

Women's Forum Australia - policies and people

Brian Baxter, November 2007

www.unbelief.org

MAIN INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES

Women's Forum Australia (WFA) is a conservative Christian lobby group, although it would strongly resist this description. Its leadership is and always has been drawn largely from conservative Catholics like Katrina George and Louise Brosnan and conservative Baptists like Melinda Tankard Reist and Johanna Lynch.

WFA is vehemently opposed to women's access to abortion and other technologies that enable women to control their reproductive lives, e.g. access to RU486 and therapeutic cloning. They also campaign actively against voluntary euthanasia. When the organisation was first launched it described itself as 'pro-woman and pro-life', though in recent times this slogan seems to have been abandoned.

In recent months, WFA has deviated from its central anti-choice message by undertaking 'motherhood' campaigns against the sexualisation of young girls. This anti-pornography message is consistent with the attitudes of the religious right and does not disguise WFA's fundamental objective: to restrict women's capacity to make choices about their reproductive lives, in line with the most conservative Christian religious doctrines.

DIRECTORS

Selena Ewing

There is no woman for whom abortion is actually known to be psychologically beneficial ... The research so far has completely failed to demonstrate that abortion has lasting positive effects on women.

(S. Ewing 'Women Are Also the Victims: Post-Abortion Grief', *Proceedings from the Women's Forum* 8.12.04, pp.6, 8.)

Selena Ewing undertakes research projects for [Women's Forum Australia](http://www.womenforum.org.au). She has a background in health science and is currently a Research Officer at the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute ([SCBI](http://www.scbi.org.au)) in Adelaide, SA. The SCBI claims to be 'an independent, non-sectarian, autonomous institution', but its close

association with the [Knights of the Southern Cross](#), 'an Order of Catholic men committed to promoting the Christian way of life throughout Australia' and its many [conservative Christian personnel](#) mean that it can more accurately be described as an [anti-choice lobby group](#). In July 2005, Ewing addressed the annual Right to Life Australia (RTLTA) conference in Melbourne on the topic 'Pro-Life is Pro-Woman' (conference brochure; *RTLTA News*, July-August 2005, 4). The RTLTA is led by Margaret Tighe and the vast majority of speakers at these meetings are dedicated anti-choice campaigners. In October 2006, Ewing signed the manifesto of the international [Hands Off Our Ovaries](#) group, many of whose Australian supporters are linked to organisations opposed to reproductive choice.

Katrina George

Katrina George, Chair of [Women's Forum Australia](#), is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Western Sydney. Her main research interests are in health law and bioethics, particularly end of life decision-making. She is the Australian spokesperson for an international body called [Hands Off Our Ovaries](#), many of whose Australian supporters are linked to organisations [opposed to reproductive choice](#). George herself has spoken at meetings [openly advertised as 'pro-life'](#). She is also a former Principal of [Creston College](#), a women's residential college associated with the University of NSW and founded in 1970 by Opus Dei's [Education Development Association](#). In addition, George lectures at the [Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney, \(see pp.16-17\)](#), working closely with its director, [Opus Dei priest, Fr. John Flader](#) and with other staff members like [Joanne Grainger](#), Operations Manager of the NSW Right to Life Association.

Johanna Lynch

My concern about abortion being accepted within the medical profession is not new – indeed to not perform abortion was part of the Hippocratic Oath and part of the medical profession's reaction to the abuse of human rights performed by its own as part of Nazi Germany ...

The solution of sex-education has been the option pushed to decrease the abortion rates – hasn't the current atheist value laden sex education proved itself unable to teach about deep lasting responsible relationships that bring real fulfillment and community?

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/ru486/submissions/sub93.pdf

[Johanna Lynch](#) is a general practitioner who consults in psychological health care in suburban Brisbane. In September 2006 she signed a [submission](#) to the Community Affairs Committee, Australian Senate, expressing 'serious concern' about proposals to legalise therapeutic cloning. This submission was drafted and circulated by a group of doctors called 'Medicine with Morality' ([MWM](#)). MWM

appended its 'manifesto' to the submission, making clear its view that human life began 'at fertilisation'. MWM is the brainchild of [Lachlan Dunjey](#), a leading member of the anti-choice Christian Democratic Party, WA. In October 2006, Johanna Lynch supported the 'Doctors Against Cloning' (DAC) group by signing an [open letter](#) that condemned embryonic stem cell research as 'unethical'. The two leading personalities in DAC are the national convenor, [Megan Best](#), bioethics advisor to the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney; and spokesperson [David van Gend](#), founder of the anti-choice [Do No Harm](#) group and Queensland state secretary of the [World Federation of Doctors Who Respect Human Life](#). Lynch also makes personal submissions to parliamentary inquiries on abortion-related matters such as [pregnancy counselling services](#) and [RU 486](#).

Lynne Pezzullo

Lynne Pezzullo, [WFA Treasurer](#), is a director of Access Economics in the health economics field. She has an extensive history of anti-choice activity, having served as an [ACT Right to Life Association \(RTLTA\) council member](#) during the 1990s. Between 1997 and 2004, Pezzullo was Vice-President of Karinya House, a major [ACT RTLTA project](#) aimed at deterring pregnant women from abortion. During this period, Pezzullo worked closely with [Melinda Tankard Reist](#), one of WFA's founders (p.4). In 2002, Pezzullo gave [evidence](#) before the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health, describing herself as the spokesperson for the Abortion Grief Counselling Association (AGCA). This body was formerly known as [Women Hurt By Abortion](#) - and before that, 'Women Exploited By Abortion'. AGCA paints an exceedingly [grim picture](#) of the effects of abortion on individual women, arguably in an effort to have the procedure prohibited.

Karen Robinson

New director, [WFA](#); a director of Mango Leadership Group, Perth.

Erica Schuman

Erica Schuman is [Secretary of WFA](#) and has worked in management and marketing for a number of non-profit organisations. In 1991, Schuman attended [Christendom College](#), an ultraconservative Catholic institution located in Virginia, USA. Christendom College 'is named after the medieval European concept of the Catholic faith being the cornerstone of civilisation'; its faculty members take an annual [oath of loyalty to church teachings](#) and there are strict dress codes, single-sex dormitories and a ban on public displays of affection. Schuman (birth-name Erica Power) and her family were honoured guests at the opening of [Campion College, Sydney](#) in March 2006. Campion College's [curriculum and culture](#) have been 'distinctly influenced' by those of Christendom College. An

Erica Schuman is a member of the conservative Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Australia ([FACS](#)), as was former WFA spokesperson [Rachael Patterson](#) (see p.4).

Melinda Tankard Reist

*Tankard Reist, who has previously written a book about women's grief after abortion, **says she supports a woman's right to termination.***

(Rachel Gibson [Abortion - or eugenics masquerading as choice? A writer takes on the doctors](#), Melbourne Age, 4 March 2006)

COMPARE WITH:

*I would love to have been part of last week's celebration of International Women's Day ... But it is the **blind celebration of abortion as a woman's best friend** which stops me participating.*

('In Too Much Pain To Celebrate', Melbourne *Herald Sun*, 14 Mar. 2002, as quoted in *Salt Shakers Journal*, May 2002, 7)

*... **[A]bortion is an uncontrolled and unregulated experiment on women: abortion is violence against women.***

('It is Broke, Fix It', speech to women's forum, Sheraton on the Park, Sydney, 8 December 2004)

Melinda Tankard Reist, a founding director of [WFA](#), is a Canberra-based writer and researcher. She has written or contributed to a number of anti-choice texts, the best-known being *Giving Sorrow Words* (Duffy and Snellgrove, 2000). Although a practising Baptist, she has close ties with Catholic-dominated organisations such as [Right to Life](#) groups and was employed for many years by conservative Tasmanian [Senator Brian Harradine](#) as his bioethics advisor. Tankard Reist has been involved with several other anti-choice organisations including the [Southern Cross Bioethics Institute](#) and bodies associated with the National Civic Council, such as the [Australian Family Association](#). From 1997-2005, Tankard Reist was a senior official at [Karinya House](#) (p.2), a project of ACT Right to Life and other anti-choice bodies, which aimed to provide pregnant women with an 'alternative to abortion'. She is also linked to Opus Dei front organisations (e.g. [MercatorNet](#)) and [institutions](#). She sometimes addresses conferences organised by ultra-conservative Protestant organisations such as [Summit Ministries](#) and the [Fatherhood Foundation](#). A more detailed study of Tankard Reist's background and career is available [here](#).

FORMER DIRECTORS/FOUNDERS

Louise Brosnan

... The government should introduce an 'at fault' divorce scheme ...If divorce laws are to exist at all, at fault divorce laws should at least make it more difficult for divorce to be obtained ... Spouses if they know they could lose custody of children, if through their fault they break their marriage vows would be encouraged not to do so ... [T]he at fault spouse often leaves a marriage for arrangements that would cause trauma for children (e.g. live-in arrangements or same sex unions).

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca/childcustody/subs/sub0829.pdf>

Louise Brosnan was one of the five Foundation Members of [WFA](#) and a member of the first Board of Directors. She was described at this time (2005-7) as being a retired partner of the major accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers and a financial consultant to businesses in Queensland. Brosnan has a number of links with the conservative Catholic prelature known as Opus Dei. These include the chairmanship (2003) of the Foundation for Education and Training Ltd., a non-profit company limited by guarantee, one of whose 'projects' is Kenvale College of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Randwick, NSW. All 'pastoral attention' at Kenvale is [entrusted to Opus Dei](#). A person with Louise Brosnan's birthname (Louise Mackie) was Principal of [Kenvale](#) until about 2003. In 2006, Brosnan was listed as a Board member of [Reledev Australia Ltd.](#), a company that supports educational and other projects in certain developing countries as well as in Australia. Reledev and Kenvale College both have 38 High Street, Randwick, NSW as their registered office and most other Reledev directors are linked with other Opus Dei organisations. At one stage, Reledev described Brosnan as a director of the Educational Development Association (EDA). EDA is a major Opus Dei non-profit organisation which includes Warrane (men's) and Creston (women's) Colleges at the University of New South Wales among its [projects](#).

Tracy Gordon

Within the pro-homosexual movement we see a rejection of the connection between gender and nature ... And in feminism we witness the importance of self-determination eclipsing that of relationship.

http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/culture/reading/the_essence_of_family1/

The New Testament recognises and assume[s] the breakdown of marriage when husbands are exhorted to love their wives, and wives to submit to their husbands ... The asymmetry of the call upon men and women in a post-feminist world matches the contours of failure that the Old Testament expects to see in marriage: that women will desire to control and manipulate men, but men will reply simply by subjugating women by force. The call to love is an obvious antidote for the male propensity to hit and act harshly. The Bible's teaching on the call to submit, which includes a sense of cooperation, is an antidote for the female propensity to connive and control.

http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/culture/thinking/nuptials_in_the_naughties/

Tracy Gordon has a background in economics and journalism and was a member of WFA's first board of directors (WFA company extract; Zoom Information cache). For some time, Gordon held the position of [world news editor](#) for the *Australian Presbyterian*, official publication of the Presbyterian Church of Australia (p.3), and during her time as a WFA director was a research officer for the [Social Issues Executive of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney](#). After a December 2004 Sydney women's meeting preceding the formal emergence of WFA, Gordon acted as spokesperson for a similar [religious leaders' forum](#) held in Sydney in January 2005; this forum called on the Federal Government to take a conservative approach to the abortion issue. It has been noted that Gordon was the only original WFA director with an official church position, but she resigned her directorship within a year of appointment.

Rachael Patterson

Newspapers have been dominated by a small group of vocal women telling politicians to back off. We have been told that the 90,000 or so abortions a year are nothing to be concerned about. Abortion, they tell us, doesn't hurt women. The occasional nasty side effects? Well, they've just been blown out of proportion ...

It is time for pro-lifers to be radically pro-woman and for pro-choicers to offer more than just the choice to abort.

<http://www.womensforaustralia.org/docs/R.Patterson.Aus.pdf>

Rachael Patterson was one of the five foundation members of WFA (WFA Constitution) and was one of the [main organisers](#) of a large Sydney women's meeting held in December 2004 that preceded the formation of the group. Patterson has science and law degrees (University of New South Wales/Princeton) and an MA in Applied Ethics from the [Australian Catholic University](#), (p.3). In 2004 she was a member of the [Fellowship of Australian Catholic Scholars](#), (p.4) and has addressed a conference of this group's [sister organisation](#) (p.32) in the US. Since 2005, Patterson has been involved with the [Acton Institute](#), an American group that 'promote[s] a free and virtuous society characterised by religious liberty and sustained by religious principles', although the organisation has many [critics](#). Patterson has attended one of Acton's [Free and Virtuous Society conferences](#), described as being 'intensive seminars for future religious leaders'. Currently in America, Patterson still regularly refers to her WFA foundation membership, as in [this article](#) appearing on the MercatorNet site run by Opus Dei's Michael Cook.