

Future Generation and 2fold: Investing for impact  
Episode Five | Wendy McCarthy AO

*Future Generation acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to elders past and present.*

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** That's Wendy McCarthy one of Australia's most influential women. For more than 50 years Wendy's been at the forefront of feminism, corporate and public life in Australia. Her trailblazing advocacy has truly shaped this country. For example, if your dad was at your birth, you can thank Wendy because back in the 1960's she fought for the rights of fathers to be at their child's birth. She's also fought for equal pay for women, affordable childcare, and access to contraception and abortion law reform. In fact, in 1972 she famously risked prosecution by taking out a full page ad announcing she'd had an illegal abortion. But Wendy is not just an incredible change maker. She's an educator, author, mother, business owner, board member, university chancellor, the Deputy Chair of the ABC and a wonderful mentor to countless other women including myself. So, Wendy welcome, I'm really delighted to have you with us today!

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I'm so delighted to be back talking to you professionally as well as personally.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Thank you. It's really hard for me to introduce you because you know over the time that I've known you your life, your career, it's been very varied, so how would you describe yourself? I mean so what do you actually put on the form at the airport?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Mostly I put Company Director because nobody knows what that is and it's an all-encompassing term and if I put feminist activist I may not get through the border controls. I'm tempted at times to do other things, but usually I do that and the other thing I did was engaged citizen, I put that down once and the guy looked and he said that's a good thing, I said yes and it's a lot of fun too.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I'm going to ask you a question that we ask all of our guests. This podcast is called 2old because at Future Generation our purpose is twofold. We want to get the best investment returns for our shareholders and we also want to get the best social outcomes for young Australians. We do this by investing in mental health and youth at risk for not-for-profits, so Wendy what are your two driving purposes now?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I think the education and leadership of women has been a profoundly important part of my life and it remains that and a part of that now which is a part of the twofold story is the resurrection of public education. I am deeply concerned that our public education system is not flourishing and I think though that the other thing that I would include in the education and leadership of women is that women's health and the right to reproductive rights, so they're the two things that I care about most passionately, but because you can't be an effective adult woman without reproductive rights and a good education.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** We'll come to both of those later, but earlier this year you published a memoir, in fact it's your second memoir and it's called Don't Be Too Polite Girls. So why did you choose that title and what does it mean to you?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Choosing a book title is agonising Caroline. People think you choose it before you write it, but mostly you don't and I had eighteen working titles and in those titles I kept trialling it with people and they go oh no and then I went back to what I did the first time and remember Doris Lessing's advice that she said you always go back to the music of the time and you think about the music and what mattered to you from that music and that's where you find your titles. So I went back to 1968 when I started an activist life because Don't Be Too Polite Girls really is about life after 60 in the activist's life as well as the years leading to it. So a young woman called Gwen Thomas Eddy, very beautiful, very well educated Melbourne woman and a singer re-lyricised the rewrote the lyrics maybe a better way to say it for an old shearing ballad called Down Among the Wool Boys and I remember the tune and I remember the words of that and she wrote it for the Equal Pay Case said don't be too polite girls, show a little fight and make sure people know what you're worth and I thought that's the book I want to write. That's the title for my book and then I got in touch with the family and I found out a lot more about her. I'd heard her sing, she was a folk singer with Margaret Rose Knight and in a sense if *I Am Woman*

hadn't come along it probably could've been, would've been the feminist anthem, but it was certainly one of them in the late '60's.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** The title made me think about Grace Tame and the criticism that she has copped when she met Scott Morrison and she didn't smile. Grace responded by saying that the abuse culture is dependent on submissive smiles, in other words, it's dependent on politeness. I know you advised Grace as well as Chanel Contos the founder of Teach Us Consent. What parallels do you see between your history and the activism that's taking place now?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Well I think they're slipping inside my shoes and the shoes of my generation and I think they'll probably move away a bit from a business focus and I think over the years you know my focus was not-for-profit and for purpose before we used those terms and then you're a loser if you couldn't do something in business and I'd always liked business anyway so for me I wanted to try all of that. But for someone like Grace and those young women they're looking for examples of that and the thing I've said to some of my peer group who were quite disapproving and thought Grace was rude, is that it wasn't compulsory to make nice. She was an Australian of the Year. She had a commitment in that role to go to Government House or the Prime Minister's residence and be honoured for that and on the completion of that role. So she went, she got dressed beautifully, she spoke beautifully when she had to, but she didn't pretend that she was making nice and I thought that was admirable that you can't gloss over something as grotesque that happened to her and that she talked about all year and pretend that it was all over and it was just a bit of a party and I think I've persuaded most people that that's a reasonable view.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** You had this famously equal partnership with your late husband Gordon and I saw that. You know he was very much a man ahead of his time in many ways and you said previously that this really allowed you to soar in your career and public life. How important is it for male attitudes to change if we are going to reach equality in the workplace and in what ways do they need to change?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I think men have got to do it for themselves. They've got to do it because they believe in it and they want to. In Gordon's case, I think having spent the first three years of our lives away from all our family in an international life, we became very co-dependent

and very curious about how other people structured marriages and relationships and so on and really it meant that you threw in the rubbish bin half the attitudes that we grew up with about what was appropriate behaviour for a couple and we were both curious about things. So Gordon was you know he was really interested in being there at the birth of our children and he wanted that participation and that closeness and intimacy and he also assumed that as he'd met someone and married someone who had the same education as him that we would both be contributing financially and intellectually to our lives together and it does make me reflect on how important it is to find the right partner for life and I think that that we don't... we think that's a bit mushy, but it's actually not. If you can find someone who has equal expectations of himself or herself and his partner in that case, you have a basis for sharing and I think that that's a wonderful basis for your children to grow up in a family where Mum and Dad do both things and they're pretty well interchangeable in their care and responsibility and their love and I you know I wouldn't have swapped him for anyone.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I remember actually when I met you, you also wanted to check out my husband to make sure it was a good pairing so.

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** That's right I wanted to make sure you were marrying well and that would've been slightly different from maybe what your Grandmother would've thought once upon a time, but not really. You're marrying well when you're marrying someone you love and someone you think you can share a creative life with and if you can have an equal life whatever that means to you that's good enough.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I'm so in agreement with you there. So I've known you...

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** And you did get a good man.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I so did, I'm very, very lucky and then so is he.

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Exactly.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I've known you for more than 20 years and the thing that I've always admired about you besides your kindness is your commitment to education. We've worked

together in the education space; we've run finance academies for public school students and you've always said that no one can take your education away from you. You know I'm interested in this more because at Future Generation we work with Youth at Risk. Kids who are homeless, have violence in their homes and many other issues. So how critical is education for the "young tomorrow" if they're going to escape their childhood?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** My childhood was really happy most of the time, but people could read the story and think you know I had a father who was an alcoholic and who was menacing sometimes and he certainly wasn't you know real and central to our lives, but the pain of it was. But education takes you to another place, particularly reading. If there's only one skill you learn from your education if it's reading you can get by. You can learn... you can use a calculator now for most of the rest of the things that you need in life, but I think that it's... you know I do say it's the one thing you can't take away from, but education opens doors. It enables social autonomy. It enables physical autonomy in particular ways and that sense of agency, so for me my life as it is now would not have happened without access to public school scholarships, access to university scholarships and the capacity to just earn enough as a young woman to be able to on that scholarship make my way basically from the age of 11 you know I had scholarships, look and that gave me a status as well, you know, so Wendy's a clever girl, not too clever please, but you know clever enough and I don't think we should ever underestimate how important it is. I was quite shocked last week when I read a piece by Mathias Cormann, international finance person now, saying that Australia have too many people going to universities and they should be more in trades. I mean for me that is just such rubbish. Anyone who is able to go to university and learns to research, synthesise, read more, think more, of course they should go and we should provide them. It doesn't mean you can't have a trade, but it means that you have a chance to learn to think independently and the best nations are taught in democracies to think independently.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Would that be the advice that you would give to any child whether they're vulnerable or at any situation that they should be getting a really good education?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Yes. I think education is the only game in town and that's the one we need to pursue and provide and public education I think is very challenged at the moment in Australia and we need some correction. In my early life we would've always chosen public

ahead of private and that's probably not the case now and I think that secular education should be, a great secular education, should be the central platform of every nation.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** You were Chair of *headspace*, the National Youth Mental Health Service and that interests me because Future Generation Global (ASX: FGG) has worked with them in the past, we were a founder partner and they're working to prevent mental ill health in young Australians which is really where we are... what we're trying to do at the moment. It's at a crisis point at the moment. Recent statistics show that 40% of 16 to 24 year old's have a mental health disorder which is a horrifying increase. What are your views of the current mental health crisis and what do you think is causing it?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I think I was shocked really when I took on the Chairmanship of *headspace* at how prevalent it was. I mean I knew the numbers and I knew in country towns of families who'd they'd gone to every cake stall and so on for a kid who was vulnerable or born with a disability and a mental disability housed and schooled and cared for and so on. But the anxiety and the depression which are rampant are the really challenging spaces and there is no doubt that as a 16 to 20 or 12 to 25 year old's that *headspace* looked at, if you have a chance of prevention before it goes really rogue you're a long, long way ahead financially and most of all for that individual. So early identification of kids with at risk behaviour and at risk confidence, I don't have the answers but I do know that when I used to see kids walking happily into a *headspace* street place for support and making it seem that's just like going to the dentist or going to the doctor because something's going wrong in your head which is a very simple way to say it but that it's acceptable because as soon as we accept those things, they get fixed and you could go back through you know my stories with reproductive rights. I mean abortion is now a health matter. It's not about backdoors and criminal behaviours and you know paying off cops and so on, you go to the doctor for a whole lot of things and you go to the doctor to talk about abortion if that's what you're looking for and so we need to get that suite of programs into *headspace*. But the jury is still out and it would be dishonest not to say that about how effective it is because we haven't been doing it even half well for more than a decade or so. So when people say oh we're not getting enough for our investment, well we're not sure about what the impact is and how that might be measured effectively and I think you know there were 95 centres, *headspace* centres when I left *headspace* and about 10 when I went there and in public



health provisions policy changes too frequently often to get any sense of longevity about what's working and I guess that's just something we have to live with.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** As you were talking before about abortion, I mean you became known to a whole new generation of people because you did front that successful campaign to decriminalise abortion in New South Wales. Shortly after that, the US took a backward step by overturning Roe vs Wade. How did you feel about that decision?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Well you know it was one of those things that was predicted by Ruth Bader Ginsburg who held on for the last moment and to stay in the Supreme Court to keep the numbers there, but I think there'd been a general sense in America since the '90's that with the rise of Hillary Clinton and the predictions and her success in international UN conferences and Women's Rights and Human Rights in Beijing in 1995, that the movement of American women into mainstream politics, mainstream business and managing the issues around women's leadership and reproductive rights would just be incrementally progressive. It's turned out not to be and it was a great shock when women with ambivalent views about abortion were appointed to the Supreme Court and then when the first thing started to happen and it was overturned, I think it was a terrible shock. But American women, I think, have lost their leadership position in the world as a result of this. They should've been watching. They should've been looking and working out different scenarios for women to have access to healthcare. I mean we have some trouble in Australia at the moment with access, so I'm not speaking from a position of you know divine leadership on this matter, but we don't have persecution at a criminal level enabled by the State. Now we're seeing in America like a friend last week got picked up at a passport because she didn't want to go through the X ray because she said she was pregnant, she got asked questions about pregnancy you know, like it was a question about abortion and you think now a 10 year old is suddenly pregnant, so there's going to be a lot of energy of women in the community, women's leadership, around how to get access to this because it's... without going back to backyard abortions and when we have backyard abortions women die. Sad isn't it?

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Very sad, really sad actually...

**WENDY McCarthy AO:** And America invests a large amount of money in international aid and development, so anywhere where anyone there are any questions or discussions about family planning they won't pay that money. Now there's like there's 70 million women live in poverty, their children go with them and they're going to be more if they don't have access to termination of pregnancy.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** So there's been some really long term impacts that weren't really thought about at the time?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Yes, yes.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** You recently helped Kerryn Phelps and then Allegra Spender get elected into Federal Parliament. What lessons do you take from these forays into politics and how difficult is it to beat the system? How difficult is the system for women going into politics?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** Well I think it's not that hard for women to get into politics, it's hard for women to be endorsed by political parties in leadership positions for relatively safe electorates. So when Kerryn ran in the by-election, she saw an opportunity and people saw it and spoke to her about it and she agreed that was an opportunity and she was really interested and so she talked to me about it and I said yeah let's do it and it was just a spontaneous decision we were really talking walking up the Macleay Street in Potts Point and suddenly off we went. So I've done a lot of work when the women's electoral lobbies set up about in supporting politicians and then I've done some local government stuff too, so I was quite aware of the system, but it was quite a long time since I've done it, but it was the most exhilarating campaign and there is that moment when people put their feet on the streets and their hands in their pocket when they've had enough of the existing regime and that was what it was. People were enraged with Malcolm Turnbull and they were not impressed by his successor and they came out for Kerryn and the second time round you know she missed but it was a very small margin and I have to be fair she won by a small margin and I think with Allegra, that what we're seeing is the result of the experience of Kerryn because she actually delivered in Parliament what she said she wanted to do, getting the children off Manus Island. Probably one of the first politicians to do that in such a short term and Allegra now is flying and she's you know she's the true



daughter of the Feminist Revolution really you know and it goes in steps and stairs but she's a force for good. Maybe she will be the first Australian woman for next Prime Minister, who knows.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** On top of your very visible work and activism behind the scenes you've also guided countless women. I know I am one of the many, many who have benefited from your counsel in my career and in my life generally. You founded one of the first mentoring systems for up and coming women. You're a founding member of Chief Executive Women (CEW). Why is it still so important for women to help other women and how many women do you see not doing this?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I think women enabling women is really important and I think women who worry that they shouldn't do that are mostly applying a male gender lens over opportunities for promotion and leadership and I'm mindful of the situation I know at the moment where a very senior man, a very nice man is mentoring a smart woman and a couple of Boards have come up that she's quite interested in and he says oh you're not ready yet. Well see I wouldn't cop that. I would say... I would be... and she took it and she thought oh well I'm not ready yet. Well she is ready to do that and what happens is when people do that whether they're male or female you lose your confidence. You think well maybe I'm not ready. Well when will I be ready, I've got a Master's degree, I've worked for 20 years, I think I'm ready, I thought I was ready, presumably somebody thought I was ready 'cos I got on this program, so I don't know how to do that but I do know how to get those passed, help those women ask questions of in that scenario saying well tell me what am I lacking because that's not true mentoring. You need to be questioned. You need to go back not to be making nice, you're grateful for the person giving the time, but you want to know a little bit you need more feedback than that and I think women who don't support other women basically I just don't want to know them really because it... and it's foolish. That doesn't mean there aren't women you dislike or many dislike or many like, but to say that you know... I think it shows a sort of anxiety and a terrible fear that another woman might get ahead of him, well I suppose men do that too.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** At a most recent CEW event and Sydney Community Fund, I saw you getting mobbed by young women. What do you think it is about you that appeals so much to these young women?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** I think I'm safe. I think they can tell me things that maybe they can't tell their mothers or their grandmothers and they're not necessarily of much consequence but they are to them and they... and I remember for 10 years I wrote the *Cleo* column on human relationships, my sex advisor years and I think in the end I understood that there was no unaskable question and sometimes it's easier to ask one of those questions to someone else and I've got a track record that says that I'm trusted and I'm safe and I'll give you advice and truth as I see it and it might just be you know a 20 minute encounter but if I say well that you know I think that's probably not a good idea or a good idea, they know they'll get an honest answer and basically I don't lecture people and I do have fun.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** So you've just turned 81. You're looking back at your life, you've written your memoir, you know what are you most proud of and what will your legacy be?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** My legacy will be at a very personal level, I've been a good wife and mum and I've been a good person in my family and there are 40 odd of us sitting down for Christmas this year. I love families. I love clusters of people working and you know together, robust as it gets at times and I think the other thing that I look for, I'd like to think that women have a bit more confidence in public life than they did when I started and I'd like them to hang onto the idea that if someone offers you something and asks you if you'd like to go on a Board and so on that you say yes first and think about it later because managing risk in today's world is a crucial way of developing your life and your career. It's a risk when you set up a relationship with a partner. It's a task and it has to be managed in a way with head and heart and it's a risk when you take a job in an unknown place, but out of that risk comes growth and wisdom and hopefully lots of fun and results.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** So what's next Wendy?

**WENDY McCARTHY AO:** That's a very interesting question Caroline. I've been thinking about a couple of little things I might like to write. I won't write anything as big as *Don't Be Too Polite Girls*, but I know I need to keep healthy. I'm working on one Board which is a for purpose not-for-profit and it's looking at aged care and disability in particular and I do feel a sense of relief that I'm not one of them, but and I know how easily it could be, but I'm really distressed by the fact that there are so many women being thrown over the truck really, out of the truck, they no

longer have a home, they're living in poverty, they have minimal super because of their working lives and they all had some stages and a good life at some time and they're just left out and so for me, if I do what [inaudible] said we should do is just keep going, I want to make sure that those who have been just left out get back into a life of respect. I guess my other thing is after a decade of I think very disrespectful discourse between women and government, I'm hoping that the next 10 years will be very respectful discourse between women and government because we need that to be safe and to have equity and they're going quite well at the moment, so we all need to keep our eyes on them.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you very much Wendy, thank you for your time.

WENDY McCARTHY AO: And thank you for the opportunity. Lovely to see you in this role.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Always. Thank you.