



AN EXTRAORDINARY PROTEST
THAT LED TO A BREAKTHROUGH IN
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEGISLATION

Changes
*to the Apprehended
Domestic Violence
Order (ADVO)
Scheme are now
before the NSW
Parliament to better
protect victims of
domestic violence in
New South Wales.*

Jennifer Neil
*offers us an insight
into the decades of
women's campaigning
that have led to
legislation for greater
protection for women*

The Violet and Bruce Roberts Campaign

In 1980, I had to pay off fines so, as a 'Women Behind Bars' member, I chose instead to go to jail in the Mulawa Women's Detention Centre, at Silverwater, in Western Sydney.

In Mulawa, it was customary to treat all women as if they were three-year olds. You practically had to get permission slips to go to the toilet. I got permission to go to the library, thinking it would overcome the mind-dulling boredom and constant noise of living in a dormitory with twenty-three other women. With radios on different stations blaring all at once, the noise was so bad that I used to stick tampons in my ears with the strings hanging down, to block out the noise.

Reading matter in the library comprised mostly Mills & Boon 'Forever Romances' so I wasn't going to the library to actually read a book. While in the library, I noticed an older woman sitting in a corner reading a Women's Weekly. She looked like everyone's proverbial grandmother, with greying hair, chubby cheeks and a great smile. In talking to her, I found out she was Violet Roberts, in jail for life for murdering her extremely violent husband, Eric, in 1972. Her young son Bruce, only seventeen at the time of the murder, was in Long Bay jail for the same crime.

At their trial in 1976, Violet and Bruce were given a court-appointed lawyer. She told me they never saw the lawyer until the day before their trial. Throughout the trial, she said, the lawyer made no reference to the violence perpetrated on her and her children over a period of twenty years. More significantly, her doctor was never called to give evidence on her behalf about the many times he had treated her and her children for broken bones and black eyes.

Eric was a violent alcoholic. Violet had her last child, a girl, adopted, hoping for a better life for her. Violet explained that her family never had any spare money because Eric took her cheque each fortnight and drank it away. She found it impossible to leave him, without taking

1980

Women's campaign for Violet's rights

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her four children, who were all terrified of Eric. She had no family to rely on and she said the only relief for her family was when Eric was arrested for driving while drunk, and twice for exposing himself to young children at the local school. But his sentences were never more than a year in jail. On his release, the terror would start again. If the family managed to move away, he always found them. Her eldest child David died of leukaemia just before Eric was shot and killed. Violet was in a terrible state after David's death, very depressed and unable to cope.

A week after meeting Violet, I got together with some Women Behind Bars people and we all agreed we would launch a campaign calling for the release of Violet and Bruce Roberts. With the help of some lawyers in our group, a leaflet on the lives of the mother and son was produced and a petition drawn up to present to parliament.

On the 1st July 1980, we set up a vigil site outside the Department of Corrective Services in Campbell Street in the city. We chose the Department because the Parole Board was also in that building and the Parole Board had the power to have them both 'released on licence', or on parole. One woman called Chris was



RELEASE CAMPAIGN

VIOLET & BRUCE

ROBERTS

I, Violet Roberts, wish to make application for release on licence. On March 15th 1976, I was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of my husband Eric Roberts . . . While I certainly do not think there is any good reason to kill *anyone*, when one suffers so much as my husband caused me to, the savage beatings, the mental torture and sexual miseries . . . one lives in constant fear of him. My husband was a brutal alcoholic . . . During those last 12 months, I was seldom without black eyes, bruises . . . two days before the crime, he had broken a bone in one of my fingers. In addition to all the other troubles, I lost a very dear son, David, just 21 of leukemia . . . I was so distraught, depressed, so very tired that night, I had not had a good night's sleep for months as every night he kept me awake with his insatiable sexual demands . . . very little of my husband's behaviour was mentioned in court. I do hope you will look favourably on this, my application. I would certainly abide by whatever restrictions were placed on me, I would just be so happy to be home again.

In March 1976, Violet and Bruce Roberts, her 17 year old son, were convicted in the Newcastle Supreme Court of the murder of Eric Roberts. Violet was given a life sentence, and Bruce a fifteen year sentence with a six year non parole period. Almost four years later, in January 1980, Violet, in the words above, applied to the Minister for Corrective Services to be released on licence. Within ten days and without making any further enquiries, the Minister for Corrective Services rejected her application.

In March 1980, Channel 9's "Sixty Minutes" presented a segment called "Justifiable Homicide?" This program, which concerned the case of Violet and Bruce Roberts, received an overwhelming response from viewers. Hundreds of letters were sent to the Channel urging their release from prison. Bruce now applied for a licence and Violet requested that further consideration be given to her original application. The Attorney General of

NSW, Mr. Walker, after an informal inquiry into the case, wrote the Minister for Corrective Services suggesting that he could consider granting the Roberts licences.

At the end of May, the Minister for Corrective Services, Mr. Haig, refused the applications. This decision was taken before a parole officer had completed reports on the case and without speaking to her lawyers who had requested an interview before any decision was made.

We ask you to read the following extracts from signed statements by Violet and Bruce Roberts. When you, as The Minister for Corrective Services claims he has done, have read the statements, we ask you to ask yourself: "Should Violet and Bruce Roberts be in prison?" "Do they deserve to suffer even further?" If your answer to that question is "NO" - we ask you to join with the VIOLET & BRUCE ROBERTS RELEASE CAMPAIGN in demanding their immediate release on licence.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Obtain a PETITION from the *Release Violet and Bruce Roberts Campaign* c/- Liverpool Womens Health Centre, Box 65 Liverpool. Ask your friends, neighbours and workmates to fill it in and return

fantastic - she had chairs, a table, a couch, carpet, and a paraffin heater, brought to Campbell Street, so we would be comfortable. Fortunately, the area was large enough to contain it all.

It was winter and freezing cold sleeping outside. The night guard kindly kept open for us a toilet which also had a power point. We used one wall to play wall tennis, and each hour we would do Chairman Mao's Chinese martial art exercise, which involved a lot of kicking and shouting to keep warm. During the day, we made appointments to see state government ministers and handed out our leaflets on Violet's unfortunate personal history. On TV, '60 Minutes' made a programme on their case and even visited Mulawa to interview Violet, who was very articulate. The programme went out to a major mainstream audience which greatly helped our cause. We did wonder how long the vigil would last.

Morning office workers entering the building had to walk over sleeping women. We slept in a long line of sleeping bags and wondered why we were kept awake at night by homeless men. I had a guy at the bottom of my sleeping bag saying, 'This is my home! Why are you sleeping in my place?' Feeling guilty, I found him a space to put his stuff and tried to convince him that I could not accommodate him in my sleeping bag. It seems we had displaced some of the resident homeless people.

After all those years of women's groups demonstrating, police still had the wrong idea that the women must have had leaders, and that if they took out the leaders, the whole group would collapse. In their wisdom, they decided that I was a leader and so was another old political campaigner called Kris.

One morning two very elegantly dressed men approached our campaign table while Kris and I were handing out leaflets. They were both dressed in expensive, dark pin-striped suits, so naturally we didn't think they were 'cops'.

They actually read the leaflet then,

The author

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using my name, one said, 'You are under arrest'. Of course, we all screamed, 'What's the charge?' and he replied, 'You'll find out down at Central Police station'.

So Kris shouted, 'Take me, my name is Melmouth,' and the well-dressed policeman said, 'Okay, Big Mouth, we're taking you as well'.

They found old warrants for our arrest, which they keep just in case they'll need them in future. This meant Kris and I had to leave the vigil.

Mulawa prison officers refused to take us because they didn't want trouble-makers upsetting prisoners, we were told. So Kris and I had to spend two nights in the cells at Central Police station. In the meantime, the screws were told by Corrective Services that they didn't have the right to decide who entered their jail.

Once we were back in Mulawa, we had the opportunity to see Violet. We got out a week later, after some kind soul paid our fines. I was happy in there, having a warm bed and three

dreadful meals a day, instead of the cold of Campbell Street. I felt a bit guilty wallowing in a jail, while our friends froze at night. The rest of our comrades were not impressed by our lack of commitment.

Early one morning we were having our morning coffee at Rosie's Café across the road, when a truck pulled up and men started throwing all our furniture in the back of the truck. We raced over to try to stop them. I sat in a chair to prevent them picking it up, but they just calmly picked up the chair with me in it and put me in the truck. I climbed out, but by this time all our furniture was gone. So we pulled out the good old 'telephone tree', and we soon had even better furniture and a microwave, which we could use with the aid of the power point in the toilet. Mr Haig was Minister for

Corrective Services at the time and the campaign stepped up its efforts to inundate Haig's office with women asking for appointments.

The Vigil, as our protest was called, kept a diary in an exercise book for women to write in when the mood took them. Most of the diary is unprintable as women tended to write in it after having spent the night raging at Ruby's nightclub. But here is one entry with no date:

Sick of the PR pretence and platitudes of Tony Vinson, we demanded to see Haig. We pushed into the Corrective Office, sang songs, had coffee, and saw a total stranger graffiti the wall behind Haig's desk, in flowing spray-painted letters, 'Release Violet and Bruce now Haig'. Chaos erupted in the heart of Corrective Services, as we flew about the corridors, after a typically futile wordy exchange with Vinson.

On the 18th July, Violet appeared before the Parole Board. She let us know later that they refused her 'release on licence'. The Parole Board also informed her that her son, Bruce, would not be considered for 'release on licence' any time soon. All of the women on the vigil strongly agreed we would keep fighting for Bruce as well.

The next day the police removed everything again and forbade us to go anywhere near Corrective Services. They actually drew a chalk line on the pavement and said anyone passing that line would be arrested. Needless to say, everyone was arrested about eight times. We would dance the conga up and down the line, putting one foot in and one foot out. As one woman was arrested another would come back. So it went on all day. We had managed to stay outside Corrective Services from the 1st July to 28th July, when it became impossible for us to sleep there, with a police presence 24/7.

Women Behind Bars then decided to buy an old VW Combi van and park it outside Parliament House in Macquarie Street to carry on protesting, with two women sleeping in the VW Combi at night. During the day, we would hand out leaflets and people seemed to come from all over

to find us and sign the petition.

We now had a petition of about thirty thousand signatures, so we decided to present it to State Parliament with the help of the Upper House Member, Anne Symonds. I'd had all the petitions tied with a nice red bow and had tried to get into Parliament House myself, but was stopped each time by police. On that day, she was to present the petitions to Parliament and we had planned a march on Parliament House, but this proved impossible as the police were out in force to stop us getting close. I rang Anne Symonds who then came out onto the front steps of Parliament House to a rousing reception from all the women, then crossed the police line and took the petitions. At the same time a light aircraft flew overhead with a banner flowing behind it, saying 'Free Vi and Bru'. We could not afford the extra letters on the banner, so had to go with that.

Our Combi van was still opposite Parliament House with hundreds of parking fine tickets under the wipers. Every time a traffic cop came by to put a ticket on the van, he would ask the same question, 'Who owns this van?' and the response was always the same, 'Sorry, we really don't know who owns it'.

I used to visit Violet once a week, with two members from the vigil. She would say things like, 'Oh my! You girls are really bad, getting arrested all the time,' and we would always say, 'And loving it, Violet.' We also visited Bruce and he was just gobsmacked that anyone would care about him and his mother. They had both had such extreme bad luck in their lives, which had given them both very low self-esteem.

The vigil went on for four months until October. We had seen every politician in every Party, and were beginning to think we were more of a hindrance than a solution to Violet and Bruce's release. We believed the Government's thinking was that if it gave in to us now, we would find someone else to concentrate on. This was the second time Women Behind Bars



had been successful in having someone released from jail – Sandra Wilson being the first. Our mood was low, and we couldn't think up any more gimmicks to draw attention to the Roberts' release. Our protestor numbers had fallen to about ten constant vigilantes. We even heard some suggest that we give up the vigil, but most of us could not imagine giving up.

One day a few of us were idly standing outside the rails of Parliament House when a newspaper headline across the street screamed, 'VIOLET FREE'. I said, 'Fuck, look at that!'

No one had told us that after all these months that the Government had seen fit to release Violet and Bruce. There was great rejoicing, and I was told that the next day I could pick them up. Violet and Bruce were stunned – they couldn't believe they'd been freed.

Bruce told me that a screw had said to him that morning, 'Roberts, get your things. You're leaving in half an hour!'

A petition

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A light aircraft flew overhead with a banner saying 'Free Vi and Bru'.

He thought he was being sent to another jail, so asked the warden if he could let his mother know.

'Why would you want to let her know? You'll see her when you get out.'

Bruce said he still didn't believe him, so he asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Those bloody women have got you and your mother out,' was the tense reply.

Back at the protest, women were babbling, 'That's all folks'. What a relief after all those months!

Violet died about two years later from a heart attack. She'd had a bad heart when she went into jail. Bruce stayed with her for a while during that period, but then disappeared to the Northern Territory and I don't know what became of him after I saw him at Violet's funeral.

Finally, and triumphantly, the campaign changed the law in NSW on provocation, so that women could use provocation as a defence in all domestic violence cases.

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1976 The trial: unfair justice

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Throughout the trial, she said, the lawyer made no reference to the violence perpetrated on her and her children over a period of twenty years

Justice and freedom

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** POSTSCRIPT*

The Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Amendment (Review) Bill 2016 now before the NSW Parliament will give effect to all 17 recommendations of the Statutory Review of the Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007. The changes will make it easier for victims to get an ADVO without having to prove fear of violence in court, allowing more victims to come forward without fear of having to face the perpetrator.

It also means magistrates will be able to hear final applications for ADVOS even if a victim doesn't appear in court, and police will be notified of any application to change or revoke an ADVO.

Crimes categorized as 'domestic violence offences' will now also include any and all NSW or Commonwealth criminal offences where the defendant intends to coerce, control or cause fear in the victim, like using a mobile service to menace, harass or cause offence.

<http://www.prugoward.com.au/Media/News/tabid/129/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/512/MORE-PROTECTION-FOR-DOMESTIC-VIOLENCE-VICTIMS.aspx>

In 2015 the rules around the use of provocation were tightened in NSW after public outrage when a Sydney man Chamanjot Singh was sentenced to just six years in jail for manslaughter for repeatedly slashing his wife's throat with a box cutter.

Now the law can't be used in NSW by defendants who kill their partners out of jealous rage or who take offence at a nonviolent sexual advance.

According to a report by journalist, Andrew Koubaridis, the law was introduced so that a victim of domestic violence who believed they had to kill a person in defence of themselves, or who held a reasonable belief that they would die otherwise, could use this as a defence against a charge of murder.

<http://www.news.com.au/national/controversial-provocation-law-is-still-being-used-in-australia/news-story/8d-7210b315a34a2502df805426f6cea4>

