



THE LYCEUM CLUB
MELBOURNE • FOUNDED 1912

Are Single Sex Clubs Still Relevant Today?



Much has been written in the press these past months challenging the relevance or otherwise of single sex clubs, directed mainly at men's clubs, but by definition women's clubs are also caught up in this debate. As a private women's club, we have a policy of 'no comment' to the media, which is appropriate and I ask you respect this policy. However, I feel this is an important discussion we need to have with each other, within our club and with friends if it is raised.

The place to start in considering the relevance of our club today is to pay tribute to the Lyceum Club's founders and the vision they held 110 years ago – a vision that I believe is just as relevant today as it was in 1912.

Let me start by recognising that many private member clubs, welcome men and women as members. The great diversity of clubs throughout Melbourne forms the tapestry of riches we can choose from, whether membership be based around sporting, social, academic or professional interests, whether they are gender specific or gender inclusive. Many Lyceum Club members are also members of these clubs, and we enjoy and celebrate their diversity and success. Many men and women prefer to participate only in gender inclusive clubs, and that is their right and we all have that choice.

For our club, the Lyceum Club was specifically established by women for women, and this is something we are not only proud of but continue to advocate for.

So, let's go back to our founding roots. On 21 March 1912 a group of educated and artistic women with courage, vision and imagination, met in a modest room in Melbourne to establish a club for women, known as The Lyceum Club. Founding members included the first female graduates from the University of Melbourne, as well as female artists and writers, along with a number of suffragettes.

They were women seeking to establish a club specifically for women, a room of their own, a phrase Virginia Woolf would pen later in the decade, a place where they could meet for intellectual, artistic, social and professional enrichment and where they could establish enriching and life-long friendships.



THE LYCEUM CLUB
MELBOURNE • FOUNDED 1912

These women embodied the rise of a new generation of women in what was a traditional, patriarchal social structure, where female graduates were rare, where women artists were routinely overlooked and where female writers rarely acknowledged.

They presented a stark contrast to the feminine ideal in the early 20th century, which portrayed women as delicate, demure and silent and confined to a domestic world.

Yes, there was progress towards the recognition of women's roles beyond these stereotypes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For instance, in the academic world, the University of Melbourne allowed women to obtain university qualifications in medicine and law as far back as the 1880s. In fact, one of the early members of our club, Margaret Whyte, was one of the first two women (along with Grace Stone) to graduate from their medical degrees in 1891. Politically, in 1903 Australia was the first country worldwide to allow women to run for parliament.

However not everyone held progressive views of a woman's place in society or the professions. Many still felt that women who entered university would become unwomanly. The stereotype of artists as hard living, high achieving males who rebelled against society, did not accommodate female artists who were not well placed to conform to such an image. Women writers also remained marginalised in a male construct of literature and history and had to overcome stereotypes and obstacles to achieve a status close to parity with male writers. Women were often controlled financially by fathers, husbands and society in general and did not have the financial independence to survive outside of marriage.

So, acknowledgement by the Lyceum Club that women could be recognised based on their own personal achievements, rather than those of her husband, family connections, rank or privilege, was quite radical. This recognition has never wavered in our history and still guides the basis on which new nominees are considered for membership.

Coming into the club in the early to mid-20th century one might encounter Nora Streeton playing her violin, listen to a performance by Dame Nellie Melba or attend a work composed by Margaret Sutherland. Perhaps you would discuss art with Ethel Carrick Fox or enter into a lively debate about the women's movement with suffragette Theo Anderson.

Fast forward to the present and our purpose is as relevant today as it was in 1912. The club still remains a much loved haven for women to pursue intellectual, artistic, social and professional enrichment. Over 60 circles of interest and classes provide stimulating conversations any day of the week, ranging from art, history, philosophy, travel, science and medicine, drama, economics, the environment, language classes, bridge classes and 20 different reading groups. The club indeed provides a perfect environment for women's ongoing learning and friendships.





THE LYCEUM CLUB
MELBOURNE • FOUNDED 1912

Today we see women in many more spheres of influence whether it be in society, government, industry or the community, and this means our membership base is much more diverse than in 1912, with members coming from a vast range of career, personal and cultural backgrounds.

Our club is abounding with women leaders like never before and our members still enjoy collegiality not associated with rank or privilege. If you walk through the corridors of the club today, perhaps you'll meet one of the 160 current members awarded Australian honours for their contribution to the cultural, economic, professional and artistic life of Australia. You may sit with and strike up a conversation with a High Court judge, a former parliamentarian, a captain of industry, a partner in a law firm, a medical specialist, scientist, or a teacher, social worker, artist, or writer. You may wish to come in to simply appreciate sitting in the club room, reading the paper, meeting friends and enjoying a drink.



The club also remains a major source of companionship and mutual support, offering a refuge from loneliness and a source of mental well-being and companionship. Given the mental health challenges posed by COVID, this aspect of the club's life is even more important in protecting and enhancing the lives of all women.

Our membership of the International Association of Lyceum Clubs connects us around the world and provides us with the perfect opportunity to immerse ourselves in different cultures, develop empathy with other ways of life and see the world differently.

We also pride ourselves in offering the finest food and wine in Melbourne's club-land in our award-winning dining room, designed by architect and club member Kersten Thompson.

I believe the purpose of this club has and always will be about harnessing the power and potential of women, giving women a voice, a place where they can develop and sustain deep friendships and support each other through the generations.



THE LYCEUM CLUB
MELBOURNE • FOUNDED 1912

This does not mean we don't welcome men – quite the contrary. We welcome partners and male guests to all events other than a few member-only events. We do not have exclusive 'women only' areas or women-only times of the day. In fact, I have heard several times from members that their husbands or partners seize the monthly newsletter as soon as it arrives to decide which club events they wish to attend.

Our long established friendships with men's clubs and our annual calendar of combined events are also an important part of our identity.

But it's easy for us to blow our own trumpet. What is especially gratifying is that this year the Heritage Council of Victoria recognised the Lyceum Club as a historically and socially significant part of the State's history. It specifically acknowledged the role the club has played in pioneering and furthering the status of women in male dominated professional spheres, for the inclusion of hundreds of prominent women who have shaped the course of Victoria's history and for the support women members provide each other in their personal and professional lives.

It also acknowledged the uniqueness of the building, designed and built specifically for women by architects Hilary Lewis and Jessie Madsen, two of the very few female architects back in the 1950s. We are very proud to have achieved this important status and recognition for the club.

So where to for the future of our club?

Clearly, women's roles and rights in society today are very different to 1912. Women have a political voice, have protections from poverty and violence, many women are now leaders of industry and there have been great advances in indigenous women's rights. Around 36% of graduates in STEM fields are women and women make up over 50% of graduates in medicine.

Yet we are still a long way from women experiencing the same recognition, opportunities and financial independence as men. Women still remain under-represented in the corridors of power, while they continue to be over-represented in the lowest paid industries including part-time and insecure casual roles. As the pay gap remains obstinately large, women contribute less to superannuation and retire with, on average, half the superannuation of men.

Women supporting women is therefore just as important today as it ever was.

I cannot imagine life 110 years from now. However, I trust that in 2130 members will still be taking part in stimulating conversations and life-long learning in a warm and nurturing environment. I am optimistic that our club will continue to play a critical role in ensuring women are seen, listened to, encouraged and supported within our club's walls and in society more broadly.

This has been our legacy and I believe it will define our future.

Norah Breekveldt

President, 2022