



Glenda Cloughley, writer of the Lament lyrics and initiator of the March 2003 action, in 2018. Picture supplied

Chorus turning lament to renewal

Janet Salisbury

THIS month, Canberra's celebrated women's group, A Chorus of Women, mark 20 years of giving voice to matters of the heart for citizens - from peace and human rights to climate change and environmental protection.

To commemorate this anniversary, they will return to where it all began - the Marble Foyer of Parliament House.

In February 2003, I joined what were reported to be the biggest rallies in Australian history to protest the looming war with Iraq. Polling showed that around two-thirds of Australians did not want to start a war and the rallies felt like democracy on the move.

But the people's democracy did not deter then prime minister John Howard. On March 18, 2003, he arrived at Parliament House to announce that Australia would join the invasion of Iraq.

Between my usual activities, I was listening to the radio to hear news of this fateful announcement. To my surprise and wonder, I started to pick up news of an audacious action by Canberra women - a different expression of democracy in action.

A group of Canberra women had gathered unnoticed in the foyer at Parliament House. As John Howard rose in the Chamber to make his announcement, Judith Cllngan, standing on one marble stairway, sang: "Open the doors of the chambers".

And on the opposite stairway, Glenda Cloughley sang: "of your hearts".

The women gathered in the foyer (later

found to be some 150 strong) joined as one: "Open your minds to our song".

And continued "We sing for peace through the power of love. Hear the wisdom of women, hear our song."

This *Lament* - an expression of grief for what was about to befall the people of Iraq - had been written just four days earlier by Glenda and Judith.

Security guards were baffled. What to do? Glenda explained that it was not a protest

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but a lament for people who were going to die. The singing continued. Politicians who came to the foyer wept alongside members of the public.

The women's sounding of grief became a national and international media event. The ABC's 7.30 bulletin that night featured the women singing over footage of the prime minister and others speaking about the war.

Broadcaster Fran Kelly opened her report with "A chorus of women singing for peace in the halls of Parliament House", thus

giving the women a name. "A Chorus of Women" was born.

Listening to the women on radio and TV that day changed my life. Unlike the anti-war rallies, which evoked anger and frustration, this action went straight to my heart.

Recalling that day, Glenda Cloughley says, "We discovered that we had sung a song that was already in people's hearts, like the longing for peace always is". The words of *Lament* were read into Hansard and journalists, artists, political commentators and academics have subsequently cited the action as an example of Australian democracy in action.

In 2006, I was looking for a choir to join. I discovered that A Chorus of Women was by then an established group rehearsing on Sunday afternoons and meeting on Thursday evenings for philosophical discussion to inform original song writing and actions.

Like the chorus in ancient Greek theatre, Fran Kelly's 2003 commentary had evoked this modern-day chorus, who were commenting on public issues and foretelling what would happen.

As Glenda Cloughley has often told me, "Our creative attitude and our voice come from listening to people's deepest longings and to what we've learned about law from wise old ones in all our traditions". I was hooked.

In the past 20 years, A Chorus of Women songwriters have created over 100 original songs, major choral and dramatic works. These have been woven by the group into over 230 public events, including presenta-

tions at major cultural institutions; community events and festivals, professional and academic conferences; public conversations and more.

In 2022, Chorus was awarded the ACT Chief Minister's Rotary Peace Prize, which has sparked fresh interest in *Lament* as a source of public inspiration, including grief about the destructive effects of climate change.

To mark their 20th anniversary, A Chorus of Women will return to Parliament House on Tuesday March 21, with permission this time, and with a "People's Chorus" of women and men. Glenda Cloughley explains, "We are returning to encourage the tide of renewal that's moving across Australia into this 47th Parliament. We're telling in three short songs the most important story in the world - the regeneration story that's much bigger than any of us who will be there."

Among the singers will be women who sang the *Lament* 20 years ago, long-time Chorus women, and women and men from Canberra's choral community. Some parliamentarians have accepted the invitation sent to members, senators and staffers.

At the heart of the event, the women will lead a 2023 version of *Lament* with new music for a call from women to "give our voice to the Song of Life" so "lament will turn to renewal" and a response from men and women.

The songs have melodies that can be readily picked up. Sheet music, recordings and other details are on the Chorus of Women website (chorusofwomen.org).