

Personal Perspectives on Parliament Lower House*

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From time to time, the national media becomes obsessed about the plight of women in politics. Interestingly, this obsession tends to occur when the national press gallery has a woman in its sights, either tearing her down, or building her up as a prelude to tearing her down.

This media cycle is driven by the fact that women are still viewed as unusual in politics. The end to this cycle will only come when women are equally represented in our parliaments. Indeed, we need to strive for a time when it is so usual for women to be in parliament that no one feels the need to comment on it. Much more needs to be done to ensure women and men are equally represented in our parliaments. In addition, much needs to be done to ensure that women who enter our parliaments do not have stereotypes limit the roles they can play. Equality of representation means women in parliament must be taken seriously if they focus on defence or finance or trade as well as if they focus on child-care or social security policy.

It is important that the image women paint of themselves, and the image painted of women in the media, is as equally inclusive of the potential for a female treasurer as for a female family services minister.

Women are capable of doing anything and yet there remains a particular style about the way in which women are treated. It is a hard job being a parliamentarian, a hard

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job for anyone, man or woman, but with an extra degree of difficulty for women given the historic male definition of the job and the power structures.

We should be concerned about and support our women parliamentarians. But it struck me when I was first elected that, particularly in media commentary, there is a tendency for this culture of concern to become one of condescension.

As an incoming Labor MP, you get the delight of being written up by newspaper columnists who snapshot you and other incoming MPs, and muse about your prospects for the future. In that coverage it always struck me that the way in which women were described differed markedly from the way in which men were described. A woman was likely to be described as 'young' when a man of the same age would not be. The condescension would also arise in the way in which past careers were summarised in these articles. The careers of the incoming men were appraised and described in terms like 'seasoned', 'experienced' and the like. Yet when women were written up, irrespective of their past careers, it is with a sort of breathless 'will they cope in this tough world' kind of spin.

In dealing with this issue we have to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. It is good that there is some media and party recognition that it is tougher for women. But there is a creeping condescension in this reporting which must be understood and resisted. Women in parliament are not some political version of little Alice who, having gone through the looking glass, now finds herself in a strange world.

Women, like men, come to parliament at all sorts of ages with all sorts of skills and experiences behind them. Some individuals will find it tougher than others and we would expect that sort of diversity. Women in parliament should not be judged as if they are in some sort of concessional class. Women should be recognised as every bit as likely to be capable, seasoned, experienced and tough as their male colleagues.

While much needs to be done to cut this media cycle, and to achieve true equality for women in our parliaments, a quick review of the statistics shows women in law are actually doing it harder.

Currently in federal Parliament there are 60 women, meaning women comprise 26.5 per cent of the Parliament. The ALP disproportionately contributes to this total with 33.7 per cent of its total number of federal parliamentarians being women.

In Victoria, there are 40 women state parliamentarians, equalling 30 per cent of the total. Once again, the ALP is doing better, contributing 36 women to the total. The story is even better at Cabinet level with seven of Victoria's 20 ministers being women.

Let's compare these figures with comparable figures for women in the law. Of the 170 Supreme Court judges around Australia, only 22 are women, which equals 12.94 per cent. Victoria is slightly behind on 11.43 per cent but is way ahead of New South Wales with only nine per cent. Tasmania and the ACT have no women Supreme Court judges. As we all know, there are no women on the High Court.

Around the nation there are 775 Queen's or Senior Counsel. Of these, only 5.8 per cent are women. Victoria is slightly in front with 7.85 per cent being women.

Should we be alarmed by these figures? I believe we should. Clearly there are all sorts of explanations that can be proffered for these results. While women now outnumber men as law school graduates, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, it will take time for the highest positions in law to be filled by women in equal numbers. I am sure many would say it is sufficient to stand back and let time even up the scoreboard.

But will time heal the gender gap in law? In my view, the gender gap in politics has been closing more quickly than it otherwise would because particular policies were adopted by Labor to address the issue. This progress made for women in politics largely stems from the cultural shift within the Labor Party signified by the passage of the affirmative action rule through National Conference in 1994.

Affirmative action for multi-member internal party committees has been a feature of the party's internal structure since 1981. While successful at generating increased female involvement in party committees, the guarantee of at least one-third membership of internal party committees did not, in and of itself, solve the problem of getting more women into parliament.

With Labor state governments providing Australia's first two female premiers, Joan Kirner in Victoria and Carmen Lawrence in Western Australia, it was easy for a period in the 1980s to think that women were making steady inroads into the parliamentary sphere and that this trend would continue. Indeed, many in the law might believe this now.

In Victoria, in particular, the shattering defeat of 1992 exploded that illusion. The truth was women had made inroads but had tended to be clustered in marginal seats. As a result, when Labor hit its bedrock vote, few women were left. The 1992 election defeat halved the number of women in Victoria's Labor Caucus. Federally, a similar crunch point was hit after the 1996 election, with the number of Labor women in the House of Representatives cut by more than half to a mere four parliamentarians.

As a result of the 1992 defeat, Victorian women, and in particular, Joan Kirner, organised an extensive campaign for an affirmative action rule that would guarantee women a specified percentage of winnable seats. Interestingly, the greatest opposition to these proposals came not from the trade union movement, which suffers from a male stereotype that no longer reflects reality, but from male parliamentarians and men aspiring to be parliamentarians who worried about the personal cost they could bear as a result of such a rule change.

Following the adoption of the affirmative action rule change by Victoria, which applied to preselections for Victorian State Parliament and federal Parliament, the 1994 National Conference of the Party agreed to adopt a similar set of affirmative action rules. This rule has seen Labor around the country ensure that women are preselected for at least 35 per cent of winnable seats. There is now agreement to

increase the percentage to 40 per cent. The affirmative action rule has also affected the quality of the seats for which women are preselected, with six of Labor's 20 safest federal seats now held by women.

The ALP is Australia's oldest political party and could no doubt claim to carry almost as much of the male baggage of history as the law does. However, for Labor the affirmative action rule changed our culture and changed it quickly.

Clearly, you cannot pick up a mechanism that has worked in one context and laud it as the solution to a gender gap in a completely different context. But maybe those who are legal advocates and adjudicators can look to Australia's law makers for proof that changing women's representation requires specific policies and efforts, not just a hope that effluxion of time will bring change gently.