

Many a Slip 'twixt Cup and the Lip: Equal Opportunity and Victorian Golf Clubs

Marnie Haig-Muir

All the pursuits of men can naturally be assigned to women also, but in all of them a woman is weaker than a man.¹

The 'booby prize' — a replica of a woman's breast — for the men's monthly medal trophy, an annual general meeting motion to reduce women's rights, and the executive director of a state-level sporting organisation denied entrée to a business meeting because it happened to be held at a prestigious metropolitan club that bars females from that particular *sanctum sanctorum* on Saturdays. Where, when and in what sport? In golf clubs during the late 1990s in Victoria, a state which prides itself on its pre-eminence in both sport and sporting events.²

The gendering of golf as sport and space has been achieved through measures ranging from subtle pressures to outright exclusion. Whatever its form—overt or covert, structural or systemic, subtle or blatant, intentional or unintentional, in the clubhouse or on the course — the end result is the same: women have fewer choices and less power than men.

Discrimination against women golfers is as long as the history of the sport itself. Swept along on the tide of Empire, the game of golf spread from Britain across the Anglophone world in the late-nineteenth century. The establishment of clubs followed close behind. Creatures of the times, golf clubs were sporting extensions of late Victorian 'clubland', which was 'an almost exclusively, and often aggressively, masculine sphere'.³ Golf's development in Australia largely mirrored contemporary English attitudes, values and practices in terms of both class and gender. True to their cultural genesis,⁴ Australian golf clubs quickly coalesced into bastions of middle-class male élitism and privilege. Women's access to, and participation in, sporting and social activities was accordingly controlled, constrained and channelled in the interests of hegemonic masculinity. Objections to the fair sex playing golf included their supposed frivolity and propensity to chatter, their general inability to treat the game seriously, the worry it would lead to 'de-feminisation', and the ways in which men could be distracted from their own game.

A Woman's Place is . . . ?

If [women] choose to play at times when the male golfers are feeding or resting, no one can object . . . at all other times they are in the way.⁵

So long as men's space, priority and privileges remained sacrosanct, golf has long been accepted as an 'appropriate' sporting activity for 'respectable' women. But barriers based on spurious reasons related to anatomy, temperament, intellectual capability, and dress at first confined female golfers to putting, i.e. restricted movements in a confined, designated, and separate space. Financial and other pressures eventually forced the male executives of clubs to reconsider their exclusionary stance, and club hierarchies gradually succumbed—but only to a point. Women's golf may have been tolerated as 'a gentle counterpoise to tea and gossip',⁶ but full membership and its concomitant privileges, including voting rights, was confined to males.

Prior to the passage of the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act (1984), and various states' equal opportunity (EO) legislation of the 1970s and '80s, women could only join Australian golf clubs only as 'associate' members who paid lower fees but had significantly inferior rights on the course and in the clubhouse.⁷ Perhaps this was, as one club historian observed, 'reasonable . . . in an age when few prospective women members had jobs',⁸ but it certainly created a relationship of dependency. The vast majority of 'associates' were married, or otherwise closely related to male club members, and financially dependent.⁹ Ladies of leisure, they were free to play on weekdays or at other times that least inconvenienced the men. Crucially, the social construction of the world most of these women occupied, and the values with which women of their class were imbued, legitimated norms or benchmarks predicated on the inherently superior rights of males to enjoy the benefits of sport and sporting space.¹⁰ Few were ideologically inclined to challenge their lowly status in the existing gender order.

No detailed studies have yet been done on the equal opportunity debate and its ambiguous results in Australian golf and other sporting clubs. But with the vast majority of 1970s golf club 'associates' apparently acculturated to their secondary status, it is arguable that most of them regarded EO as of no immediate relevance. More importantly, for many male and female golf club members of the time, the 'radical' changes inherent in the proposed legislation threatened the comfortable certainties of their familiar social order, and were therefore the subject of deep suspicion.

With rare exceptions, golf clubs worldwide have been constructed as 'normally' masculine space. However, the majority of 'associates' do not seem to mind being comfortably incorporated into the male-dominated power

hierarchies of golf clubs. For although threats to their territory and/or established privileges may have been strenuously resisted by 'associates', minimal enthusiasm has been shown in contesting matters falling within the public sphere, i.e. the wider club domain controlled by their menfolk. Women's subcommittees had (and still have) highly circumscribed spheres of influence and no official role other than running 'women's golf' within a club. They rule the roost on designated 'ladies' days', and organise and run women's competitions and special events. But until EO legislation forced the issue, 'associates' had neither vote nor voice in broader club concerns. The historical origins of the situation where women golfers and 'the club' were seen as separate entities are well illustrated by the wording and intent of one of the three resolutions passed at a meeting of Melbourne (later Royal Melbourne) Golf Club members held in 1892 to discuss the admission of 'ladies' as 'Associates of the Club'.

The Lady Associates shall have no voice in the management of the Club, but they may enact such rules as they deem proper for their own section—always provided that they do not conflict with those of the Club.¹¹

In financial terms golf in Australia is relatively egalitarian and accessible. With a plethora of public courses and annual fees said to be amongst the lowest in the world,¹² golf stands second only to aerobics/fitness as the nation's most popular participatory sport.¹³ Australia-wide, 1.33 million people (9.8 per cent of the adult population) played golf in 1998–99 of whom 589,000 were club members.¹⁴ The sport's masculinity however is marked. Of the 1.12 million Australians recorded as golfers in 1997–98 only 242,500 were female.¹⁵ A 1996 state government survey showed that some 9.2 per cent of adult Victorians played golf. The study also showed that of those golfers 261,000 were males and only 61,000, females (or 5.1 per cent of males and 1.4 per cent of females), and that only 3 per cent of Melbourne's female population plays golf compared with 15 per cent of males. 'The rest of Victoria' fared little better with 15 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women playing the game.¹⁶

Females currently represent just over a quarter of total golf club membership in Victoria, slightly above the national average.¹⁷ While that appears relatively healthy, closer scrutiny suggests otherwise. Little, if any, empirical research has been done in the area,¹⁸ but the data available shows female club golfers to be significantly older than their male counterparts. With few younger women replacing aging and/or retiring players female club membership is greying rapidly.¹⁹ Junior club membership figures, moreover, show boys outnumbering girls by eight to one in both metropolitan and country areas. In Melbourne, the masculinity ratio at public course clubs (where entry costs are very low) is a

staggering 57:1.²⁰ The implications of these figures are significant for the future health and funding both of the sport and its governing bodies.

While golf itself seems to be thriving, current trends do not augur well for the future of women's club golf. Much more work is needed to obtain a detailed picture, but the fragments of evidence to hand strongly suggest that the majority of women who belong to golf clubs are becoming increasingly atypical of broader Australian society in the early twenty-first century. They are overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Celtic, middle- or upper middle-class, middle-aged or older, married/widowed, and do not work for a living.²¹ As a group they are more representative of an earlier era and its (idealised) values than of today's world. For the lives, lifestyles and expectations of many Australian women have changed markedly over the past quarter century. Australia-wide, between 1966 and 1998 female labour force participation rates rose from 36.3 per cent to 54 per cent and by 1997–98, females represented 43.2 per cent of the national (paid) workforce.²²

Women golfers and would-be golfers whose needs are not suited by the current club system are voting with their feet. In the mid-1990s Maisie Mooney, Executive Director of Women's Golf Australia (WGA), drew attention to the 'increasing number of women who are not attached to private clubs taking to golf ...'.²³ While women and girls apparently enjoy the game, they mostly prefer to play outside club structures (and strictures). A 1996 Women's Golf Victoria (WGV) survey found that only 22% of female golfers were club members and of these, two-thirds belonged to private clubs, and one-third to public course clubs.²⁴ As a result, the current ratio of female 'casual/social' players to club members is estimated to be 3:1.²⁵ Nationwide, WGA's research has found that there are 'approximately 220,000 Australian women who play golf to some degree but who are not registered members of clubs.'²⁶ At the same time, WGV statistics show total female membership of Victorian clubs to be in secular decline, dropping by 1024 (c.3 per cent) between 1994 and 1999. Over the past twenty-five years the number of women holding an Australian official (golf) handicap rose by only 4 per cent (from 103,000 to a peak of 107,000).²⁷ Numbers have since dropped to 104,180.²⁸ During the same period, according to an article written in May 1998, 'the number of male players [with handicaps] ... skyrocketed, by 93 per cent, from 200,000 to just over 386,000'

Challenging the 'comfort zone'

Golf clubs are facing a serious problem, although many members and officials seem blissfully unaware of, and unconcerned by, a situation of direct relevance to their future viability. Few appear willing and/or able to tackle the root causes. Research on this subject is incomplete, but all indications so far suggest that the number of women members is declining in both absolute and relative terms

in most golf clubs. More importantly, as female membership steadily ages a number of factors come into play which militate against any significant change in direction. The net effect is to produce an increasing divergence between the male and female membership of clubs in terms of gender balance, age, occupational status, disposable income and, in some cases, social values. This combination, in turn, reinforces existing gender power hierarchies and outdated attitudes towards women's 'place' in the scheme of things.

At the same time many clubs are anxious to attract more players, and the money that comes with them. Yet few officials or policy-makers have kept abreast of the effects that fundamental socio-demographic and economic change has had on their sport and its longstanding structures, systems and practices. Little heed has been paid to the implications for clubs of modern life and lifestyles, particularly the requirements of business and otherwise busy people whose leisure activities must fit into already crowded schedules.

For a variety of reasons, many of them historical or 'traditional', the club system's general reluctance to accommodate change and move with the times has disadvantaged women more than men. This obduracy is not confined to Australia, of course. Despite increasing legislative pressure for equal opportunity, golf in the US and the UK is also prone to similarly sexist attitudes and behaviour.²⁹ Club organisation, sporting and social, generally remains fixed in a gender order more suited to earlier eras when far fewer women worked for a living, especially after marriage, and where men controlled family finances. This situation adversely affects the sport's future health and vitality because

[t]he biggest new area of business [in development programs] has come from women in their early 20s to late 40s. Market research undertaken by Women's Golf Victoria shows that 60 per cent of women who play golf are tertiary educated, have an average income of \$38,000 and are mainly in professional type jobs. From this research *we are able to determine the exact needs of these women and tailor golf to suit their busy lifestyles.*³⁰

With almost nine out of every ten women golfers in the workforce currently playing at public courses,³¹ and, as mentioned earlier, with three women playing outside the club system for each one in it, a significant sector of the sport's market remains untapped by the clubs. These same players are also 'lost' to the various systems, structures and organisations — local, district, state and/or national — associated with 'organised' golf. But there has been little sign of any concerted effort so far from the club system to tackle the necessary cultural changes needed to attract a potentially lucrative market.

On the face of it Australian women golfers and would-be golfers are in a strong position to effect change particularly as the peak bodies controlling

women's golf, state and national, are themselves controlled completely by women. Yet despite this organisational strength, and major shifts in workforce composition and other characteristics of the broader Australian community, the attitudes of many of those in golf clubs, men and women, remain firmly fixed in the past.

Golf clubs tend to be conservative and traditional organisations run by committees of well-meaning, but rarely well-qualified, volunteers. In important ways, most clubs are 'frozen fragments' of the 1950s where 'tradition'³² and an idealised matrix of gender roles are often invoked to legitimate existing practices and power relationships. Inertia is substantial, as is more active resistance to change. In terms of gender hierarchies, this has meant that women have rarely had equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of full membership to the same extent as their male counterparts. Much importance is attached to minimising conflict, and the status quo remains largely sacrosanct. Within this 'comfort zone' anachronistic normative assumptions, which perpetuate women's subordinate status, shape social constructions of reality and underpin arguments against major change.³³ Significantly, this hegemonic masculinity is endorsed by a majority of both male and female club members. Greater diversity and/or flexibility is seen as inimical and, hence, threatening to 'traditional' club systems, structures and practices.

As Boyle and McKay found when studying lawn bowls -Thompson with tennis, and Bricknell with yachting — incorporation (into the maintenance and reproduction of existing institutions, structures and power relationships) is rife amongst women members of clubs.³⁴ The same is true of golf. Existing women members can usually be relied upon to provide trenchant, if quiet, opposition to anything more than a cosmetic rearrangement of their sector of the 'comfort zone'. In a nutshell, the status quo suits them, their partners (where applicable), lifestyles and world view. They are generally happy with their place in the present scheme of things and see no sound reason to 'rock the boat'. Weekday golf, usually scheduled to take up much of the day, is seen as a congenial way of occupying one's recreational and social time.

Even in the year 2000 many club members, women and men, still refer to Saturdays as 'men's day'. Suggesting that a qualifying round of the (women's) club championship be played on a weekend, or that a Saturday event for women be added to club Open Week tournaments is likely to produce a chorus of dissent along the lines of 'we don't want to spoil things'. But spoil things for whom? As a memo from WGV reminded women's committees of affiliated golf clubs and districts in August 1997: 'business women are not able to participate in the normal program of women's golf. In most cases these women pay fees equal to, or in some cases, higher than, those paid by the majority of women members'.³⁵ For these higher fees, often substantially more, working

women get seriously diminished access to competition and special events that are still almost universally held on weekdays. Complaints and complainants are likely to get short shrift from both male and female members who are suited by the present system, and thus disinclined to disturb the status quo.

‘Caught’

After a raft of federal and state anti-discrimination and EO legislation was passed during the late 1970s and 1980s,³⁶ Victorian golf clubs were expected to transform time-honoured ‘traditional’ practices and modify the dominant masculine culture to allow women equal rights with men on the course, in the club and in the clubhouse. In April 1981 Brian Dixon, Minister for Youth, Sport and Recreation in the Hamer Liberal government, released a Green Paper entitled ‘The development of sport in Victoria’. The tenor of the ‘Women in sport’ section alarmed some sporting bodies, the (men’s) Victorian Golf Association (VGA) amongst them. The question of Saturday play for women golfers was specifically targeted in a letter from the VGA warning the Victorian Ladies’ Golf Union (VLGU) of the possible implications of proposed government anti-discrimination initiatives. With EO now looming as a serious threat, the VGA geared up for action.³⁷

The principal actors in what developed into a serial drama included: the federal and Victorian state governments; the Equal Opportunity Commission and its successors; the Human Rights Commission; peak bodies— AGU, VGA, ALGU/WGA, VLGU/WGV,³⁸ their staff and councils; and the clubs themselves. For its part the EO Commission played both an educational and an enforcement role. The Human Rights Commission stepped into the arena in cases where legal rulings were required. Explanation, interpretation and much of the implementation of official government policy was left to what were essentially committees of golf club members, i.e. groups typically likely to resist most fiercely fundamental change in golf club ‘comfort zones’. Salaried secretaries of the peak bodies perched uneasily between government, their organisations and the clubs.³⁹ Major battle zones included: subscription rates and membership categories; voting rights; playing times and days (especially course access on Saturdays); men’s long-standing entitlement to ‘play through’; the legality of single-sex teams and competitions; handicapping; access to previously restricted parts of clubhouses; the role/s and powers of women’s committees; the control of women’s section monies; representation on club committees; and whether women should continue to perform quasi-domestic services like catering, cleaning, waiting on tables, and floral arrangements.

The forces of resistance mobilised in mid-1981 when the VGA sought VLGU approval for a joint ‘final submission’ to the Victorian government before the act was brought down. Approval was given and the submission sent to both

the Premier and the Minister on 21 July 1981. Two months later at the executive's behest, council agreed to support the VGA's submission after 'four written replies had been received from clubs all of which agreed with the submission's general argument that government interference on this matter was not wanted or needed'.⁴⁰ With around 335 clubs in the state at the time four replies is, of course, a woefully low (and statistically insignificant) response rate to what purported to be a survey of opinion about a highly contentious issue.⁴¹ But official opinion proclaimed that 'since the draft of this submission had been taken by all Council members, for discussion with those whom they represent, it was felt that the Union could fairly say that a survey had been done'.⁴²

'A summary of the feelings of our members, as the VLGU Executive sees them' was forwarded to EO Board Commissioner Joan Dwyer.⁴³ 'This summary was presented to ... Council, and comments invited. As there have been few comments, we feel it can be taken as it is, although it is not based on any real survey.'⁴⁴ Two years later the men's and women's state peak bodies combined to lodge another joint submission (21 July 1983), in which they applied for golf clubs to be exempt from part/s of the EO legislation, particularly the right to run separate competitions for women and men.⁴⁵ This issue generated much concern, and a flurry of correspondence ensued within and between VLGU/VGA and clubs on the one hand, and the government on the other. The matter was eventually resolved by a special amendment tabled by the then Premier John Cain in his capacity as Victorian Attorney-General.⁴⁶

Feelings were running high in some quarters. Sporting clubs had been specifically exempted from the provisions of the 1977 Victorian EO Act because, as Premier Cain put it: 'The previous [Liberal] Government took the view that by a process of community education the discrimination practised by sporting clubs against women in particular would be eliminated.' But further action was necessary because, he continued '[i]t is abundantly clear that that approach has failed miserably.'⁴⁷ Whereas clubs using Crown land, or receiving state or local government financial concessions were now clearly in the catchment of the newly amended Victorian EO Act, clubs on private land initially thought they would escape unscathed. However, it soon became clear that they too would be 'caught' via the nexus between EO and liquor licensing laws.⁴⁸

The amended Act of 1984 required all Victorian licensed clubs, sporting and otherwise, which admitted both males and females to membership (of any category) to end discriminatory practices like 'white lines' in public areas of the club, and gender-specific membership categories. Liquor licences would be withdrawn or withheld from any club which flouted the law. For most 'caught clubs' the threat of losing their licence was far worse than the thought of letting women take an equal place in the club. But in some cases reactions were particularly vindictive and/or petty. Devoid of voting power, women

'associates' had no direct influence on discussions or decisions about how their club's compliance with the act would affect them. Then Secretary to the VLGU, Kay Mahlook informed the Equal Opportunity Board that '[i]n many clubs this is being done without consultation with the women in the clubs.' Moreover, she continued,

In some [clubs], the women have been told that their Committee must be abolished ... Even in cases where women have been included in the deliberations, they are usually ignorant of the requirements of the Act, outnumbered in the meetings and anxious to preserve harmony within their club in the face of what is sometimes a reactionary and threatened atmosphere.⁴⁹

Some clubs took a punitive approach. In many cases women's fees were sharply increased, often nearly doubled, for the same rights and privileges they had previously enjoyed as 'associates'. Since women generally used their (restricted) memberships less than men, many people strenuously objected to the new fee schedules. Some even resigned from their club rather than pay higher fees. With men's fees rarely lowered commensurately, some resignations appear to have been from wives pressured by husbands unwilling, or unable, to pay two full memberships.⁵⁰ Where the option was offered, a number became weekday members.

In the 1980s, the administrators of women's golf apparently saw EO as an ideologically driven, unwarranted and unwanted interference in long-standing arrangements that had worked well for their traditional constituency, i.e. leisured women who could play golf during weekdays. Consequently, expressions of concern for working women's sporting interests are notably absent from existing records. Nearly twenty years later, EO legislation is still being blamed for the sport's woes (for which read structural problems and declining membership). Anne Court, immediate past President of WGV, said only last year: 'All *women's* subscription fees escalated, many *people* could not afford to remain members of clubs ... so membership numbers started to dwindle.'⁵¹ The AGU's suggestion that 'lack of significant growth of female membership may be due to anti-discrimination legislation outlawing cheaper "associate" membership for women',⁵² is at best ill-informed, and, quite likely, disingenuous. The causal connections are far more complex than that.

'Associate member is a time-honoured title'

The VLGU's pattern of response to the proposed Equal Opportunity policy initiatives of the 1980s is instructive. Their initial response seems to have been to ignore the matter in the hope that political enthusiasm would wane, and the issue wither on the vine. Despite clear signs that was not likely to happen, and

that change was in the wind even with a Liberal state government still in power, new legislation apparently came as an unwelcome surprise. While some individuals might well have been sympathetic to the notion, the collective response suggests a strong organisational preference for a 'business as usual' attitude. A letter from the Presidents of the VGA and the VLGU in late 1982 set the scene. It states baldly: 'Legislation of an anti-discriminatory nature is unnecessary for golf clubs and would be to the detriment of the game.'⁵³ And although a subcommittee was established to determine VLGU policy on EO, extant records suggest that whenever and wherever the issue was discussed, the principal focus remained on minutiae and/or practical 'housekeeping' matters like handicapping or course ratings.⁵⁴

There was no apparent interest evinced in the wider picture or in contesting what seems to have been considered rightfully male territory; in fact, quite the contrary. A council minute records: '[O]n the question of discrimination against women *the VLGU has no policy on the advancement of women's rights in golf clubs since our members have not requested it.*'⁵⁵ Any question of taking a leadership role on questions of equity, or in critically examining the assumptions and values underpinning existing gender hierarchies simply did not arise. The VLGU apparently saw its role as protecting the status quo rather than widening its brief to include working women. With the organisation's policy-making bodies seemingly unwilling to address the broader implications of EO, much of the work at this critical stage — meetings, surveys and negotiations with various parties — seems to have been left to Kay Mahlook.

The campaign opposing EO legislation seems to have been largely led by the VGA, which was concerned, amongst other things, about the level and division of future government funding for the sport. A document drafted by VGA officials and sent to the VLGU for approval prior to a (joint) submission to the Minister says much about both the strength of opposition and the depth of incomprehension prevailing in official circles. Under a heading 'Women being limited to Associate Members because of their sex' the draft reads,

Associate member is a time honoured title for women members ...
 It is *certainly non-discriminatory to limit the title associate member to women golfers.* The rights of an associate is [sic] a different issue ...
 Until the seventies, the usual arrangement was that an associate paid half the subscription payable by a man member and had restricted rights. By selecting times, associates were usually able to play on as many weekdays as desired. It was different at weekends — golf was not available on Saturdays, and was unsatisfactory on Sundays *because of the large number of men playing who had priority.* The associate who did not go out to work was

content with the arrangement ... It was different with associates who studied or worked outside the home Monday to Friday as they were able to play very little golf.⁵⁶

Apparently unaware of its fundamentally flawed logic, the draft then urged clubs to move

towards equal playing rights on Sundays [although] equal priority for men and women on Sundays as well as Saturdays is considered impracticable in Melbourne clubs. ... [V]ery few [existing] associates would pay a man's subscription to obtain equal priority on a Saturday as well as a Sunday, particularly with the prospect of no competition because of small numbers. ... The development of flexibility in employment should give associates going out to work the opportunity of playing associates' competition days and this, with Sunday play should satisfy all but the very few. ... [A]rrangements for play and priority and the rights of women should remain with the individual clubs and not be the subject of amendment to the Act.⁵⁷

There was some urgency if long-standing traditional power hierarchies, privileges and institutions were to be protected from reformist zealots as incumbent Liberals were likely to be replaced at the next election by a Labor government. Specially worrying for sports conservatives was Brian Dixon's likely replacement: 'Labour [sic] MP and long time campaigner for equal rights, Mrs Pauline Toner, [who] is less restrained on the subject than her opponent ... Confident of a Labour [sic] win in next year's State elections, Pauline Toner is warning that the [sporting] clubs had better begin preparing for amendments to the Equal Opportunity Act, which will make anti-discriminatory policies an "absolute certainty".⁵⁸ Their concern was well-founded. Shortly after being elected to office in 1982, the Cain Labor government began a campaign of action designed to end discrimination in sporting clubs.

Equal enjoyment of the sport

In the state of Victoria, discrimination on the basis of sex, race and other grounds was outlawed in 1977, but over a decade later little had changed in golf clubs which were identified as amongst the worst offenders in a 1983 state EO Board report on sporting clubs.⁵⁹ Nine out of ten Victorian golf clubs still denied women full membership, a figure Premier John Cain was determined to slash. 'It simply means that 50 per cent of our population are discriminated against and that's quite unacceptable. [Even though] ... the systematic exclusion of women from enjoying the full benefits of membership has been a traditional feature of most sporting clubs over many years'⁶⁰ Cain subsequently introduced a Bill to

Parliament in 1983 which was designed to amend the Victorian EO Act (1977) in ways which would effectively force recalcitrant clubs into line, or pay heavy penalties. Significantly, it was not only the men's golf organisations or male club members who were guilty of stymieing EO recommendations. VLGU President Burtta Cheney, for one, staunchly defended the 'traditional' status quo. 'You know what you are going into and you accept the conditions ... as far as the private clubs go, they can make any rules they wish, and if you don't like them, you can join another club. ... We don't want the men playing on our days any more than they want us on theirs.' Her views were strongly supported by Victorian Golf Association president, Keith Alcock, who declared that 'most clubs gave women "a good go"'.⁶¹

In reply, Assistant Commissioner Ian Siggins warned that, 'the Victorian Ladies Golf Union which opposes the Government's move, could not speak for "all those other women who are denied an equal chance to play golf by discriminatory membership categories"'. To which Burtta Cheney responded testily that "'a tremendous majority" of women who held associate membership at golf clubs did not want to become full members'.⁶² Perhaps not, but under the new legislation having the option would not be optional.

In September 1985 EO Commissioner Fay Marles addressed Victorian golf club representatives to try to allay fears and clarify matters of principle, practice and procedure related to Equal Opportunity.⁶³ She stressed that there would be no exceptions because 'all golf clubs will come under either the State or Federal Acts, or both'. While men's and women's golf could legitimately 'be regarded as different sports',⁶⁴ any form of 'discrimination on the basis of sex' was illegal. The section of Marles' address on 'the intent and philosophy behind the Act as it applies to golf clubs' is worth quoting in full.

Sport is central to social structures, business and political life. The present structure of clubs and playing of the sport very largely reduces the ability of women in the workforce to actually participate on an equal basis with men. Working people can usually only play on the weekend, but in a number of golf clubs women's ability to play during the weekend is greatly reduced. *The whole question of enjoyment of the sport is denied to women as it is not denied to men.*⁶⁵

This 'question of enjoyment of the sport' cuts right to the heart of gender discrimination in golf and golf clubs, as Keperra Golf Club in Brisbane found to its cost in December 1985.⁶⁶ Immediately after the passage of the federal Sex Discrimination Act (1984), an action was brought against Keperra by a group of women full members of the club who were restricted to limited tee-times on Saturdays. The case was heard by the Human Rights Commission in December 1985. In a key decision of on-going significance for sports clubs Dame Roma

Mitchell ruled against Keperra on the grounds that the women did not have equal enjoyment of the sport and its benefits. This landmark ruling has received widespread publicity throughout the Australian sporting world, and is highlighted by both the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Australian Sports Commission in their guidelines on women, sport and sex discrimination.

Yet six years later we find the VLGU Secretary's report to council on the 1991 Canberra 'Equity in Sport' seminar⁶⁷ still reminding her organisation that 'women's golf is the only sport, beside women's bowls, where all important competitions are held during the week'.⁶⁸ A suggestion that it might be 'time to consider conducting events at weekends' drew little response. Without any apparent sense of irony the VLGU council, clearly worried about declining membership and future funding implications, announced at the same meeting that the

'mission' or theme of all our operations is to reverse the decline in women's membership in city clubs. Captains were asked to take responsibility for addressing the problem because if it was not affecting their club now, it soon will be. A close look at the age distribution in one major club shows 50% of the women are over 60 and only 10% under 45.⁶⁹

Three years later, newly appointed Executive Director Ann-Maree Colborne embarked on what could be called a 'silent cultural revolution'.⁷⁰ EO was made a high priority for the VLGU along with various policy changes designed to modernise the organisation's image and operations. In 1995, the VLGU became Women's Golf Victoria (WGV) as part of nationwide move to adopt standardised nomenclature for women's golf peak bodies. Since 1994, VLGU/WGV has become far more proactive and generally supportive in the equal opportunity area. A good example of this is a plain language guide on EO and anti-discrimination issues that WGV sent to affiliated golf clubs in the mid-1990s. Its final section notes that:

the structure of some clubs has impeded the opportunities for membership and access to facilities for women and some other groups. ... Society is changing and all sporting organisations and clubs must keep abreast of issues and respond accordingly.⁷¹

Meeting the Market?

Response has been painfully slow. In August 1997 Colborne wrote to a Victorian government official.

Within my sport discrimination and harassment problems are

escalating from the private clubs, city and country areas to the small golf clubs. This is due to the success of the business women's development programs [through which] we are now attracting well educated, articulate women in club membership under 50 who are not prepared to put up with outdated practices and the education of the membership of their rights has created a number of challenges and identified a number of discrimination issues which still exist. *Most of these issues could be dealt with [through] an education program and a commitment by club management to change.*⁷²

Given the profile and attitudes of existing female club membership, the lack of major events for women on weekends, and continued hostility from a significant minority of males towards women playing on Saturdays, it is not surprising that few women have taken up full membership. Some clubs have, of course, embraced the spirit of the new era. But in many others women who want to play on Saturdays continue to be effectively stymied by (illegal) by-laws in their constitutions or other rules that restrict times or set minimum numbers for competitions. Women who are prepared to challenge these practices must also be prepared to brave some most unpleasant consequences — with or without support from peak organisations.

With rare exceptions, significant commitment to real change, especially cultural change, seems to have been notably absent all round. Thanks to EO legislation — and a few path-breakers who have been prepared to brave considerable opposition and odium — women are now eligible for full membership in most clubs. Thus formal change, whilst slow and sometimes grudging, is now a *fait accompli*. Cultural change, however has proved much more difficult. With claims that 'the current player base could be increased by at least 50%',⁷³ the economic stakes are high for clubs and peak organisations alike because funding for both depends on numbers of registered players. But little of significance has altered in what could be called the 'associates' syndrome' in club golf, while the 'comfort zone' remains largely intact. Female membership is steadily greying and, with minor exceptions, all women's competitions and events are still held on weekdays. As a consequence, only women who are free to play during the week have true equality of 'enjoyment of the sport' even in the year 2000. Juniors, students, young married women with children, and working women are all conspicuously absent from golf club membership. 'Traditional' inflexible structures and systems do not meet their needs, and few clubs appear willing to embark on the kinds of changes necessary to accommodate new and different groups of members.

In 1996 Maisie Mooney declared that: 'WGA's mission is to encourage more women to play and participate in all aspects of golf'.⁷⁴ But, as American

sportswomen have found with Title IX, nearly two decades of EO have not produced real equality or, more importantly, equity in golf clubs. Put another way, Equal Opportunity has not secured equal opportunity. Aside from questions of 'fair play', ignorance still abounds about what is and is not lawful under EO and anti-discrimination law. For example, in late 1998 one golf club manager authoritatively informed his committee of management that, 'most cases of equal opportunity between men and women are settled simply by allocating equal playing time etc to each'.⁷⁵ That course of action is clearly in breach of the landmark *Keperra* decision — a legal precedent that golf officials at all levels should surely be familiar with.⁷⁶

Games off the course notwithstanding, golf remains a sport of 'fundamental fairness' and 'ethical purity'. But a depressing and frustrating obduracy about confronting the real nature, magnitude and implications of equal opportunity pervades most clubs. Nevertheless, as costs and members' expectations continually rise, it is clearly in clubs' financial interests to broaden their membership base. For women, options like child-minding facilities, more nine-hole competitions, and holding some serious events on weekends, or late afternoons in summer offer substantial benefits and flexibility to groups of golfers whose needs are not met by the present system. In economic terms it is a win-win approach because negative impact on present weekday golfers and their 'comfort zone' would appear to be minimal. In the absence of any research on the issue, the potential downside effects on conservative club culture can only be the subject of speculation.

WGV and WGA have been actively working for some time to attract more females to golf. Several WGV development programs saw a threefold increase (to 90,261) in the number of women playing golf between 1995 and 1997. Programs like these, and those of WGA,⁷⁷ have encouraged women and girls to take to golf with great gusto.⁷⁸ But rising female participation rates have not been reflected in club membership. In 1998 Ann-Maree Colborne noted:

Since 1994 more than 69,000 new [female] participants have taken to the game with 11,000 new participants in the last 12 months. The increase is from women not associated with a club. *They are women who have a busy lifestyle and just want to get out and enjoy the game without the constraints of being attached to a private club.*⁷⁹

Financial self-interest, if nothing else, suggests that it is time for clubs to become proactive on equal opportunity and related matters. Women already outnumber men in Australia and trends towards greater female workforce participation show no signs of abating. As groups playing outside 'organised golf' grow in numbers and influence, Maisie Mooney warned clubs that they were losing ground.

[WGA] research indicates that private club membership is becoming less of an imperative to participants for a variety of reasons. ... lack of equality and access, together with a conservative culture and outdated dress codes were the most prevalent. Women were also concerned that they did not have time to commit to the wider demands of club membership, such as serving on committee, playing club competitions and attending special functions.

The Anti-Discrimination and Sex Discrimination Acts have not been as effective as hoped and there is no doubt that there are still significant challenges. WGA and its state affiliates are receiving an increasing number of requests for advice and guidance in these areas and, while the issues ultimately are internal matters ... our position is that clubs must provide for the needs of both women and men ... through an appropriate social justice and equity policy ... These rights of access reflect the laws of the country ...³⁰

When it comes to 'enjoyment of the game' women may have attained Equal Opportunity, but as we enter the new millennium equal opportunity and equity remain tantalisingly elusive.

Notes

- 1 Plato, 'Republic', in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 4th edn, vol. II, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1953, p. 310.
- 2 Personal communications, A.-M. Colborne, Executive Director, Women's Golf Victoria, 1997, 1998; letter, A.-M. Colborne to D. Fox, Executive Director, Victorian Golf Association, 22 August 1999 (WGV files).
- 3 J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public spirit. A social history of Britain 1870-1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 27.
- 4 R. Holt, 'Golf and the English suburb: class and gender in a London club, c.1890–c. 1960', *The Sports Historian*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 76-89; R. Holt, *Stanmore Golf Club 1893-1993: A social history*, Stanmore Golf Club, London, 1993; J. Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995.
- 5 Lord Wellwood, 'General remarks on the game', in H. G. Hutchinson (ed.), *Golf*, 5th edn, Longmans Green, London, 1895.
- 6 D. Soutar, *The Australian Golfer*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1906, p. 138.
- 7 See, for example, J. Johnson, *The Royal Melbourne Golf Club. A centenary history*, Royal Melbourne Golf Club, Black Rock, Vic., 1991, pp. 47-53; J. Johnson, *Birdies and Billabongs. A history of the Kew Golf Club 1894–1994*, Kew Golf Club, East Kew, Vic., 1994, pp. 58–9; D. Lawrence, *Victoria Golf Club 1903–1988*, Lester-Townsend, Sydney, 1988, pp. 95-118; B. Meldrum & G. Mansfield, *Sand and Success. A history of Huntingdale Golf Club*, Huntingdale Golf Club, Huntingdale, Vic., 1996. pp. 73-9.
- 8 Johnson, *The Royal Melbourne Golf Club*, p. 49.

- 9 Most were either independently financially comfortable or supported by their menfolk.
- 10 Which is still the case today. S. M. Thompson, *Mother's Taxi. Sport and women's leisure*, SUNY, New York, 1999; L. G. Bricknell, 'Secret Men's Business': Gender, power and sport. A critical ethnography of a competitive sailing culture, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1998; M. Boyle & J. McKay, "'You Leave your Troubles at the Gate". A case study of older women's labor and "leisure" in sport', *Gender and Society*, vol. 9, no. 5, October 1995, pp. 556-75.
- 11 The Extraordinary General Meeting was held 17 September 1892. Johnson, *The Royal Melbourne Golf Club*, p. 49.
- 12 'Tee totals: the truth about golf', *Good Weekend*, 3 January 1998, p. 13.
- 13 Personal communication, Dr Ian Ford, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, November 1999.
- 14 *The Golfer*, vol. 6, no. 1, January 2000, p. 4.
- 15 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends 1999*, ABS, Canberra, 1999, p. 185.
- 16 Department of State Development, *The Business of Sport*, Sport and Recreation, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 39, 46, 48.
- 17 'The scorecard', *The Golfer*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1997. p. 1.
- 18 For example, clubs have rarely recorded applicants' ages other than junior and similar age-limited categories until very recently. Progressive introduction of the computerised *GolfLink* handicapping system into clubs from 2000 will eventually allow the development of a comprehensive data-base of members for peak bodies. Much will depend, however, on the willingness of present members to supply the necessary personal information to clubs.
- 19 Personal communication, Dr Ian Ford.
- 20 Regional District ratios vary between five in the Wimmera to twenty-one in Sunraysia. D. Fox, 'Shaping for a junior boom', *Golf in Victoria*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1998, p 4.
- 21 Fieldwork observation: personal communication, Dr Ian Ford.
- 22 'Welfare and society. Then and now', *Australian Financial Review*, 19 January 1998. Data source: Various ABS; Dept of the Parliamentary Library; EPAC Paper no. 12, 'Future labour market issues for Australia', July 1996; ABS, *Australian Social Trends 1999*, ABS, Canberra, 1999, pp. 98, 100.
- 23 'Women's golf is all the trend, Golf Show (The Golfer), May 1998. p.32.
- 24 Yann et al., Profile of women golfers, p. 12.
- 25 WGV data, 22 June 1998.
- 26 'Women's Golf Club', www.womensgolfaus.org.au/WGA%20Club.html#Top, accessed 2 June, 1999.
- 27 A. Main, 'Going a round with golf's cowboy outfits and fashion victims', *The Fin (Australian Financial Review Weekend)*, 16-17 May 1998, p. 3.
- 28 Personal communication, National Development Director WGA, May 1999. No response was received from AGU to enquiries about currently registered male players.
- 29 See, for example, M. Chambers, *The unplayable lie*, Golf Digest/Pocket Books, New York, 1995; J. Carter, 'Time to take a stand?', *Women and Golf*, Vol. 7, No. 7, April 1998, pp. 13-16; 'Sweet justice', *Women and Golf*, Vol. 9, No. 1, October 1999, p. 54; J. Carter, 'Thanks a bunch, gentlemen', *Women and Golf*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Jan/Feb. 2000, p. 2; B. D'Zurilla, 'Sex discrimination in golf',

- <http://womensgolf.about.com/sports/womensgolf/library/weekly/aa111999.htm>
 accessed 1 March, 1999; E. Earnshaw, 'Times are changing', *Women and Golf*, Vol. 9, No. 6, April 2000, p. 53.
- 30 'Women's golf is all the trend'. Emphases added.
 - 31 Yann et al., p. 13.
 - 32 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983 examines the modernity and implications of much so-called 'tradition'.
 - 33 Like the presumption that equal priority for men and women would be impossible in Melbourne clubs on Saturdays because courses are full.
 - 34 Boyle & McKay, "'You leave your troubles at the gate'", pp. 55-78; Thompson, *Mother's Taxi*, Bricknell, "Secret Men's Business"; S. M. Thompson, "Thank the Ladies for the Plates": The Incorporation of Women in Sport', *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 9, 1990, pp. 135-43.
 - 35 Memo, WGV Council to all affiliated golf clubs and Districts, 27 August 1997 (WGV).
 - 36 The various golf organisations of necessity work within frameworks imposed by both federal and relevant state legislation. In the case of Victoria, Equal Opportunity Acts were passed in 1977, 1984 and 1995. Each successive act both repealed its immediate predecessor and broadened the grounds where discrimination was outlawed. Federal anti-discrimination legislation includes the Race Discrimination Act (1975), Sex Discrimination Act (1984) and Disability Discrimination Act (1992).
 - 37 Letter, T. S. Duguid to K. Mahlook, 7 July 1981 (WGV).
 - 38 The Australian Golf Union (AGU) and Victorian Golf Association (VGA) represent male golfers. The Australian Ladies' Golf Union (ALGU) and Victorian Ladies' Golf Union (VLGU) represented female golfers. All four organisations functioned with a Secretary/Executive Director, a tiny number of paid staff, and fairly large councils of (volunteer) golf club members. In the mid-1990s ALGU and VLGU changed what was deemed to be outmoded nomenclature to WGA and WGV respectively. Both subsequently reduced council numbers significantly and generally improved governance systems.
 - 39 WGV Council then included about thirty (women's) captains of city clubs, twelve country district delegates plus co-opted members. Country delegates, who tended to remain on council for longer than captains formed a knowledgeable and potentially powerful group. The position and title of secretary was replaced in 1994 by that of executive director.
 - 40 Council Minutes, 25 September 1981 (WGV).
 - 41 In response to the submission, the Minister enquired as to whether VLGU had surveyed members' views on equal opportunity. Council Minutes, 5 March 1982 (WGV).
 - 42 Council Minutes, 5 March 1982 (WGV).
 - 43 K. Mahlook to Mrs J. Dwyer, Chair and Commissioner, EO Board, 18 July 1983 (WGV).
 - 44 Council Minutes, 17 July 1981 (WGV). Emphasis added.
 - 45 Scare tactics were rife. In July 1983, for example, VLGU and VGA issued a joint press release: 'Cain government legislation will outlaw women's sporting competitions.'

- 46 Ruling made on the grounds of differences in the strength, stamina and physique of men and women.
- 47 P. Chadwick, 'Cain threatens golf clubs over sex bias', *Age*, 13 June 1983.
- 48 Letter, T. S. Duguid (VGA) to VGA members, 'Equal Opportunity Bill 1983', 2 September 1983 (WGV).
- 49 Letter, K. Mahlook to Commissioner, Victorian Equal Opportunity Board, 30 August 1985. (WGV)
- 50 It is difficult to get a complete picture because membership figures do not identify people belonging to two or more clubs. Metropolitan clubs seem to have been particularly badly affected. Between 1986 and 1989 WGV noted a 10 per cent decline in women's membership of city clubs. Council Minutes, 8 May 1989 (WGV).
- 51 K. Gregg, 'An era of change', *Golf Victoria*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999, p. 36. Emphasis added.
- 52 'Tee totals'.
- 53 Letter and joint submission, Presidents VGA and VLGU to the Hon. Brian Dixon, Minister, Youth, Sport and Recreation, n.d., (Oct. 1982?), p. 5.
- 54 Council Minutes. (WGV)
- 55 Council Minutes, 17 July 1981 (WGV).
- 56 VGANLGU joint draft submission to Minister of Youth, Sport and Recreation, 1 August 1981, p. 4 (WGV). Emphases added.
- 57 VGANLGU joint draft submission, p. 4 (WGV). On flexi-time, Mahlook's note on the draft reads, 'Does not apply to many women!'. At the end of the document a handwritten note says, 'mid-week apart from associates day, women must give way to men's groups'.
- 58 G. Franzmann, 'The great divide', *Herald*, 20 June 1981, as quoted in copy of paper from Finance Committee to Council, VGA 6 July 1981. Letter, T. S. Duguid to K. Mahlook, 7 July 1981 (WGV). In 1979 Mrs. Toner, then Opposition spokesperson on Women's Affairs had introduced a Private Member's Bill into the Victorian Parliament to amend and widen the catchment of the 1977 EO Act. The Bill was defeated by the Liberal Government.
- 59 Equal Opportunity Board of Victoria, *Report into discrimination in sporting clubs*, Melbourne, 1983.
- 60 Chadwick, 'Cain threatens golf clubs'
- 61 'It's a fair way - golf women', *Herald*, June 13, 1983, p. 11.
- 62 K. Cooke, 'Golf rules hit working women', *Age*, 14 June 1983, p. 7
- 63 From 'Summary of an address to representative of VLGU clubs by the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity Mrs Fay Marles', 9 September 1985 (WGV).
- 64 A crucial issue, and one of great concern both to WGV and VGA Letters, J. Cain to K. Mahlook & T. S. Duguid (VGA), 21 July 1983, 19 August 1983 (WGV). Prior to this ruling several clubs had threatened to abolish women's committees and, in one case, to do away with women's championship events and honour boards. (WGV).
- 65 WGV, 'Summary of an address', p. 1. Emphasis added.
- 66 Cony and Others v. Keperra Country Golf Club and Others 1985.
- 67 A joint seminar held by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs and the Australian Sports Commission, Parliament House, Canberra, 27-28 February 1991.
- 68 Council Minutes, 23 August 1991 (WGV).

- 69 Council Minutes, 23 August 1991 (WGV).
- 70 Personal discussion, A.-M. Colborne, 1 December 1998 (MH-M).
- 71 WGV, *A Guide to Affiliated Golf Clubs on Equal Opportunity and Anti-discrimination Issues*, n.d. (WGV).
- 72 Letter, A.-M. Colborne to M. Bellamy, Department of Sport and Recreation, 'Re: "Comment on Eliminating Discrimination in Sport Guidelines";' 12 August 1997, p. 2. (WGV). Emphasis added.
- 73 Yann, Campbell, Hoare & Wheeler, Profile of Women Golfers. Survey for Women's Golf Victoria, unpub. paper, Melbourne, 1996.
- 74 M. Mooney, 'The role of Women's Golf Australia and its future in golf', address to NSW golf clubs' Secretary-Managers' seminar, Coogee, 12 August 1996, p. 1.
- 75 Manager's Report to Curlewis Golf Club Committee of Management, Oct.-Nov. 1998 (MH-M).
- 76 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Australian Sports Commission, Women, *Sport and Sex Discrimination. Guidelines on the Provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, August 1992, p. 18.
- 77 WGV development programs include: Hearthealth, CBA Businesswomen, Hyundai Junior, and Schools. WGA programs include Girls Golf Club Australia and the Executive Women's Golf Association. Growth in the CBA Businesswomen's program between 1994 and 1997 was spectacular, with numbers increasing from 224 to 11,380.
- 78 Dropout rates are high, a trend not confined to Australia.
- 79 'Women's golf is all the trend', p. 32. Emphases added.
- 80 Mooney, 'The role of WGA', p. 4.