

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 190

Transcript – Wendy McCarthy



Helga Svendsen 0:00

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this conversation today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and paying respects to elder's past and present and acknowledging their continuing connection to land to waters and to culture, and also acknowledging that this land was never ceded. Given our discussion today and often the conversations on Take on Board, I particularly pay my respects to the Strong First Nations women who have led their communities as you know, the stewardship of their people and of their lands is I think, a testament to strong governance. So today on the Take on Board podcast, I am super excited to be speaking with Wendy McCarthy about her journey to the boardroom. First, let me tell you about Wendy. Wendy McCarthy AO is an Australian Business Woman activist, and former university administrator, and she joined her first board of directors almost 50 years ago. It was 1974, feminism second wave was in full swing, and members of the women's electoral lobby were encouraged to join the family planning association of Australia to vote for a new board, to drive reform and change, such as accessible contraception. Wendy was WEL's Sydney chapter co deputy convener. She joined FPA and was elected to the board, well gained control of the association. And as she says, to my surprise, I was elected albeit at the bottom of the ticket. I can't believe that Wendy anyway. It was her first board appointment, and she was excited and apprehensive about the task. Wendy joined the ABC board almost 40 years ago, it was 1983 and the ABC was 50 years old, and had just turned into a corporation to become more innovative and competitive. The Secretary of the Department of Communications called her to ask if she'd be deputy, or chairman, interestingly, of the board. She was appointed without an interview. And again, as she said, no recent book, her advocacy had to be for the Advancement of Women of the corporation. Today, Wendy is on the board of for-purpose investment partners. And she's been on a string of boards way too many to mention here. She's a feminist activist who believes 50/50 is a good framework for board participation and engagement in community life. Wendy, welcome to the Take on Board podcast.

Wendy McCarthy 2:28

Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

Helga Svendsen 2:31

So Wendy, before we talk about your journey to the boardroom, although to be honest, some of these questions might touch on that as well. I would love to just dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me what was young Wendy like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom?

Wendy McCarthy 2:47

Well, I think young Wendy was born to a very young mum, she was 18. When I was born very wisely, she and my father put me in a little preschool in Orange, which was very advanced. So I had a preschool education of one and a half years. And then I went then we moved from Orange. We lived in the country then and my life until I was 18 was completely in the bush after the age of six. And I went to all one teacher school. So one teacher school, I often reflect on what we have we carried on with conversations about what education is required to live a good life. Actually, I was always pretty well, the only one in my class, always come first. And I was a child who read a lot where they're always books in my house. My father had a solid settlement block just outside Forbes, a little village called Karima. You know, I wrote a bike or a horse to school, whatever was the go that day, and I spent a lot of time as many Bush children do on my own. And I've reflected on that recently, quite a lot. And I can see patterns in my life where I've done that. My vision never extended past, almost the immediate present. I'm very fashionably able to be mindful and in the moment and always have been. And did I plan a career? Did I plan a life? No, I didn't. I clearly was opportunistic in situations. So I would put up my hand because I wasn't enthusiastic person to volunteer to, you know, to take the cat for a walk, you know, because in a bush school with 25 kids, you're allowed to walk outside into the playground or put the horse you know somewhere else on the fence and get into the shade. So I would I would always be voluntary, but I was never part of a team because I was in a class on my own for all those years. And I realized now that had a big impact on me and made me probably quite independent. And when I went to the local high school, which was 20 miles away, and I lived in a hostel and I was 11 when I went to into first year high school and really I never lived at home after that, until my first year of teaching were in circumstances where my mother had remarried. And I never really lived with my siblings, especially my sister who was eight years younger. I thought I really wanted to go and live with them. So for a year I lived with them. In my first year teaching, I found myself lucky to be at a school in Bedforms High School with help from the Canteens Trust fund for the boarding at the local Anglican hostel, to not be still at home had correspondence with my mother, who dreaded the prospect of teaching as correspondence, especially in secondary school, especially, you know, terribly have parents see my father left school by 14 and take the responsibility. I mean, they were both, you know, bright and smart and avid readers. And so but so I was independent. I like joining things, I loved boarding school, because there was, you know, there was a group of, a mob around us, we did things together. And that was the pattern of my life that I was capable of having a solo life, and capable of joining in, and I still see that trait within me now. And I know when I first started teaching, most of my friends got apartments. Also, in Sydney together, I've got a bed sit on my own. Because I would go and I've worked at night as a teacher, you know, work to midnight pretty well, or I read. And I now see that that is a pattern. So I'm independent and opportunistic. Did I think about boards? No, I thought about jobs. I couldn't

believe my luck that I was went to university for four years, I had a scholarship. So really, from the age of 11, I didn't use this phrase, but I understood about social reciprocity. Someone had invested in me. And I had a responsibility to do my best. Now that didn't matter. It was was a good girl. I was often naughty, as we used to say, but I always felt I had to please and respond appropriately to the people who had paid for my education. And then I started teaching and and I walked into the classroom, and I thought, Oh, this is like coming home. So I never thought about boards or anything. I didn't even know what a board was really, until I lived in London when my husband who was an economist, accountant, with a big firm in England, but they would be talking about boards around the dinner table. So I kind of worked it out. It never occurred to me that any woman would be on a board. The best life is a life of lifelong learning. If you find something interesting along the way, what I'd like to do you know, more of that, or more of that, or I'd like to have a go at that. So I found that it was possible to often say yes, and think about how I'll do it later.

Helga Svendsen 7:42

Oh, my God, there's already so much I want to dig into there. Wendy? Is Oh, so many things. And it's yeah, it's interesting. I think I reflect as well about didn't know what a board was. I don't think I had any idea what a board was. When even for a university, I suspect I had no idea what a board was, even though I was technically on a board at the time, I was involved in the student union and the on the student on the union board. I think it was called, like I was on a board. And I still wasn't had don't think about it the way I think about boards now, which is interesting. Even when you're in it, you don't quite know what it is about. so on. And I actually want to dig back to something you said very early there about how you were a reader when you were a young kid. I'm just interested. What were the books you loved?

Wendy McCarthy 8:29

I loved all the billabong Series. I loved My Friend Flicker or Little Women, Sydney Town just about every piece of Australian literature that was ever written. And then of course, you know, I read all the Enid Blyton's and then without my parents knowing I was reading adult books because I've swapped the loose covers so that someone else I read the unedited version of the Cruel Sea, I had no idea what they were doing until about 20 years later, you know, but I knew that going on. And my mother said no, we just keep those books away from Wendy. And I said, actually you don't already. But I got I got the jist of the story or the Dambusters or all those books. And in our house, you know, we read catalogs, Reader's Digest, we read everything because we got mail three times a week, it was a completely different then. I mean, I'm still a huge reader of newspapers and magazines and so on, you know, but I think next year, you know, I'm thinking about what am I doing next year, and I think I might just read eight hours a day really.

Helga Svendsen 9:33

It is such a beautiful way of just getting into a different world. I think it really can take you away. Ironically, or perhaps in line with being on a podcast. I am increasingly listening to books as well, which I never thought I would enjoy because I was such a reader, but I actually do I love listening to a book as well.

Wendy McCarthy 9:52

Oh, I do. And my audible book has just been released by a firm in America. I mean, it's now you know, can get in all sorts of Booktopia and all those places but what is interesting is that I didn't read it. And I felt so anxious about not being a reader, and why I didn't have an option because it's it's 16 hours and 55 minutes as an audible. And you need to trained voice to do it. I had to take advice about that. And though I felt quite vaguely petulant for a day or two, actually, I caught like hearing it now. And I hear it differently. I'm listening to it in the car.

Helga Svendsen 10:27

Yes. Oh, how fabulous. I didn't know it was out on audio book (only two weeks ago). Ah, okay. I don't feel so out of the loop then. Fantastic. I'm also interested. And I promise we'll get onto board stuff in a minute. But I was interested, you talked about how did you put it pleasing and responding all that was partly to the people who had supported you. But now you're writing a book about don't be too polite girls, as well. So I'm just wondering about that pleasing versus not being too polite. And maybe if there was a transition or how they connect,

Wendy McCarthy 10:59

I think I was raised to be polite. And I was raised to be seen and not heard. And I think I was raised to be a good girl. But I think over the years of discourse and feminist discourse, in particular, where we had to redefine the words we use to even to describe ourselves the use of Ms. It still drives me batty people being called Ms. McCarthy. Now, why would anyone want to be called Mrs. Gordon McCarthy? You know, I'm Wendy McCarthy. And so I think we changed language. And I think the whole issue around polite that came out of a bush ballad that title, written by it was called Down Among the Wall Boys, and it was well known you know, you could you could hear ukulele or a banjo playing in the woolshed. And then Glen Tomasetti, really rewrote it for the Equal Pay case in 1969. And it became a little mini feminist answer. And it's still incredibly popular within the trade union movement in places but I think it was about don't undervalue yourself, understand how you present your worth. And what I could see with that sense of reciprocity that the more I did, and the better I became at things, the more valuable that I was. I've been to two functions in the last three weeks with Cremorne Girls High School. One was my history class of 1963. As I said to my daughter, I'm off to do that now. And she said to see the girls and she said, Mum, how old are the girls, and I said, Oh, I suppose they're about 78. And then just a regular all girls Union for the class of 1964. And I

thought, it's such a privilege to see these women and nearly all of them said that the thing they loved about being in my classes that I listened to their voice, I help people hear my voice. And I pay a lot of attention to other people's voice, because that's who you are your voice so much. And it's not just about the sound you make, of course, it's about your words, and your expressions that so defines who you are. And in a life in a professional life, and particularly, in making an entry into a board, your voice becomes a crucial part of your demeanor and your respect on the board. And I'm very fond of saying that when I'm mentoring, that how you arrive and how you depart are two extraordinarily important things in life. I mean, you could put that to birth and death. Or you could put it to, you know, coming into a room, Do you can you create a presence? Does anyone notice you? Well, they might notice you for the right or the wrong reasons. But you need to be in control of that. To some extent. You need to people need to know when you walk in a door. Who you are. They're watching for cues and signs and voice is profoundly important. Because voice gives you confidence. When you're when people say when they're frightened, and they're doing public speaking, their voice dries up. And that's a terrifying thing. I've seen it many times. And you know, I've been close to it a few times myself, where you sort of open your mouth and you think, is it going to come out?

Helga Svendsen 14:25

You talked about arrivals and departures. We're talking about your journey to the boardroom. Tell us about your arrival to the boardroom.

Wendy McCarthy 14:34

Well, you mentioned the Family Planning Board. And that was important, but I was one of 18 on that ticket. And I was so shocked that I bought this especially as I was pregnant. It was a community board, but it was the corporate machinery of the Family Planning Association. A more disciplined board was higher education board. I've spent a lot of time on statutory government boards. When people say to me, why don't you join a political party? I say because I think I get more done outside a political party and I wouldn't be suited to that political party discipline. But I'm the sort of person that, you know, has been given a real role in statutory boards, which are, you know, rigorously controlled and organized. And that's a good thing to be a trusted outsider. I think my experience in the higher education board was really eye opening to all my future boards. I got a phone call in 78, from the Minister of Education, who said, "Is that Wendy McCarthy, I want to talk to you about going on the higher education board." Now, I've never met him but I had a lot of time for him. And I said, Yes. And I said, immediately, I don't think I've been going on the board. And he said, "Well, you caused me a lot of trouble, you know, and women and Education Group, you're just really painful and why wouldn't you go on the board and work from inside rather than outside?" No one had ever really said that to me before. So I thought about it. And I said, Well, could we talk about it tomorrow? I just need to think about it overnight? And he said, "Most people say yes or no, immediately." I didn't say it. But in my head. I thought, okay, but I'm I know, I'm not most people. So, next morning, he rang me, he said, "What did you decide?" And I said, I've decided, I accept your invitation. Thank you. But I am worried about my qualifications to be there. That is another girl

thing. No bloke ever says that. And he said, you've got a degree, haven't you? That's how much research he did. I thought to myself. And I said, Yes, he said that'll do. So there are people who are worry warts, who spend weeks months planning how to be perfect for a board. And frequently, they become poorer copies of themselves, because they're so risk averse. They're so frightened of standing on someone's toe, offending somebody, not having the right response, what is the right response? We don't know until the conversation starts. And when I arrived, he didn't prepare me in any way, I was handed over to the public sector, then you know, to fill in mother's maiden name pretty well. And fill that in. And when I arrived in the board, I was the only woman and they were 18 men. And firstly, why do you need this many men, and it was a bit it was all universities, or TAFE. And they were debating very within the first or the second meeting where the nurses should get degrees. But I felt very comfortable about that. So I thought, you know, there's a girls topic here. And they were nearly all engineers, you know, I know that TAFE was an important part of the sector. Then I suddenly got it, you know, it was like going to university the first time there were no spas or Armadale, they were just, you know, one beautiful house builder member, they were just otherwise, you know, basically ordinary buildings. So anything that looked like Oxford, and Cambridge wasn't what was being offered in regional New South Wales. But the education was fine. And the same thing if you thought you were going into a group of gods who knew everything, but actually they didn't. They were human. I wasn't frightened to ask questions. And that's another way learning to ask questions without threatening or being rude to people is a skill, then I would ask questions, and I think people respected that. There was a moment when I thought, it's actually not very exciting this board, but I have to do it, I have to learn the discipline of how this works. And this will be good for me. You know, I was also on the Education Commission. So it meant I was the most prominent woman in the carriage and administration of education in New South Wales. I was in only two of us in both roles. And I think to myself, how did I get there, and I couldn't even get a job in the Education Department. When I said I was pregnant. So we've come a long way. And I've enjoyed it.

Helga Svendsen 19:13

That is in that final reflection there just about literally can't get the job because you're pregnant, but you can be on the governing board of that organisation...

Wendy McCarthy 19:21

From 1968 When I was pregnant, and and I got it, I ended up getting, you know, casual job six months. And then in 1978, 10 years later, I was on a board maternity leave that arrived, the Whitlam government had been there women in education had done a report which I've been a part of all because I was a grassroots activist, a feminist activist. So all those people who said, Wendy, you shouldn't speak out. You shouldn't be a feminist. You shouldn't be an activist. But of course, it was also a bit of a different time because it was also Vietnam, which gave us all courage to go to the street.

Helga Svendsen 19:59

I'm actually interested in feminist governance. And I'm wondering what your reflections are there. We had a brief conversation about this recently on the podcast with Rosslyn Noonan, who reflected that much of the governance structures in a way have been developed by the west, developed by men, developed by white men. You know, the line between governance and operational and other things are in that frame. So I'm just interested as a feminist of the 70s, and as somebody who's been involved in governance, I'm wondering what feminist governance looks like to you and what, you know, more traditional governance structures can learn from feminist governance, if anything?

Wendy McCarthy 20:39

When we were setting up women's electoral lobby, which was quite a different, although based in the ideology of women's liberation, but quite a different structural response to women's liberation. There was a piece that was circulating that had been written in Miss Magazine called the Tyranny of Structurelessness, by a woman called Jo Freeman. And we were very quickly, as feminists working out how we governed, as well as managed, the endeavor of feminism. Women's liberation held a big commission, talking about it, and women's electoral lobby argued about it. How did you get accountability? And how did you get representation, all the things that are important in current governance, it was pretty free flowing. So you know, we did things like, different people took the chair at each meeting, and, and we looked after the money, you know, there were no in the freewheeling way that we were doing it, we could say that nobody was left out. But if you actually unwrap that, people who were not accustomed to intercepting a conversation, being heard, it was very hard for black women, as we said, then but you know, First Nations women, because they weren't used to that kind of discourse. And frankly, they were more polite, until they weren't.

Helga Svendsen 20:41

They've also learned not to be too, too polite girls.

Wendy McCarthy 22:16

And women's electoral lobby, you know, we never really thought about governance, we were in pursuit of an idea which of course, all governance is. But we had the idea, we knew that we wanted to be a reformist organisation. And we wanted to create some sort of framework that would enable us to do that. Women's liberation was more revolutionary, there were no plans for what when the revolution happened, how a business would be done. So we will bid more than women with the shopping list. There were very few things that women's liberation, Women's Electoral Lobby did not agree on. It was only about how you got there, and then how you manage it, to bring more people into your team. So after about 18 months, there were about 5,000 members of WEL, that was more than the Liberal Party, or the country party as it was then. And you know, when the age wrote that WEL was the body that made the difference to the election of Whitlam, it is exactly the same, really

the WEL methodology / women took Morrison out. There's no doubt about that. And so many women's organisations had scorecards which the WEL group invented. And I will often think about that, like we had a shopping list on that scorecard. When we interviewed the politicians, we mark them against the things about how good they wouldn't be at this. And that's what the Teal's did. And well is 50 years old this weekend. So which is amazing. Yes, yes, Linda Burnie. And I've been doing this speech for WEL in New South Wales on Saturday, having a conversation about how things have changed. And she and I were together on many of the Higher Education, education commission work, she's the person who really taught me truth telling in an indigenous way. So we knew we were, we were in pursuit of the governance of an idea that we wanted to keep, and that is women's equality. There were a million different things on that, you know, that's when I started reading Mao, and said women hold up half the sky. And that just says that means 50/50. Now, I know and when one of your previous things and people talked about the importance of the 30% Club, and it has a value, but I can't understand why anybody would have the aim of 30%. I consider myself in this society to have access to 50% of the fun or responsibility, accountability, you know, all the things that matter because to me, that seems to be the ultimate the human position in terms of equality, and that's when people begin to understand feminism never taught people to war. It never killed anybody. It's basically out of the peace movement, did it manage feminism as something? Not really what it did was it gave an idea to take into governance spaces, to be managed. So Women's Electoral Lobby was a feminist organisation, and it eventually had rules of association around money, public money. And that's the other thing if you get public money you have to follow the rules, and that's a good thing for us to also understand. Coming on to whether it's a University Board, or whether it's the ABC or anything, you take the idea of feminism into the board, because you're not trying to develop a feminist monastery, you're trying to inform the world, that there is a better way, then one part of the human species, whether you want to call it the patriarchy or whatever, that should have all of the power, framing all the laws. And even in this recent, awful case of Brittany Higgins and Bruce Lehrmann, it just strikes again, the memory that it's so brief that rape and marriage wasn't approved of. And we still have laws framed around a male world. And we still need to change it. And it doesn't matter. Both people are damaged in that. And of course, it's a terrible story. But it's still, we're looking at the experience from the perpetrator, not the victim. And I don't want women to be seen as victims, but we are in many parts of the legal system, there's always a lot of work to do,.

Helga Svendsen 26:51

Being 50% and holding up half the sky. I think once we get our political structures, our legal structures, our governance structures, and so on to represent the communities which they serve, we will much more likely have some of those systems that do serve all of us rather than parts of us.

Wendy McCarthy 27:10

And the other thing about that is that if you're a reformist, you need always to keep your eye on the game. I just say I say to young women, you need to be a target, have fun and make change that is valuable for you and your peer group and all the rest of us. You need to be an engaged and

frequently enraged citizen, you need to learn how to do it. And I've watched that wonderful woman on the Supreme Court board, Sonia Sotomayor. And Ruth Bader Ginsburg in conversation, and they then walked around a group of teenage girls, and they said, "You should all do law, you need to understand your human rights." And, one girl said, "You know, I'm just a beauty therapist," and they said, "Well, if you want to run a business, you need law." And you know, they just convert the adolescent language into a bigger opportunity. And that's a lot about voice and language again, you know, I always wanted to keep coming back, you've got to find your voice in the space.

Helga Svendsen 28:11

We have barely touched on things Wendy, how does this happen? Oh, I'm going to ask you one more. And then I promised I would have you out by midday. So I promise I shall. People often ask about the Australian Institute of Company Directors and I know you are a life, fellow of the AICD. I'm wondering what part that may have played or what role you think that organisation can have in people's journey to the boardroom, just some views there?

Wendy McCarthy 28:39

I found it remarkable watching the rise of the AICD. I used to be in the, I think would be at it, I used to often do a thing or host, the chairman of the board thing when I was the Chancellor of the University of Canberra, and various company directors who were members of that in which system was not a very big group. And they would come and they could talk to people who were chairs and the thinking of the university chancellor as a chair was a new idea to them. But anyway, we worked on that. And I found the rise of it. And they started running conferences, and I went to a few and I joined the organisation to see what it was doing. And it was still very prejudiced against women, that you know, the default position was not to hear a woman's voice, even if she was sitting at the table next to you and there was a wonderful moment we're in a conference where they were three women and about 90 men. And I asked a man who was talking and who was a very wonderful speaker about corporate governance and I said well, you know, tell me about women and corporate governance and he went on about who he'd always go to a hospital or a school to find the leading woman there if he was looking for one director and I said how many women have you put on boards? Zero. That was Sir Adrian Cadbury and I have to say, I thought I can't be bothered with this anymore, that they have got themselves together. And they have done a lot of work on mentoring. Certainly their company director magazine is very good reading for people. And it's contemporary, and I, but I don't think I mean, I've never done the course. But I've taught in it. I've taught endless courses on governance, especially if not for profits. But I think that it's a useful prerequisite. But it's not the only prerequisite. There's a lot of stuff on boards about learning about risk. And that of course does not teach you about risk. How can you be risk averse in the interest of the shareholders and the board and still take risks in order to improve the situation. So I think that it's encouraging and good. And I think it's a good course, and I've encouraged people to do it. But it's not the only pathway to a board, and we shouldn't see as is that there are many people who are very good directors on boards, both young and old, who haven't done it, and might at some stage, I haven't done a Harvard degree. And I think about it, and I think there must have Harvard for older people

now. You'd go into it, you're not going in to in order to go on a board. I'm done with that. But it would be interesting to reflect with a group of older people, that the world is always in need of good governance, around good ideas, and good enterprises. So there will always be space. And I was quite moved and flattered that I was made a Fellow of AICD, because it came completely out of the blue. And I felt well, they've rewarded someone who hasn't followed the rules. So I couldn't thank them for that.

Helga Svendsen 31:52

h, Wendy, we have covered so much yet so little. I'm wondering, you know, we've barely touched on the ABC, I might have to get you back at some stage, I think. But I'm wondering what are the key things you would like people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Wendy McCarthy 32:07

I think for women, especially if somebody asks you to do something, you should assume they've done their homework. And they think you could do it competently? You don't have to say, oh, no, I haven't got a PhD. I think somebody be better than me. I don't know that I could do that. Because that actually makes the person who's the asker lose confidence. You just need to say thank you so much. Can I have you know, a couple of days to think about it, and go away and just bask in the glow that someone has noticed that you are ready for something different and something new, and work out how you can do it? And you know, the simplest way say Yes, first and think about it later. That's what men do. And we don't always copy them. But in matters of governance, it works. I think that's one thing I would say. And I think the other thing I would say is to live in a good world, you have to keep learning. The things that I know now about living with First Nations people compared with what I knew growing up. I just had two planets. Do you know we birth differently, and now you know, people can have babies with, you know, people present in hospitals. We, we do lots of things differently. And mostly they're better. You acknowledged in your acknowledgement of country. The extraordinary difference that young First Nations people and particularly young women are making, writing the statement of the heart, doing law, writing novels, everything, whether it's from rap music, to William Barton playing the didgeridoo with the symphony orchestra, First Nations people everywhere, we need to get to know our First Nations people and work with them.

Helga Svendsen 33:58

I could not agree more. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community? I don't know. Maybe a book?

Wendy McCarthy 34:04

Oh of course, I want I want everyone to read 'Don't be too polite, girls' and it is a lot about governance of ideas. You know, I was thinking when I was coming here, and there are certainly, you know, chapters on my experiences at the ABC and the Higher Education Board and a very interesting board IMF, Bentham, which was a class action board, which very commercial financial board, which I joined later, because all of those boards enriched my life. And I'd like to think that I made a contribution and everyone is capable of that contribution. So it's an encouraging book for young and old women and many men.

Helga Svendsen 34:41

Fantastic. I will make sure we put a link to that in the show notes, including the audio book so people can read or listen along. So fantastic. Oh, Wendy, thank you so much for literally taking the call when we said would you be on the podcast thank you so much for making the time and for sharing your wisdom not just with the Take on Board community today via the podcast but also via your books. Thank you for all that you've done and thank you for being with us today.

Wendy McCarthy 35:09

And Helga, thank you for having me it's been a pleasure.