

Emily's List Australia

Emma Russell, July 2022



In the early 1990s Australian Parliamentary Library research showed that after almost a century of suffrage in Australia, women's participation in many state and territory parliaments was barely over single figures with women making up just 14% of the national legislature.

EMILY'S List in America was established in 1985 to fund campaigns for pro-choice Democrat women; the name is an acronym – Early Money Is Like Yeast [it makes the dough rise] – the idea being that early financial support makes for more successful campaigning.

In Victoria, Labor party member and women's campaigner Leonie Morgan was inspired by reading about EMILY's List in America and in 1992 initiated an Australian campaign with others including Kay Setches, Joan Kirner AM [1] and Candy Broad. Its aim was to build support for an EMILY's List in Victoria and eventually Australia. EMILY's List Australia (ELA) was incorporated on 1 October 1996 and launched on 11 November at Parliament House in Canberra.

In an interview with Joan Kirner AC, one of the founders and the first CEO of ELA, she said of the early days establishing ELA 'This was a very interesting time in terms of the outside influence of the feminist movement and the inside of the ALP'. [2]

Decisions had to be made about a focus on progressive women from all sides of politics or on women embracing Labor principles. Their choice was the latter. Would ELA become part of the ALP, or simply support the ALP? Again, the choice was the latter because being part of it meant handing over raised funds to the party rather than controlling it themselves. Similarly,

the question of specifically supporting abortion law reform was debated as a condition of becoming a member of, and receiving support from, ELA. It was included in the ELA constitution for the same reason - the primary purpose of ELA was to increase the number of progressive Labor women in state and federal parliaments.

But the ultimate goal was to enable women to have choice and control over their lives, their money, and their bodies.

An undated but presumably 1996 document in the archives 'Announcing EMILY's List' says it will assist 'endorsed Labor women candidates... in winnable Federal and State seats' by providing a political support network, a database, targeted research, funding and strategic support, and encouragement. Their assistance is available to women [1]

who have demonstrated their potential to win and their commitment to, and ongoing advocacy of, women's rights to:

- determine their own lives*
- participate fully in decision-making*
- be free from fear and violence*
- affordable child care*
- equal pay for equal work*
- control their own fertility*
- decide on matters concerning their own sexuality*

[1] Kirner was made a Member of the Order of Australia [AM] in 1980, and a Companion of the Order of Australia [AC] in 2012 - <https://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1145731> accessed 25 February 2022

[2] 'Q&A with Joan Kirner' in Housebound, a commemorative edition, p.4

[1] Document in archive announcing EMILY's List, c.1996

The ALP had already voted on an affirmative action rule change at their 1994 National Conference requiring a minimum of 35% of ALP candidates for winnable seats to be women by the year 2002.

When ELA was launched in 1996 there were only 4 women ALP members in the House of Representatives - 'to achieve gender equity in our parliaments, we have to shift the culture as well as change the rules'.

In the twenty-six years since, ELA's primary purpose and goals have remained much the same. In the 2020-2021 Annual Report Sharon Claydon MP and Leigh Svendsen, the current National Co-Convenors, state clearly that

EMILY's does not support one person over another in pre-selection battles, not even an EL member over a non-member or man ... EL is not a faction. EL is not affiliated to the ALP. The power EL 'wields' within the ALP is by harnessing the power of EL members who are members of the ALP, by bringing them together, across factional, state or branch divides, to represent and win the changes needed to improve Equity, Choice, Diversity, ECEC (early childhood education and care) and Equal Pay for women.

Archival correspondence from the late 1990s indicates some disquiet felt by other feminists and/or staunch Labor supporters.

... I feel quite hurt that I am unable to join EMILY's List... I am against violence and, therefore, the taking of another person's life – the baby in the womb, the aged, ... I feel your pre-requisite of being "pro-choice" is very rigid and exclusive, two things I don't expect from a women's Labor Party group. You will miss out on many good women'

Joan Kirner's reply explained:

I fully understand your position on abortion, but EMILY's List is not in support of abortion, it is in support of women having the right to choose whether they have a child or not. Most women make that choice through family planning, but that is not always possible. I can't imagine any woman wanting to have an abortion, but EMILY's List still believes if women are to be in control of their lives, the central purpose of feminism, then they must make this decision as well. And if they do, the procedure must be legal, safe, based on full advice and available under Medicare. [1]

Nonetheless, there were 594 financial members by the end of 1997. This is not an organisation that has seen exponential growth – 26 years later membership has doubled to 1,060 members. However, since 1996 ELA has supported 577 candidates (who must be financial members themselves to receive this support), assisting 284 to get elected to federal and state governments across Australia, including Australia's first and only female Prime Minister. The support for candidates includes mentoring, training, campaigning, lobbying, and networking, as well as financial support. The work of the organisation has also included extensive gender gap and issues research, taking on student interns, and fundraising. Across state elections held during 2020-2021 48 ELA members were elected to parliament out of 63 candidates. Five different awards for various types of commitment and achievement are now made every year since the first EMILY's Award was made in 1998/99 to Cheryl Davenport. [2]

ELA's advocacy, and that of the candidates they support, has also brought about many legislative and policy changes impacting the lives of women, children, and families in the areas of abortion law reform, gender equity, women's health and safety, paid parental leave, equal pay, and early childhood education and care.

[1] Extracts from letter to Joan Kirner, 9 June 1997 and her reply, January 1998

[2] ELA Annual Reports, various dates

