

Women in the Federal Parliament

Senator Patricia Giles

Address when opening *Trust the Women* exhibition

In addressing this gathering as one of the women who has been elected to Parliament I am obviously obliged to make some observations about the select group to which I am privileged to belong - though I am reluctant to generalise.

Gender is one of the few distinctions that Australians make in distinguishing politicians, rating women ahead of used car salesmen and male politicians on measures such as trustworthiness, conscientiousness and being in touch with the electorate. Like all averages, these obscure the fact that there are wide differences between the twenty-nine women currently in the federal Parliament as there are between the one hundred and ninety-five men. Additionally, on the distribution of any of our characteristics including masculinity and femininity there would be considerable overlap blurring gender and party lines.

It is impossible therefore to describe the typical woman parliamentarian, but I am prepared to claim on our behalf that by definition we are tenacious, resilient and hardworking - like most of the women who are our constituents, the main distinction being our addiction to committee work!

One is frequently asked why is it so important for women to be in Parliament? Can't men represent all their constituents effectively? The answer is, of course, that maybe they can, but there is not a lot of evidence from recent or past history to give us much reassurance in that regard.

A couple of interesting intellectual exercises suggest themselves. Let us imagine Australia in the 1990s with no women in Parliament and consequently a demoralised and discouraged women's movement that has given up and gone back to home and hearth, or has been driven underground! Or even more thought provoking - consider an Australia in the 1990s where all the parliamentarians were women and all the institutions dominated by women - a thorough matriarchy. Would the men be organising for equal pay, child care and the right to control their own bodies? Would sole supporting fathers be the largest group of beneficiaries vulnerable to community criticism? Would men be safe on the streets at night or in their own homes? Would we have been so utterly careless of their needs?

It takes only a superficial analysis to discover how the agenda has expanded, due to the influence of women in recent years, to reflect the everyday lives of women, their increasingly complex roles in a changing society, and their inevitable life experiences. We are talking here about over half the population's joys and achievements, burdens and disadvantages previously adjudged to be restricted to the 'private' realm, now accepted as community concerns and responsibilities. Obvious issues such as violence against women and children have been trivialised by the use of the word 'domestic' until quite recently. Breast and cervical cancer, responsible for the high levels of

mortality and morbidity among women, have been around for a long time but only recently have attracted public funding for preventative and monitoring measures.

Another frequent question is: 'Do women parliamentarians ever work together across party lines?' Of course we do, especially in the Senate where there are more women and a vast committee system, where much of our most productive and largely consensual work is done. We sometimes travel together; the further away from Canberra, the more we find in common. At times of course, just like our male colleagues, we have serious differences of opinion which our traditional parliamentary system is designed to absorb according ultimately to the wishes of the electorate.

It was a rare and rewarding experience however when, last November, I was able to send to the Canadian Status of Women Bureau a supportive message signed by nearly every woman in the federal Parliament on the anniversary of the Montreal massacre.

This exhibition celebrates not only our achievements but places us in the historical context which helps to explain the absence of women prior to 1943 and the comparative deluge after 1980. The scene is set by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, as well as by the political women of this century who wielded great influence but failed to be elected to the Australian parliament. To the examples shown here, Vida Goldstein, and Jessie Street who stood repeatedly without success, Bessie Rischbieth who rejected party political activity, and Muriel Hegney and Alice Henry, outstanding trade union women, I can add a couple of whom you may not have heard.

Muriel Matters, travelled to Britain to join the Women's Freedom League after Australian women achieved the vote in 1902. She was a talented speaker who performed regularly in Hyde Park on Sunday afternoons, and threw herself wholeheartedly into the campaign for women's suffrage. She was among those who chained themselves to a grille in the Ladies Gallery in the House of Commons, whence she harangued the honourable members. In 1909 she floated over Westminster in a balloon shouting 'votes for women' through a megaphone, for which she was imprisoned. Her name appears on the Roll of Women Suffragette Prisoners 1904-1914.

Marian Phillips left Australia in 1904 as a young historian to take up a research scholarship at the London School of Economics. Working first with the Poor Law Commission, the National Union of Suffrage Societies and the Labour Women's League, in 1918 she became the Chief Women's Officer of the Labour party in England, a position she held until her death in 1932.

In that time she succeeded in creating 'the largest mass movement of working women that has been seen'. She was elected to the House of Commons as the Member for Sunderland from 1929-1932. Her obituaries were inclined to regret that her evident political talent had not been deployed on a wider set of problems than simply organising women!

I sincerely hope that one is no longer expected to cringe because one emphasises the long neglected needs of 54 four per cent of the population.

In fact, the women in this Parliament have a wide range of interests and expertise. If there is not at least one woman on every committee it is because there are not enough of us. There are many reasons for committed, motivated and talented women failing to become members of parliament, but three groups are easily identified.

The first are discouraged from the outset, believing that their circumstances preclude them from ever seeking preselection (lack of confidence, and/or resources) or family responsibilities that cannot be reconciled with parliamentary life.

Members of another group stand once or twice for unwinnable seats and, personally wounded, give up too soon (see Marian Sawer and Marian Simms¹ for those of us who have persevered despite defeats.)

The third group are, or become, the spouses of men who have made it into parliament. We know who they are, those whose own political ambitions have been sublimated on the basis that one politician in a family is quite enough, and sadly, merit tends not to be the criterion determining which of the two will be that one.

Few if any women seek election for its own sake. Prestige may be of importance to some; the salary, especially for women is not inconsiderable. But the job security is abysmal, and there have to be more intangible rewards to defray the physical and emotional demands of the job, with its long hours, incessant demands (one is never off duty) and extreme incompatibility with anything like a normal social or family life.

Most of us seek and find rewards in the stimulus and never-ending variety of public life, and the opportunities that we have to expand our knowledge, and to influence people and events through our work within the Parliament, our electorates and our parties.

I am sure many of my colleagues have experienced the special excitement and challenge of the past decade as the widespread second wave of the women's movement, through non-governmental persistence, was instrumental in prompting the United Nations to declare 1975 the first Women's Year; upgrading the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (DEDAW) to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); upping the year to a decade and extending the process to the year two thousand, developing the climate for a generation of immense change.

We Australian parliamentarians and non-governmental women can take quiet satisfaction from the fact that the role that our own country plays in the United Nations and Commonwealth forums on the Status of Women is strong, constructive and widely commended. Measures developed and implemented in Australia are internationally applauded and emulated by governments of many nations.

As this exhibition clearly demonstrates however, the head count of Australian women parliamentarians is not impressive by world standards. We are sold short by the International Parliamentary Union which only counts national lower houses, crediting us with 6.3 per cent. In total we are 12.5 per cent with an impressive three leaders² (out of eight) and a moderately respectable proportion of women ministers.

Developments in Australia which are of such crucial importance to women depend only partly on those of us who have been elected, many initiatives having come from

¹ Sawer, Marian and Simms, Marian, *A Woman's Place: Woman and Politics in Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984.

² Ms Rosemary Follett, the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory, the Hon Dr Carmen Lawrence, Premier of Western Australia and the Hon Joan Kirner, Premier of Victoria.

the non-government women's movement which also acted as a kindergarten for many of us. Our successes are greatly dependent upon the extent to which our parties can be educated, and our efforts are greatly magnified by the fact that we are only the most visible part of our ever growing and strengthening network of talented women. Some of them identify themselves as feminists, some do not, but it is frequently and bitterly observed that we are 'everywhere'- well true - but 'taking over'- not just yet.

It has been very important for Australian women generally that all our institutions are being infiltrated. Educational, health, legal, academic, union, military and religious systems have responded at varying rates to the notions of equality and social justice promoted strongly by the women's movement and accompanied by the steady emergence of better qualified and more confident women.

In short, we who have the honour and privilege to have our portraits in the Parliamentary Handbooks, if only fleetingly, owe much to the splendid body of women who are involved in all aspects of political and economic systems, from policy development to practical application in all sectors - government, non-government and private enterprise.

Within the parliamentary system the same applies. There have always been significant numbers of women secretaries, cleaners and caterers providing the parliamentary support system. But even in 1981 when my term commenced the parliamentary establishment was predominantly male. How this has changed! Starting with Anne Lynch, Deputy Clerk of the Senate, and Lyn Simons the former Sergeant-at-Arms, there are now droves of women throughout the system including the gardens and the Press Gallery.

How one feels for Dorothy Tangney who for the twenty-five years of her term as a Senator was the only woman in caucus! Would she believe the photograph which we see in the exhibition of the three women officers of the Labor caucus, or the one of the Senate with women similarly in positions of authority?

My sincere thanks to the President of the Senate, the Hon Kerry Sibraa, and the Clerk, Harry Evans for their sponsorship and encouragement of this exhibition.

The exhibition is a great credit to those who have produced this informative and attractive display, presenting today's parliamentary women in the historical and social context which explains, but hardly excuses our low numbers. Our parties must be constantly challenged to improve women's representation if only for the sake of sheer electoral expediency. They ignore this challenge at their peril!