

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



DAME BERYL BEAUREPAIRE

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST



DAME BERYL BEAUREPAIRE (1923-)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of Australian Biography (Series 11) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Born in 1923, women's activist Dame Beryl Beaurepaire is a pioneering Australian feminist. After serving in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force during World War II, she married Ian Beaurepaire of the Olympic Tyre dynasty and became Melbourne's Lady Mayoress. At a time when few women were in the workforce, Dame Beryl put her energy into community and charity work.

Recruited by Sir Robert Menzies to work in the Victorian branch of the Liberal Party, Dame Beryl graduated to the Federal branch of the party and lobbied successive prime ministers on both sides of politics. A willingness to challenge existing systems, a sense of social justice, a belief in equal rights and opportunity and a need to contribute to community life led to her becoming one of the most influential woman in the Federal Liberal Party.

Convener of the first National Women's Advisory Council and the first woman to be the Chair of the Australian War Memorial, Dame Beryl has tackled women's employment, domestic violence, sex discrimination and education issues, among many others.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Threads and activities in this study guide will have interest and relevance from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels studying English, Personal Development (especially topic of Gender), Women's Studies, Society and Environment, Society and Culture, Politics and Philosophy.

Before watching

The following political figures are mentioned in the program. It will help if you know who they are and their backgrounds: Sir Robert Menzies, Dame Pattie Menzies, Henry Bolte, Bob Hawke, Malcolm Fraser and John Howard.

After watching

The program opens with Dame Beryl Beaurepaire cautioning us to 'watch carefully' lest we become complacent about the progress women have made in gaining more rights and better conditions.

- Do you believe women can gain more equality with men than what they have now? As a class, discuss some of the areas where women may be able to gain further ground.

Activity

1. Break into pairs and select an area which you feel does not currently provide equal opportunity for women. It may be one of the areas mentioned just now with the whole class, or it could be an original idea of your own.
2. Find out whether women in the past have tried to change this. How valuable have these pioneer's efforts been?
3. Explain fully why you believe the area you chose is discriminatory and give some examples.
4. Suggest ways you could change the situation to make it more favourable to women.
5. Finally share your ideas with the class.
6. If you are a listener rather than a presenter, jot down arguments against how and why the presenter would change things. These may not be necessarily your own ideas but rather could reflect society's arguments.
7. At the end of each presentation, engage in two minutes of debate with the presenters.

At the end of the program, Dame Beryl stresses women's success does not come easily.

- Do you agree that having confidence in yourself is important? Can you think of a time in your life when confidence boosted your chances?
- What else happened for you as a result of your confident attitude?
- Do boys have more confidence than girls? List reasons that give any person confidence and discuss why this may be so.
- Even though women may not have achieved equality in every area, do you believe that women today 'are still regarded as second class citizens'? Give examples to support your answer.

Dame Beryl also speaks out of her own experience when she advises women always to believe in themselves and always to try.

- Name three events in her life where this philosophy stood by her and she succeeded.
- Do you ever urge yourself on by reassuring yourself 'Of course I can'? Does it work?

Activity

- Think of three scenarios:
 1. a competitive situation where only the winner is rewarded
 2. a setting where someone who didn't come close to winning is rewarded for trying
 3. a situation where a winner isn't rewarded at all

Make a list of the benefits and disadvantages for the person in each scenario. Don't forget to include what the person thinks of him/herself. Is there ever a situation where personal loss could outweigh personal gain?

Influences on Dame Beryl's life

Family

- Dame Beryl nominates her father as a major life influence. How do you think he influenced her life? Why do you consider she remembers him as giving her 'courage to do things'?
- What influences did her mother have on her? Do you consider Beryl's relationship with her mother influenced her later life and activities?
- What differences do you see between growing up in the 1920s and 30s compared with now? Can you suggest reasons for these disparities?

Fintona Girls' School

Beryl had the good fortune to attend a small, independent day school for girls, where a progressive headmistress (Miss Cunningham) ran the school.

- Why do you believe Dame Beryl considers Miss Cunningham to be the woman who has 'had the most influence' on her life? Name at least three of Dame Beryl's recollections of her. Discuss why each incident may have affected Beryl's later life.
- Can you think of a person or event from your own school days that has influenced your life for either good or bad? Break into pairs and discuss how that has shaped your life.
- Do you believe that attending a private school helped form Beryl's future? Support your answer with evidence.
- Would attending a single sex school have awakened her interest in women's issues and conditions? Why/why not?
- What do you consider to be the advantages/disadvantages of single sex schools?
- Do independent schools benefit their students more than state schools? Support your answer with examples.

One of Dame Beryl's memories is about how the teaching of reproduction, even from a scientist's viewpoint, created a furore amongst many parents.

- Is sex education part of your school curriculum? Do you think it should be?

Later in the program, sex in schools again becomes an issue. Dame Beryl initially is in favour of condom vending machines in schools but later says she can see the point of view of headmistresses that such an available point of sale encourages inappropriate sexual behaviour amongst students.

- Do you think Dame Beryl's initial stance may have been triggered by a reaction against her own experiences in school? To what degree does our past experience shape our current views?
- Do you believe condom machines in schools are a good idea? Debate the subject in class.

Fintona's school motto is *Age Quod Agis* which is Latin for 'Do what you do well'.

- Can you find evidence to support the idea that Beryl's ideas were influenced by the motto?
- Does your school motto influence your values or actions in any way?

Motherhood

- Being a mother wasn't an aspiration for Beryl early in her life. Find evidence in the program to support this statement. Look particularly at the way she describes motherhood.
- How did her parents contribute to her lack of interest in being a mother?
- What do you conclude from Dame Beryl's body language when she is asked how she took to motherhood?

At the end of the program Dame Beryl states '...that's a much better achievement than riches or anything else to have your wonderful family...'

- Ask a number of adults whether family has become more important for them as they got older and if so, why they consider this happens.

Other Influences

- Suggest other influences which shaped Dame Beryl's life and examine their roles.

Feminism

Dame Beryl seemed uneasy with the label 'feminist' because the word was associated with 'somebody who was aggressive and out to down men...'.

- Do you believe the word has gathered negative connotations? If so, what do you believe to be the cause?
- How would you define a feminist?

Dame Beryl believed that she 'should be able to have equal rights if (she) accepted equal responsibility.'

- Abstaining from the label of feminism, find other ways to describe her convictions.

Service to Women

One of Dame Beryl's first forays into seeking equality was during the war when she joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force as a meteorologist to help ensure the safety of aircraft, both military and civil.

- The newsreel talks about the job done by 'women meteorologists'. Why might this term be regarded today as discriminatory?
- Do you consider any other part of this news report patronising to women?
- Of what value, if any, is this type of archival footage?

After enduring gender discrimination in her job and at 19 years of age, Beryl stormed into the office of the Director of the WAAAF, demanding equal pay for equal work. She wasn't intimidated by her male colleagues or the rank of her superior.

- Would you expect this response in 1942 from a well brought up young lady? What do you think about her actions?
- Discuss the reasons you've chosen such words to describe what she did.

Sir Frank Beaurepaire

Dame Beryl says she 'fought for a few things.' Consider her relationship with her late father-in-law. He headed a business empire which sold car tyres and because he was an important man, he wanted Beryl to be 'a social butterfly'. However, she preferred to learn millinery and paid a deposit on a shop where she would sell hats.

- Why was there 'uproar' over the actions of Beryl and her friend? What do you believe is the psychological reason behind the objections which came from both her and her friend's families?
- Does this attitude still exist today?
- Why do you think the young women did not go ahead with their plans for the shop? Did they cave in to family demands? Was it easier to do so? How would you handle a similar situation today?

Dame Beryl states that Ian's father was 'very domineering' and yet she 'took him on' and triumphed.

- What enabled Sir Frank to have the power to send his son overseas?
- What methods did Dame Beryl use to ensure she went with him? Does the way she handled this incident in any way foreshadow her methods of lobbying in later years?
- How do you think Sir Frank felt about Beryl? Would it have been easy for men to share their power with women, considering they always had unquestionable authority?

Lady Mayoress

Ian's election to the office of Lord Mayor of the City of Melbourne provided Dame Beryl with opportunities to be either the socialite or to see situations where her actions could bring about a difference. She chose the latter.

- Do you believe that fighting her own personal battles led her to the point where she felt compelled to fight for the rights of all women?
- Do you think providing breakfast for students was a worthy project for the Lady Mayoress's Committee? Why/why not? Are there still schools today that make breakfast available because some students' parents don't have enough money to do so? Who should pay for such services and why?
- What do you make of Dame Beryl's comment that going to all the churches 'interrupted Ian's golf'? What more do you learn about her from this comment?
- What do you believe Dame Beryl thought about the Mayoral social responsibilities?
- Do you believe all the social activities that we see Dame Beryl involved in during this period (balls, pageants, dinners) helped her activism for the rights of women, or were they purely fun? Give reasons for your answer.
- What do you think about the label 'Lady Mayoress'. Why would its use today be problematic?
- How appropriate would a headline 'She plans one hairdo a week' be in today's papers?

Dame Beryl makes comment on how much easier it was for her to raise money because there were so 'many women who were not in the paid workforce and they wanted to get involved'.

- Have the incomes of charities suffered because most women now work?
- Does this mean society would function better if women did not go out to work? Should these factors have any impact on a woman's decision to take a job?

- What advantages/disadvantages do you see to women filling employment vacancies or running their own businesses? Look at this question from as many viewpoints as possible (employee, employer, society etc)

The incident involving the French Consul in Melbourne was extremely controversial in its day.

- What did Dame Beryl think of the 'men-only' dinner ruling? How can you tell?
- Look at the newspaper headline that we see whilst Dame Beryl is telling about the incident. Why does it refer to Madame Petrement as M'selle? Does this difference alter the message that the paper conveys?
- Do you know of any men-only clubs today? Why do they survive and do you believe they are a good idea? Give reasons for your answer.

Dame Beryl in Politics

Sir Robert Menzies' speech introduces this segment.

- What does Robert Menzies mean by 'in this city we have kept the faith' and how does this relate the conservatism?
- Why does Dame Beryl not like the way she entered politics? Why does she then make excuses for herself? Can you see this attitude as part of the way she achieved so much as a lobbyist?

Dame Beryl sat on many boards which advised the government, including the Federal Women's Advisory Committee and then later she became convener of the National Women's Advisory Council.

- Explore the role played by the National Women's Advisory Council and give reasons why you think it's important or trivial.
- Do these 'advisory boards' demean women who don't have any actual power to pass or debate laws but only to 'be heard by the parliament? Might they be outmoded?
- Can women change the status quo through consensus rather than aggression? Are women better at manipulating behind the scenes to achieve their goals rather than being outspoken and antagonistic? Cite examples of both approaches, and compare the gains of each woman.
- Discuss whether having designated years for different issues, such as International Women's Year actually works or is it mere tokenism? Support your findings with evidence.

Activity

Research how many women Australia has in parliament and compare the figure with the number of male parliamentarians. Speculate on reasons that you consider may account for the discrepancy.

Dame Beryl never officially ran for Parliament because she felt she couldn't toe the party line on every issue and because she preferred to retain her freedom to say and act as she saw fit.

- What does she mean by 'toe the party line'?
- How many other examples can you find in the film where Dame Beryl cherishes her independence?
- Is it better to compromise integrity, give in on some issues but still have a say in parliament or to stay out of it altogether as Beryl did?
- How can you have political power without being a politician?

The Council of the Australian War Memorial

When in 1982 a woman was appointed to this committee, many were horrified.

- Are you surprised that previous to Dame Beryl's appointment, ex-servicewomen did not receive pensions or any form of recompense given to men who returned from the war?
- Why do you think the RSL argued that it 'was inappropriate for a woman to speak on behalf of our fallen diggers' when Dame Beryl was appointed to the position of the committee's chair in 1985?
- If a woman cannot speak on a man's behalf, why do you believe men think they can speak on women's behalf? Do you think it is merely tradition which will be broken down over time?

Dame Beryl succeeded in getting money for the cause of bringing home the Unknown Soldier.

- Why was Dame Beryl proud of getting money from Bob Hawke?
- What evidence can you find that even when she proved she could do a good job as Chairman, many men were still patronising to her?
- Why was the Unknown Soldier brought back to Australia? Where was his body previously? How important is this type of ceremony and why?
- What is the significance of the music we hear during the ceremony?

Final Moments

As the credits roll, we see Dame Beryl strolling with her walker among the flowers at her home.

- Why do you think these images are reserved for the final moments, and not really part of the interview? Bring evidence to your answer.
- How does the music in this scene fit its visual message?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Australian Women Biographical Entry

www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0365b.htm

Fintona Girls' School

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fintona_Girls%27_School

Michael McKernan, *Beryl Beaurepaire*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999

Remembrance Day Tradition

www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/remembrance/tradition.htm

Remembrance Day Speech - at the funeral service of the Unknown Australian Soldier, 11 November 1993 (includes audio) www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/keating.htm

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY: DAME BERYL BEAUREPAIRE

A Film Australia National Interest Program

Director/Producer: Rod Freedman

Writer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes

Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn

Duration: 26 minutes

Year: 2007

Study guide written by Diane O'Flaherty.

Photography by Nicholas Sherman © NFSA and archival images courtesy Dame Beryl Beaurepaire.

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