7 September 2018*

*Light years ago, before I became a lawyer, I completed a history degree at Otago, specialising in NZ history.*

*I always thought I'd end up working in a museum. That was until I also did a law degree and figured out that lawyers get paid more. The rest is, well, history.*

*But history has always been a great love of mine; many of my holidays are spent exploring the history and culture of places foreign. In the 1990's I worked for several years with sponsorship from The Law Foundation compiling a series of 13 Oral histories with Otago lawyers, including Marion Thompson and Margaret McKay, which are now held in the Hocken and Toitu. And so when I was asked to be on the reference group for Suffrage and Beyond I jumped at the chance.*

*While I was involved with the Reference Group, I was reminded not more than once of what we, as women in NZ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, owe to those who agitated to gain the vote for women in NZ in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

*As lawyers, we place a great deal of focus on Ethel Benjamin. And rightly so. But it was no coincidence that Ethel enrolled at Otago University in 1893, the same year that women got the vote in NZ. In the years leading up to suffrage, during which Ethel was at OGHS, women in NZ were striving to better their lot. Ethel was one of the first generation of NZ women who had the opportunity to attend secondary school, OGHS having opened in 1871 – it is the oldest state school for girls in the southern hemisphere, and only the 6<sup>th</sup> oldest in the world. But while women were slowly becoming better educated at secondary level, very few (less than 1%) went on to University. Moreover, the choices of occupation for women were extremely limited - domestic service, factory work, teaching, nursing or secretarial work were the main options. Prostitution. Or marriage – the hardest work of all. The agitation to achieve the vote steadily came to be seen as the only way in which the lives and standard of living for women and children in this country at that time, could begin to be improved upon.*

*Which for those who don't have a degree in NZ history, begs the question what needed improving ?? Perhaps the best way of answering that question is by way of comparison to our lives as women in NZ today :*

*As an exercise, not related to Suffrage 125, I recently made a checklist of 5 things that were top-of-mind bothering me on a particular day :*

*Dear Diary.....*

- 1. I had just run over a seagull. I tried to avoid the seagull, which was in the middle of the road, possibly already maimed. But as I drove towards it, it made what it perhaps thought was a bid for freedom that turned out to be a suicide bid, by flying under my wheels. I had the choice of driving into a fence and damaging my late model European car, or over the seagull. The seagull lost out and flocked off to seagull heaven. I felt terrible.*
- 2. My Practise Manager informed me that we were having new website photos taken on the 26<sup>th</sup>, which is a week before my 6 weekly haircut; I need to lose 3 stone and get a haircut in ten days. Panic.*

3. *My eldest son lost his phone while he was on holiday in Paris, on his way to the Greek Islands. I have had to send him money for a new phone so that he can message me every day like he promised he would do, thus reassuring me that he has not been abducted by kidney harvesters.*
4. *My 4 mth old puppy Jack is not adapting well to daycare. Apparently he gets overexcited and has to be taken to the naughty kennel for a rest. The rest is for the other dogs, not for Jack. (I blame Anne Stevens dog and Val Farrow's dog, also at the same daycare...)*
5. *I bought new towels. They were quite expensive, but they match the heated floor tiles in my bathroom perfectly. However they are not washing well; they still have that slightly slimy texture, whereas I prefer the slightly rougher texture that the woman in the shop promised me they would have after only one wash. I want to take them back. Can I take them back even after I've washed them ... ?*

*As a further exercise, after I had done some reading associated with the exhibition, I made a comparative list of the things that might have been top-of-mind bothering me if I was 55 years old in 1893, working or middle class, and living in NZ :*

1. *The dead seagull. I have not run over a seagull. That is partly because cars did not come to NZ until 1898, but even then women didn't drive them. I have to walk everywhere, or ride a horse. As one might imagine, that is somewhat limiting in terms of what I can do with my life. Apart from church on Sundays, my outings are limited to going to do the shopping, daily, and on foot, and carrying it all home again. All this lugging of heavy groceries is not easy or good for me, because I have advanced osteoporosis brought on by the fact that I haven't eaten any calcium for most of my adult life – what milk I had always went to my kids. But I'm 55, and my life expectancy is only 58, so not long to go now and I'll be put out of my misery.*

*Until then I will be kept busy enough caring for my 11 children and 21 grandchildren. I gave birth to 16, but 5 died. I only stopped at 11, because my husband also died, in an accident. He was drunk – the messages from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, started in 1885 and instrumental in achieving the vote for women in 1893, had not yet reached my husband's ears. But frankly his death was a blessed relief from the childbearing and the beatings.*

*If I did find a seagull on the road I would probably wait until nobody was looking and take it home for the pot. They are a bit like chicken, only saltier.*

*If I am middle class I can ride a horse, but that will predominantly be for recreational purposes. I have to ride side saddle, wearing a frankly ridiculous get up involving petticoats and a corset. Side-saddle was invented in about 1382 when Princess Anne of Bohemia was required to ride across Europe on a horse to marry Richard II. It was believed that riding side-saddle would preserve her virginity. Riding side-saddle is exceedingly dangerous, not only to ones virginity but also to one's life – many women have died when they have fallen from their mount, been caught up by their skirts and dragged to their death by their still galloping horse. So I think I will err on the side of caution and stay at home, for the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

*I married when I was 17. My father and mothers choice of husband – 15 years older than me, but a good provider. When we married, even though the Married Women's Property Act came in in 1884, At age 17 I had no property, and no income with which to buy any, and so I am bound inextricably to my husband for my support. I became Mrs William Smith. Our 3 children all died as infants, and he now spends most of his time with his much younger*

*mistress. I spend most of my time at home doing needlework and playing the piano. Sometimes I go outside and feed the seagulls, for company.*

*It sucks that I have to call myself Mrs William Smith, knowing what Mr William Smith is up to when he isn't with me, but if I divorce him I have no legal rights, and no means of support.*

- 2. The Practise Manager and the looming photo-shoot. I don't have a Practise Manager. I don't even have a job, even though I'm working class. I had 2 years at Primary school but then, like most girls, I was forced to leave because education is more important for boys, we didn't have enough shoes for all of us to be able to walk 3 miles to school each day, and my mum needed me at home to help with the little kids. But if I did get a job, it would be working 12 hours a day in a factory.*

*The only haircut I have ever had is from my mother and involved a pudding bowl, and her dressmaking shears.*

*I am not overweight, because there are 11 kids in my family and most nights a few of us have to take turn-about going without dinner. Unless it's been a good day and Mum has found a dead seagull.*

*I might get pregnant at about 16. There is a reasonable chance the father will be related to me. My father will make him marry me.*

*He has given me a venereal disease. Following the Contagious Diseases Act 1869, I can be compulsorily tested and confined to a hospital for treatment. My husband, by contrast, will suffer no such indignity and will re-infect me again and again, and also my eldest daughters. The Police, if I were to tell them, would do nothing – the word of a woman and her daughters holds no sway with the Constabulary; it is a domestic issue.*

*He will also drink and he will beat me and my kids just like my own father did. There is no contraception, and so the kids just keep on coming – on average women in the 1990's will have 7 children. But I won't be able to leave him, because how would I support myself and my kids? There is no social security yet.*

*If I am middle class I may have had more education – possibly even to secondary level. After that, I might work for a few years as a teacher or a nurse or a secretary. My wages will, on average, be less than half those of men working in comparable positions. I will be subjected to unbridled discrimination of every type in the workplace. I would continue to live at home with my parents, until I marry a Principal, a Doctor or my boss, and immediately have multiple children. Perhaps 11.*

*I saw a seagull once when we went to the beach on the only family holiday we ever had – at Karitane – 2 days by carriage up the coast from Dunedin.*

- 3. The traveller and the lost phone. The only travelling my family has ever done was 20,000 kms and 120 days from Britain to Dunedin – the longest and most dangerous journey of migration in human history. After that, "travel" and "fun" just shouldn't be mentioned in the same sentence.*

*I never want to see another seagull as long as I live. Let alone eat one.*

*Once you left Britain, you never expect to see your family there again. Or talk to them. It is 1893. Phones were invented in 1876, but we don't have them in Dunedin yet. You might get a letter every year.*

4. *The dog. We don't have dogs for pets. They only increase the fleas, and the fleas are bad enough already. And there is no daycare for children, let alone dogs. If you are a middle-aged woman in NZ and your daughter gets a job, you look after her children – that's your job.*
5. *The towels. I brought some towels out from England in my hope chest. 10 years and 7 children later they're not looking their best, despite the fact that I wash them once a month whether they need it or not. I wash them by hand then boil them in the copper over the open fire, then I put them through the wringer by hand. Then I hang them out and hope they don't get cacked on by bloody seagulls. I hate seagulls. The washing takes up a whole day of each week, so I don't want to be washing the bloody towels twice.*

*And so it was for women in the 1890's in NZ.*

*A very far cry from our lives today.*

*And the worst, the very worst thing about it all, was that women had no real ability to change anything about their own lives. By our standards, most women didn't really "live" life as such – it just happened to them.*

*While many men in 19<sup>th</sup> century also had quite grim lives, the difference for them was that they were regarded, without question, as those who called the shots. They had rights. Their resources might have been limited, but they could do whatever they wanted with those resources. Their work was paid, they had control over their social engagement with the world – they could do what they wanted, with whomever they wanted- and they did.*

*They had legal rights in relation to their own property, they could make a Will, and they could vote. Women had none of that.*

*And so achieving the vote in 1893 was about so much more than the physical act of going to the polls. It was about starting a journey towards having some control and some choice over how we lived our lives, a journey that still continues as we now grapple with issues like sexual harassment in the workplace, equal representation across all of the legal profession, and pay equity.*

*When you look through the exhibition, you will be struck by the many large and small ways in which women's lives changed after suffrage. The change was profound and permanent, and no aspect of women's lives was unaffected. I particularly love the way that changes to women's clothing can be seen as a monitor of social change – as if gradually casting off and emancipating ourselves from the restrictive clothing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a metaphor for women's simultaneous social and political emancipation.*

*Please take the time to go to the exhibition. Take your children – boys and girls. And take your mothers – they'll love it. And remember your grandmothers and your great grandmothers and the sacrifices that they made, so that you could be here today.*

*Thankyou.*