

Source: Discovering Democracy Lower Secondary Units – Political Life
Biographies of four Australians who were politically active outside
parliament

<http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/ddunits/units/ls4fg3acts.htm#Street>



Jessie Street 1889-1970

Some major achievements

- Founder and President of the United Association of Women, 1929
- Only female member of the Australian delegation to the conference that set up the United Nations, 1945
- Drafter of the petition for a referendum to remove from the Australian Constitution the clauses that discriminated against Aboriginal people, 1964

Memorials and monuments

- Jessie Street Women's Library, Sydney
- Jessie Street Garden, Sydney

Lady Jessie Street
Photograph by Falk. Courtesy National Library of Australia.

Background and experience

Jessie Lillingston came from a family of wealthy landowners in northern New South Wales. When she was a girl she loved horse riding but she did not like the fact that she was expected to *ride side-saddle*. So when nobody was looking, Jessie would swing her leg across the horse and ride the same way men did. All her life she behaved in ways that people from her background were not expected to behave.

When she was a schoolgirl, Jessie met members of the suffragette movement in England and, on a visit to New York in 1915, she volunteered to help in a reception centre for young women arrested as prostitutes.

In 1916, Jessie married Kenneth Street, who later became the highest judge in New South Wales. When he was knighted, she became Lady Jessie Street.

- *Ride side-saddle* means to ride a horse with both feet on the same side of the horse. A hundred years ago, well-off women were expected to ride side-saddle.

Political life and times

Street used her wealth and influence to help her work for political change, but many of the causes she supported were very unpopular at the time.

In 1929 she founded the United Associations of Women, which campaigned for women's rights, and she was a leader of the Equal Pay for Women movement in the 1930s. When only one woman was included in the 1936 Australian Olympic team, the United Associations of Women ran a campaign in the newspapers and, as a result, more women were included in the team.

Married women teachers were threatened with the sack in the 1930s, when there was high unemployment. Some people thought that married women should not have jobs if their husbands were working but Street spoke out against this idea.

She made speeches, wrote letters to newspapers and talked to politicians, and also offered practical help to women. In the 1930s, she started a cooperative farm for unemployed women at Glenfield, New South Wales. At the time, the government was giving some help to unemployed men but was not helping unemployed women.

During the Cold War, Australians generally regarded the United States of America as a powerful friend and people feared a war against communist countries, such as Russia. At this time, Street visited Russia and was a member of a number of organisations that wanted friendship with Russia. Some people accused her of being a communist herself.

In the 1950s, Street visited *Aboriginal reserves* in the Northern Territory and Western Australia and was shocked by the discrimination she saw against Aboriginal people. She then started working with Aboriginal groups that were aiming to change the Australian Constitution so that Aboriginal people were not discriminated against.

Street stood as a candidate for Commonwealth Parliament in 1943 and 1949, but she was not elected. She was criticised for being involved in controversial issues and some people said that the way she behaved was not what they expected of the wife of an important judge. But Jessie Street continued to fight for the rights of women, Aboriginal people and other disadvantaged people.

- An *Aboriginal reserve* was a place set aside by governments for Aboriginal people to live. Usually, a government official was in charge of the Aboriginal people who lived on an Aboriginal reserve.

Beliefs and aims

The women's *Basic Wage* has just been declared at £1.17.6 and the men's at £3.8.6 ... It is most *reprehensible* that women should have to work the same hours as men and get paid a little more than half the amount men are paid.

The result of this inequitable system brings injustice all round. Firstly it is unjust to the woman worker as she does not get the same value for her work as a man gets; secondly it places the woman worker in the *invidious* position of being regarded as 'cheap labour' with the resultant loss of dignity and status; thirdly it is a system which is responsible for much unemployment amongst men since women can be employed to do just as effective work as men for a little more than half the cost; a fourth injustice is that it brings great hardship to families where the woman is the breadwinner.

From a letter to the editor by Jessie Street, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18/4/1933. Reproduced with permission of Sir Laurence Street, Trustee of the Estate of Jessie Street.

- The *Basic Wage* was the lowest wage that could be paid to a worker.
- If something is *reprehensible*, it deserves to be criticised.
- An *invidious* position is an unfair position.

Challenges and responses

During the 1930s and 1940s, there were periods of very high unemployment and a World War. In times like these, people often worry more about themselves than about whether other people are being treated fairly. So Street was often fighting for unpopular causes.

She believed that everyone in the workplace should have a fair go. Although she did not have to work for a living herself, she fought for equal pay, equal training and equal employment opportunities for men and women.

Some politicians and employers did not agree with her ideas. They said she was too idealistic and that, anyway, her ideas were too expensive to put into practice.

Street also disagreed with some unionists, even though they all wanted better pay and conditions for workers. She believed that housework, child rearing and other unpaid work should be included in the debate about minimum wages. But some unionists wanted to concentrate on people in paid jobs.