

## Housekeeping the State Women and Parliamentary Politics in Australia

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I have taken the title for today's lecture, 'Housekeeping the State', from Catherine Spence, whose photograph appears in the 'Trust The Women' exhibition curated by Ann Millar and currently on view in Parliament House. I shall begin with a sketch of Catherine Spence, based on the biographical work done by Susan Magarey, as an introduction to today's theme. Spence arrived in South Australia from Melrose in Scotland in 1839 when she was fourteen years old. A year later she witnessed what is believed to have been the first public election in the world conducted using proportional representation (PR) - an election for the Adelaide Municipal Corporation.<sup>1</sup> Spence's father had become Clerk to the Corporation and she later recalled in her autobiography how he had explained to her the bearings of this unique system for minority representation. Later again she became Australia's most active advocate of PR, promoting the ideas of Thomas Hare and John Stuart Mill on the subject and visiting them in London together with Rowland Hill, who had been responsible for the use of PR in Adelaide back in 1840. They enthusiastically endorsed the pamphlet she had prepared, *A Plea for Pure Democracy*, which was designed to popularise this election method.

By the 1850s, after a period working as a governess and teacher, Spence had become a writer, publishing (anonymously) novels such as *Clara Morison*. A later novel, *Handfasted*, was submitted for a prize offered by the *Sydney Mail* but rejected as 'calculated to loosen the marriage tie'. Meanwhile she had also become a social commentator, writing for the serious papers and journals of the time, for the first thirty years under her brother's name or in other ways disguising the unacceptable fact that the journalist was a woman. As well she became a social reformer, working to improve the treatment of destitute and delinquent children, engaging in issues such as education for girls and writing the first social studies textbook for Australian schools (also in the 'Trust the Women' exhibition). Towards the end of her life she chaired the board of a women's co-operative clothing factory, set up to counter the 'sweating' of women in the clothing trade.

Spence's career as a public speaker began in 1871 when she defied convention by presenting her own lecture at the South Australian Institute rather than having it delivered by a man. Five years earlier a man so bungled the delivery of a lecture she had written for the Institute that she had resolved next time to offer to read her own text. Despite her shaking knees, she told the audience that she wanted to make it 'easier henceforward for any woman who felt she had something to say to stand up and say it.'<sup>2</sup> From the 1870s she became as well a regular preacher in the Unitarian church. In 1891 Spence gave a wider audience the opportunity to hear a woman platform speaker when again reading her own paper to the Australasian Charities Conference in Melbourne. Vida Goldstein's mother, although an active feminist who

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, J F H, *Mirrors of the Nation's Mind: Australia's Electoral Experiments*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980, p 93.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Magarey, Susan, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: a biography of Catherine Helen Spence*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985, p 154.

had helped collect signatures for the monster suffrage petition, was content to have her husband read the paper she had written for the same conference. Spence's success at the Charities Conference led to Dr Charles Strong inviting her to address his Workingmen's Club. From this date Spence's platform career was well and truly launched and by a year later she had given forty public addresses.

Most of these addresses were on the subject of PR, which on the advice of her brother she called 'effective voting' as this was easier to say repeatedly than 'proportional representation' (they hadn't started saying PR as we do today to avoid this problem). In addition to lecture tours which took her to the United States and Canada, as well as to Sydney and Melbourne, Spence ran mock elections and helped form effective voting leagues. Her system of PR, which included giving fractional values to all votes when distributing the surplus over a quota, rather than distributing a random sample of votes at full value, became known as the Hare-Spence method. This feature was later adopted in Tasmania and from 1984 in Senate elections.

As part of her campaign for effective voting Spence stood in 1897 for election to the Federal Convention. She thus became the first woman to stand as a political candidate in Australia, despite the reported disinclination of the Returning Officer, W.R.Boothby (after whom a federal electorate is now named) to accept her nomination. In the event her nomination was accepted, but there was speculation as to whether she would be allowed to sit if elected. She gained 7,383 votes, coming 22nd out of 33 candidates. Thus Spence missed out on becoming a 'founding mother of the Australian constitution' but she felt the results of the election demonstrated her case for PR in so far as the delegates elected were quite unrepresentative of the population. Constitution-making remained an all-male affair, from which women and working men were excluded.

Spence lent her considerable prestige to the women's suffrage movement and had become Vice-President of the South Australian Women's Suffrage League in 1891 despite initially being what she described as 'a weak-kneed sister'. She also ensured that women's political organisations took up the cause of PR even though evidence had not yet become available concerning the importance of PR in achieving adequate parliamentary representation for women. Today we have ample international evidence for this, with all countries where women form over a third of MPs using PR and even the Dail in Ireland, elected using the Hare-Clark system, having a higher proportion of women MPs than the Australian House of Representatives. In Australia we can see that the houses of parliament with the highest proportions of women, the NSW Legislative Council (36 per cent), the ACT Legislative Assembly (35 per cent), the Senate (25 per cent) and the Tasmanian House of Assembly (20 per cent) all use forms of PR.

In her old age Catherine Spence described herself as a 'new woman' - she had followed her own injunction and trained her mind 'to be a useful and amiable member of society, no one's wife, and no one's mother'.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, despite her personal defiance of conventional expectations of womanhood, Spence was, like many other suffragists, a practical and hard-headed politician. She knew that women would not persuade male legislators to grant them political rights if such rights were seen to lead to women rejecting their conventional roles as mothers, daughters, wives. That is why Spence, at the first meeting of the Women's Non-Party Political Association in 1909 said: 'Women were much criticised when they essayed to enter the field of

politics, but women may well take their share of housekeeping the State, without neglecting their own houses'.<sup>4</sup>

In Australia, as elsewhere, women's entry into the male realm of public life was viewed as a serious threat to the social order and the social economy. Henrietta Dugdale provided a scathing account of the material motives of the opponents of women's suffrage in her feminist utopia, *A Few Hours in a Far Off Age*, published in Melbourne in 1883 and displayed in the 'Trust the Women' exhibition. She wrote that: 'Some there are who say: "If we permit women to go beyond her sphere, domestic duties will be neglected". In plainer language, "If we acknowledge woman is human, we shall not get so much work out of her"'.<sup>5</sup> Dugdale was regarded as a shocking figure in her time, the first to advocate full political rights for women (in a letter to the *Argus* in 1869) and a proponent of rational dress - she made her own divided skirts. She is part of the rich tradition of Victorian radicalism and became president in 1884 of Australia's first women's suffrage society.

Opponents of women's suffrage asked who would do the housework and who would mind the babies if women obtained political equality with men. Sir Edward Braddon was still raising the spectre of women deserting their domestic roles in the 1902 debate over the Commonwealth Franchise Bill. He asked:

Does the honorable gentleman [Sir William Lyne] think of the case when the woman will not take her husband along with her [to the poll], but will go alone and leave him at home to look after the baby and cook the dinner? That is what the honorable gentleman has to think of as a possibility in many of the homesteads throughout the Commonwealth.<sup>6</sup>

Other speakers such as the Member for South Sydney agreed that extending the franchise to women would mean taking them away from their proper sphere and a 'lapse of domestic obligations'<sup>7</sup> while the Member for Kooyong declared that 'It is man's duty to be here, and it is woman's duty to attend to the family.'<sup>8</sup>

Suffragists who were more pragmatic or politically experienced than Henrietta Dugdale provided constant reassurances that women's role in public life would merely be an extension of the maternal role, not an alternative to it and there would be no lapse in the performance of domestic duties. As Lilian Locke said, campaigning during the lunchbreak outside the Geelong Woollen Mills in 1904: 'No woman could be so much interested in a budget speech or an electoral Bill to forget to put the chops on.'<sup>9</sup>

This was also a theme of the testimonials gathered from colonial statesmen to support the cause of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. For example, Sir John Murray, Premier of Victoria testified while at the Imperial Conference in London in 1911 that

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<sup>4</sup> Spence, Catherine, *Minutes of first meeting, Women's Non-Party Political Association of South Australia*, 1909.

<sup>5</sup> Dugdale, Henrietta, *A Few Hours in a Far Off Age*, Melbourne, 1883, p 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 23 April 1902, Vol IX, p 11937.

<sup>7</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 23 April 1902, Vol IX, p 11952.

<sup>8</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 23 April 1902, Vol IX, p 11941.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Searle, Betty, *Silk and Calico: Class, Gender and the Vote*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1988, p 50.

women's suffrage in Australia had 'enlarged women's knowledge of public questions, without lessening their interest in their homework'.<sup>10</sup>

The fear that women would desert their unrequited domestic roles if they obtained political rights was a longstanding one. At the time of the French revolution, when a number of brave souls argued that the rights of man should be for women too, the philosopher Condorcet supported his case by providing an assurance that 'women given political rights would not neglect homes, children or needle'.<sup>11</sup>

In general, as we have seen, the Antipodean case for women's suffrage rested on the proposition that the overall sexual division of labour would remain undisturbed and that women would contribute to housekeeping the state without neglecting their homes and children. Political success was gained on these terms.

Initially women's influence in the state was conceived primarily in terms of the power of the vote - women with the vote would be more likely to be listened to by politicians. As Mrs Martel, one of the women who stood for the Senate in 1903 wrote: 'Until we got the vote we agitated in vain for certain reforms. Immediately the vote was granted, and fully a year before we were able to exercise it, we found member after member introducing measures which previously we had pleaded for all to no purpose'.<sup>12</sup> The Senate agreed with this viewpoint, stating in the resolution cabled to the British Prime Minister Asquith in 1910 that women's suffrage had 'given a greater prominence to legislation particularly affecting women and children, although the women have not taken up such questions to the exclusion of others of wider significance'.<sup>13</sup>

There was a widespread belief that the enfranchisement of women in Australia and New Zealand had contributed to the introduction of progressive legislation including old-age pensions, the maintenance of illegitimate children and deserted families, pure food acts and separate children's courts.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless the consolidation of the modern party system effectively tamed the 'women's vote' and it was to be party loyalty rather than sex loyalty which largely determined the political behaviour of women.

In the years between 1902 and 1907 a number of party-linked women's organisations were established, including the Women's Committees of the Labor Party, the Women's Liberal League and the Australian Women's National League. These organisations contributed to the stability and strength of the Australian party system, 'blunting the growth and the effectiveness of the autonomous women's bodies'<sup>15</sup> which had flourished during the campaign for women's suffrage.

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<sup>10</sup> MacMillan, Chrystal et al. *Woman Suffrage in Practice*, International Woman Suffrage Alliance, London, 1913.

<sup>11</sup> Condorcet, Marquis de (1790) 'Sur L'admission des femmes au droit de cité' Oeuvres Vol. 10. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> Martel, Nellie Alma, 'An Interview in London', *The Dawn*, 1 June 1905, p 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 17 November 1910, Vol LIX, p 6300.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Martel, Nellie Alma, *The Woman's Vote in Australia*. 4th edn, The Woman's Press, London, 1913; Goldstein, Vida, *Woman Suffrage in Australia*, The Woman's Press, London, 1913; and MacMillan, op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> Searle, *op. cit.*, p 17.

The contribution made by women to political parties has often been characterised as another form of 'political housework'. This refers to low status chores such as canvassing, door-knocking, enveloping, making the tea and fund-raising — auxiliary functions traditionally performed by the women's organisations associated with the political parties. In some cases these organisations were in effect transformed into what Bob Hogg has called a 'catering service for Party functions'.<sup>16</sup> While thanks were duly recorded at election times or at party conferences where 'splendid teas' had been provided, the general attitude towards women party members was extremely patronising. For example the *Workers Weekly Herald* advised women in 1937 that '... there is quite a lot you can do to help over the back fence or the front gate. What way does the woman next door vote? Labor? Are you sure?'<sup>17</sup>

In 1953 Frederick Eggleston said in his *Reflections of an Australian Liberal* that:

The most disinterested work on the Liberal side is done by the women in Leagues such as the Women's National League of Victoria. They like political work, they have good meetings, love to be addressed by the members or leaders of the party, and work like tigers in canvassing votes. On the other hand ... As they canvass during the day time, they only see the women of the house, whose opinion as to how the family vote will go is not always reliable.<sup>18</sup>

A book on the 1959 State election in South Australia tells us that:

The L.C.L. was well served by its middle-aged women members, particularly where there were women's branches with substantial membership. These took over the bulk of the essential, and often dreary, chores, leaving the men and the paid organisers free to look after the planning, co-ordination and financing of the local campaigns.<sup>19</sup>

Caroline Hogg, now a senior minister in the Victorian government, has talked of the turning point in her own life which came with the rejection of the political housework role:

I joined the ALP in 1966 because of my concern over issues such as capital punishment, the Vietnam War and democracy in Greece. The Women's Central Organising Committee traditionally made the morning and afternoon teas for the State ALP Conference - and these were the high points of the conference. In June 1967, in the Trades Hall Vera Kent and I downed tools - the soap-saver and the tea-towel - to listen to the Vietnam debate.<sup>20</sup>

To go back to the early years of the century, there was besides the question of women's voting power, the further issue of the newly granted right to sit in parliament. How could this right be exercised within the constraints of maintaining the overall sexual division of labour within society? The short answer is with great

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<sup>16</sup> Hogg, Bob, Speech to 'Recognition for Women in Australia', at a joint seminar of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Official Hansard Report, July 1991, p 168.

<sup>17</sup> *Workers Weekly Herald*, 27 August 1937, p 3a.

<sup>18</sup> Eggleston, F W, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, F W Cheshire, Melbourne, 1953, p 133.

<sup>19</sup> Hetherington, R and Reid, R L, *The South Australian Elections 1959*, Rigby Limited, Adelaide, 1962, p 93.

<sup>20</sup> Address to National Labor Women's Conference, 24 January 1986.

difficulty. The historical condition placed on the relatively early grant of political rights to women in Australasia was the major reason for the extraordinarily long time it took for women to convert the right to stand for parliament into the right to sit in parliament, particularly at the federal level.

The paradox involved in obtaining political rights on the condition of upholding the primacy of women's domestic duties was recognised by the suffragists themselves - for a start Catherine Spence, Vida Goldstein and Rose Scott, leading suffragists in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales respectively were themselves all unmarried by choice. Lilian Locke, who had used, as an argument in favour of the suffrage, that no woman would be so interested in a budget speech or an electoral Bill as to forget to put the chops on, was two years later complaining about women's absorption in domestic duties at the expense of housekeeping the state. During the 1906 federal election she said in a speech at Charters Towers that:

Many women have been blinded as to the far reaching importance of their part in the political fight and are utterly absorbed in the carrying out of trivial domestic arrangements. They have no time to help save sweated workers; no time to help save white hairs from a paupers grave; no time to help save one child from starvation; no time to help the great seething mass of humanity in their struggle for standing room only on God's earth - no time - because they are too busy washing the blankets.<sup>21</sup>

Katharine Susannah Prichard was another politically active woman to express frustration at the degree to which women's political participation was stultified by a 'too conscientious devotion to household duties'. In an International Women's Day Address in 1945 she said: 'So much futile polishing, shopping and refurbishing of garments, wastes the priceless thought and energy of women.'<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere she wrote about how Australian women, regardless of professional qualifications, became domestic drudges when they married and had children and how the same applied to women who would like to become active in progressive movements: 'Always it is a question of who is to look after the children, who will do the washing and ironing, cooking, sewing, if the mother of a family is away from home often, or for any length of time.'<sup>23</sup> It was the existence of domestic servants which enabled some women to participate more actively in politics in other countries. Prichard pointed out that it was to Australia's credit that domestic servants were rare in this country, but the social services which should exist instead of servants to prevent the double burden falling on women were undeveloped.

And regardless of the ways in which women politicians addressed themselves to upholding the family, their very presence in the male sphere of public power and authority was seen as a threat to a family structure premised on women's dependence. The need to defuse this threat is an important key to understanding the experience of those women who succeeded in entering Australian parliaments in the first half of this century.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Searle, *op. cit.*, pp 53-55.

<sup>22</sup> Prichard, Katharine Susannah, *Straight Left* (Articles and addresses on politics, literature and women's affairs over almost 60 years: from 1910 to 1968, collected and introduced by Ric Throssell), Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1982, pp 235-6.

<sup>23</sup> Prichard, *op. cit.*, p 246.

Firstly, in order to demonstrate commitment to the ascribed roles of wife and mother it was important that women with political aspirations should be married. Parliamentary roles could then be seen as an extension of the maternal function rather than as an exercise of power in competition with men - identified as mothers women appeared less threatening. The state would be the 'larger home' in which there was a natural division of functions and women played a complementary role to men as 'helpmeets'. Some early women MPs were unmarried, but they made up for this by the family devotion and the motherly characteristics they displayed - what might be called 'virgin motherhood'. For example, May Holman, the first Labor woman MP was single but as John Curtin put it in his radio tribute after her death, 'she had the family instinct pulsing strongly'. Senator Dorothy Tangney, who was also unmarried, was photographed by *Pix* not long after her election checking the family roast. The text read: 'The Senator Is Perfectly At Home in the Kitchen, whether cooking the family's dinner or doing the large wash-up which follows'.<sup>24</sup>

As pointed out in last year's *Senate Brief*<sup>25</sup> on 'Women in the Senate', Dame Annabelle Rankin was another unmarried woman who was unofficially referred to as Senate 'mother'. On her retirement one Senator remarked that he was sorry to see her go because as Government Whip she had 'always provided midnight suppers for honourable senators whose tempers were frayed...'<sup>26</sup> Irene Longman, the first woman MP in Queensland and herself married but childless was also frequently described as giving the 'motherly side of the question'. In Parliament 30 out of her 35 contributions outside question time concerned women or children.<sup>27</sup>

Despite such possibilities it was in general women who had fulfilled the roles of wife and mother who were most acceptable. On the other hand married women had to be seen to perform their duties to their family as well as their public duties. This meant, for a start, that it was rarely permissible for women to embark on a political career until their children were grown up - and they themselves were already approaching an age which would be held against them. Senator Agnes Robertson was one woman who successfully fought back against such discrimination. She was first elected in 1949 at the age of 65 as a Liberal Country League Senator for Western Australia. At the age of 73 she was dropped from the ticket as 'too old'. She then ran successfully for the Country Party, defeating the young man endorsed in her place. And even where married women waited, they were still always open to charges of neglecting their responsibilities to their home and family. Edith Cowan, Australia's first woman MP, elected to the Western Australian Parliament in 1921, was accused of being a disgrace to women and of heartlessly neglecting her husband and children. Her youngest child was thirty at the time of her campaign and her husband was out canvassing for her.

When Cowan was elected, the *Age* ran an editorial which was generally favourable to this historic event. It did, however express concern that her example might encourage too many women to stand for parliament: 'Were political office to become the ambition of the fair sex, and were standing for parliament to become the latest craze

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<sup>24</sup> *Pix*, 22 April 1944, p 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Senate Brief*, No 3, Research Section, Senate Department, Parliament House, Canberra 1991.

<sup>26</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 12 May 1971, Vol S 48, p 1716.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Janice, 'Women in Queensland State Politics', *Refractory Girl* 4, p 14.

of fashion, there would be many dreary and neglected homes throughout the country sacrificed on the altar of political ambition'.<sup>28</sup>

The fear that Edith Cowan's election would lead women to desert the servicing roles they performed in families was reflected in much of her press coverage. The *Bulletin* attempted to counter the threat with a page of cartoons entitled 'The New House-Wife'.<sup>29</sup> The cartoonist reassured male readers by depicting Cowan's role in parliament as scrubbing, polishing and tidying up after male members: housewifely 'instincts' would prevail. This treatment was particularly interesting as Cowan was a woman of great intellectual seriousness and few if any housewifely 'instincts'. She early gave up the running of her household to her daughters.

The need for the kind of reassurance provided by the *Bulletin* and other organs of opinion at the time of Cowan's election remained constant. The burning question in relation to women's entry into public life was always 'who will do the housework?'. When the Victorian MP Fanny Brownbill died in 1948 she was praised not only for her 'motherly demeanour' but for the fact that 'the late honourable member's home life conformed to the model upon which the very foundation of the British Empire rests'.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, when Dame Ivy Wedgwood died in 1975, it was said in tribute that:

She was able to combine 2 careers, which male senators would find it extraordinarily difficult to do. That is to say, she was a senator fulfilling and discharging the senatorial responsibilities that devolved upon her as a senator and at the same time she was still fulfilling the life of a devoted wife...<sup>31</sup>

Note that the role of a wife, the primary role for women, is conceptualised as a career in itself because it involves the provision of services; male senators, even if husbands and fathers, are not considered to have two careers.

In 1955 Mabel Miller, a barrister and Deputy Lord Mayor of Hobart, was elected first woman member of the Lower House in Tasmania. The *Hobart Mercury*<sup>32</sup> ran a front-page photograph of her mixing a salad and informed the readers that she still performed her domestic chores 'like any other housewife'. Women parliamentarians were highly visible because of their rarity, attracting considerable media interest, and hence it was particularly important to reassure the public that they still had to perform domestic duties or servicing roles. The sexual order was still intact, as was the social economy relying on the unpaid work of women - barely dented by the achievement of formal political equality and the entry of a handful of women into parliamentary roles.

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<sup>28</sup> *Age*, 15 March 1921.

<sup>29</sup> *Bulletin*, 31 March 1921.

<sup>30</sup> *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, Vol 228, p 2967.

<sup>31</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 19 August 1975, Vol S 65, p 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Mercury*, Hobart, 21 February 1955.



So these early generations of women politicians were constrained in their careers by the need to demonstrate that their first commitment was to traditional gender roles in the home, and that housekeeping the state could only come later and never at the expense of the primary role. As we have seen, this meant that the early women MPs tended to embark on their parliamentary careers somewhat late in life. It also meant that Australia, like other countries, had a number of political widows among its early women MPs. This phenomenon has been termed 'male equivalence'<sup>33</sup> and signifies that the presence of women is legitimised by their standing for husbands or fathers. It appealed to party preselectors because of the possibility of cashing in on the popularity of the recently dead through attracting a sympathy vote and sometimes also postponing a damaging factional struggle over a seat. The most notable example was Lady Millie Peacock, the first woman to be elected to the Victorian Parliament. Lady Peacock replaced her late husband (a former Premier) at a by-election, during which she did not speak on her own behalf, instead being vouched for by party leaders. She carried her silence into Parliament where she made only one contribution, a speech on the Factories and Shops Bill where she paid tribute to her late husband.

The silence of Lady Peacock was an extreme case. Generally women parliamentarians were active contributors, but the need to present their parliamentary role as an extension of the maternal role, constricted the range of subject matter dealt with by early women parliamentarians. If the state was simply the larger home, then women must assume similar roles in the state as in the household and be mothers rather than simply parliamentary colleagues. As we have seen, it was particularly important for women parliamentarians, because of their visibility, not to trample on existing gender expectations.

The first woman cabinet minister in Australia, Florence Cardell-Oliver, was deeply concerned at the effects of the depression, particularly the fate of undernourished children and of men on 'sustenance'. She campaigned continuously for the delivery of free milk to schools both as President of the Council for Free Milk, and as an MP; she eventually supervised implementation of the scheme as Minister for Health in 1949. Although these were gender-appropriate concerns, Cardell-Oliver did not have an easy time in the Western Australian Parliament. In a speech delivered in 1937 she referred to a vitriolic attack made on her in parliament a few weeks earlier suggesting she had got her parliamentary nomination through giving luncheons to the President of the Nationalist Party. She continued:

I had dared to tell the Government that the children were underfed and that the condition of the sustenance men had become hopeless, and that the relief system was rotten. It is easy enough for members to laugh while many are starving. Members have laughed every time I have spoken in the House on these subjects.<sup>34</sup>

When first appointed to cabinet as an honorary minister without portfolio in 1947 Cardell-Oliver remarked that she was only there to pour the afternoon tea - a remark also attributed to Dame Enid Lyons when she was appointed to federal cabinet without portfolio in 1949. A parliamentary contemporary of Dame Annabelle Rankin, Condon Byrne, summed up the ethos of this era in comments on Rankin's career:

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<sup>33</sup> Currell, Melville E, *Political Woman*, Croom Helm, London, 1974, pp 167-72.

<sup>34</sup> *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates*, 24 November 1937, p 2024.

Annabelle came into politics in pre-women's liberation times. It was a period when women were barely accepted in public life and they were expected to participate in public affairs as women and for women. Therefore, one would look in vain for women, perhaps at that stage participating in general debates on general issues. My recollection is that Annabelle confined herself in a major degree to the discussion of those things which particularly concerned women. That is, questions concerning the aged, matters concerning the family, family welfare, children and things of that character and, of course, questions of international aid where solicitude for the underprivileged, the deprived and the dispossessed is most important.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly Dame Annabelle made it clear in her maiden speech that she saw herself as having a special responsibility to represent the viewpoint of homemakers, particularly those in the lonely places of Australia and for that reason she felt a 'strong womanly bond' with Senator Tangney. As she said: 'There are things that transcend party politics, and Senator Tangney may be sure that in anything designed to help the women of Australia, or the children who are in their care, she can count upon my ready and sincere interest.'<sup>36</sup> The claim to be above party politics when representing the interests of women and children was common among early women MPs, most of whom were non-Labor but at variance with their male colleagues in their desire for greater social expenditure. The acknowledgement of 'special responsibility' led to maiden speeches by women in state parliaments covering topics such as the carriage of prams on public transport, the provision of creches, playgrounds and child endowment.

This self-imposed limitation made women more acceptable as MPs at a time when there was extreme nervousness about the entry of women in parliament and its impact on sex roles, but it did not solve the problem of the low regard given by their male colleagues to so-called women's issues. In 1964 the United Associations of Women reproduced a letter written to the *Sydney Morning Herald* complaining about the trivialisation of issues raised in parliament by women Senators. It read:

Last week I listened to a question time in the Senate, during which two women Senators asked questions. In both cases their subjects concerned women and women's causes. They were good questions, but in both instances the ministers replied with a mixture of coyness and fatherliness that they no doubt also apply to their teenage grand-daughters' demands - that 'keep the little woman happy tone'.<sup>37</sup>

Already in the 1960s women were beginning to express impatience with the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles in politics. When Kay Brownbill was elected to the House of Representatives in 1966, after a gap of fifteen years since the retirement of Dame Enid Lyons, she reacted with irritation to questions concerning what she would do for women, and responded that she did not want to be labelled 'a woman MP' with duties restricted to women's interests.<sup>38</sup> At first women with this new orientation avoided any collective identification with other women, fearing that such identification might threaten their acceptability as 'serious' politicians.

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<sup>35</sup> Browne, Waveney, *A Woman of Distinction: The Honourable Dame Annabelle Rankin D.B.E.*, Boolarong Publications, Ascot, Queensland, 1981, p 123.

<sup>36</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 22 October 1947, Vol 193, p 1045.

<sup>37</sup> United Associations of Women News Sheet May 1964.

<sup>38</sup> *Australian*, 8 May 1967, p 2.

Later, after the arrival of the second wave of the women's movement in Australia at the beginning of the 1970s, women politicians emerged who sought to introduce new feminist perspectives into both the content and style of politics. These women were critical of assigned gender roles both inside and outside the family and successfully challenged the traditional constraints on women's participation in the public sphere. As a result women MPs today are far younger than in the past, and have traditionally combined paid work with the raising of children before entering parliament. Some have even had babies after election to parliament, like Ros Kelly, or even after election to cabinet, like Yvonne Henderson in Western Australia. There is still more pressure on such women to demonstrate that they are not neglecting their families than on their male colleagues who can present as 'good family men' without undertaking time-consuming domestic tasks and responsibilities. The suggestion that women would be better occupied at home looking after their families still has a place in the lexicon of political abuse, as cabinet ministers such as Ros Kelly can testify. Nonetheless the times they are a-changing.

One image, which would have been unthinkable for earlier generations of women MPs, appeared in the *Age* of 17 August 1987. Caroline Hogg, then Minister for Community Services in the Victorian government (today one of the most senior members of the Victorian cabinet), was photographed with her husband Bob Hogg, now National Secretary of the ALP. The photograph depicted Caroline Hogg in her kitchen, as we have seen a traditional venue for reassuring photographs of women politicians. But this photograph was not reassuring. It depicted Caroline dressed in business clothes taking notes from a phone call, with paper and pens in front of her at the kitchen bench. Meanwhile, Bob Hogg was at the sink, doing the dishes. This was an advertisement for a symmetrical marriage in which roles were interchangeable and indeed, as Bob Hogg has told us, he spent the first two or three years of his son's life staying at home, working from there part-time and child rearing.<sup>39</sup>

Women are now willing to share their domestic housekeeping roles with men and are themselves increasingly achieving leadership roles in Australian politics. Women's role in housekeeping the state is being re-evaluated by male political pundits such as Rod Cameron, who in 1990 declared that the Australian electorate was ready for the feminisation of politics and needed motherly figures to clean up the financial messes caused by male attempts to involve government in risk-taking entrepreneurial activities. It seemed that not just housekeeping but springcleaning was needed. Cameron said that the election of Dr Carmen Lawrence as Premier in Western Australia epitomised this trend:

At a time of crisis, it was not a strong man that was wanted. Strong men had made the mess. The presence in Victoria of Joan Kirner as Premier is another sign. Like Carmen Lawrence, she is a mother, a former education minister and has a brief to heal the scars and divisions created by the perception of financial mismanagement.<sup>40</sup>

It also seems that we have passed through the dominant political attitude of the 1980s - that those identifying with the losers rather than the winners resulting from deregulated markets were 'wimps' - ie. having womanly concerns. The need for maternal caring is now frequently referred to also in relation to environmental issues.

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<sup>39</sup> Hogg, *op. cit.*, p 172.

<sup>40</sup> Cameron, Rod, an address to the *11th National Convention of the Public Relations Institute of Australia*, Canberra, 19 October 1990.

A recent snippet in the *Age*<sup>41</sup> about global pollution suggested : 'Women should rule the world. It needs cleaning.' As Jane Elix, formerly national land degradation co-ordinator for the Australian Conservation Foundation (and now director of the Australian Federation of Consumer Organisations) has commented, women are expected to perform the role of 'ecological housewives'.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of these stereotypes, women are certainly today taking a greater share in housekeeping the state and not only in the wake of financial disasters, as we can see in the ACT where our Chief Minister, Rosemary Follett, became the first woman to attend a Premiers' Conference in 1989. Women in leadership positions are challenging the male norms which have dominated behaviour in formal political institutions; they have also expanded the content of politics to include issues which were previously unnamed, let alone the subject for public policy, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. Needless to say the topic of unpaid work is also treated quite differently today than when its existence, allocation and consequences for the financial security of women were concealed beneath the platitudes about the family or about motherhood uttered by male politicians. As we have seen recently, many men still feel that they have no need of such information, which is indeed subversive of social arrangements which have been very comfortable for some.

Whether women will in the end be successful in changing the extremely combative and adversarial traditions of Australian politics and whether more humanistic versions of collective purpose can displace managerialist, market and dominance themes in the public arena will depend in part on the degree of community support and community pressure for change. We must all keep up that pressure.

Dr LAING - Thank you very much, Dr Marian Sawer, for so ably laying the foundation for our series on women in parliament. Dr Sawer has kindly indicated that she will take brief questions if there are any from the audience. Are there any questions?

QUESTIONER - I am very pleased that we have an opportunity to ask questions because I think that two-way communication is important. I would merely like to ask that more of us pay attention to effective emancipation and I thank you very much for using the word in a way that made me think of that. We are using votes and playing the numbers game. Democracy is a process and a way of life; it is not a numbers game to be ruled over by manipulators making us millions.

Dr SAWER - I think that it probably is notable that there are no female numbers men in politics today.

QUESTIONER - Can I ask you to give your opinion on the effects that factions, particularly factions in the Labor Party, have had on both the preselection and election of women candidates at Federal level?

Dr SAWER - That is the kind of question I had hoped to avoid answering. I think that the operation of factions is seen by many women as being akin to machine politics — that is, the achievement of power and achievement of positions through manipulation of rewards, a kind of politics with which women have never felt particularly comfortable.

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<sup>41</sup> *Age*, 11 January 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Elix, Jane, 'Green Girls and Ecological Housewives', *Refractory Girl*, Issue 35, May 1990, pp 11-14.

Obviously, there are women who are working through factions and are achieving their goals through factional membership but I think that, on the whole, it is a form of politics with which women are not particularly comfortable and it certainly does not seem to be operating in favour of the preselection of women for single member constituencies.

QUESTIONER - That was the question I was going to ask but can I take that one step further? If we are not getting very far working through factions, can you foresee any system for achieving the overall aims, as women, without us being forced back into the specific roles of women and not having it appreciated that women are interested in all areas of life — not everything affects us all? My difficulty is that if we organise just as women we will alienate ourselves from the mainstream again. I was wondering whether you had any thoughts on that?

Dr SAWER - I think that women have been taking an extremely active political role in Australia in the 1980s to 1990s but this is not seen so much in formal political parties. It is certainly seen in community politics where women are creating political processes which are somewhat different from those of traditional political parties which are perhaps often more consensus seeking, less hierarchical and less factionalised.

Women are exploring alternative forms of political action. Their success in the formal political parties tends to be linked to the perceptions of numbers men that women may be a political asset in marginal seats and that they may bring over 2 or 3 per cent of non-traditional voters for that party. So we still have the situation we had in 1906, with safe seats not being wasted on women. Maybe somebody in this audience has something creative to say about how this can realistically change in the near future, because I find myself not terribly optimistic on this question.

QUESTIONER - I am concerned about the vocabulary used so often relative to the whole question of criteria being set. If we look at the criteria for people having safe preselection, how much of that vocabulary makes it easy for men to be seen as powerful in that area? How many of the women's strengths carry over to management type things? Where a woman has managed a home or managed community affairs, it is relegated as being not valuable, but it equates basically to the same sort of thing that men have done.

Even our own unconscious choice of words, such as 'women's issues'— if we think that to the logical conclusion, women's issues are also men's issues. They are family issues; they are the country's issues; they are future issues. I think that we possibly need some area where the choice of vocabulary is looked at as not giving further power to men to win those safe seats preselection. Do you know whether anything is being done in that area?

Dr SAWER - Of changing the vocabulary?

QUESTIONER - At least looking at the vocabulary to see whether there are hidden undertones which detract from women winning in those areas.

Dr SAWER - I think that language is an area in which a lot of work has been done. In fact, some people say that too much work has been done in this area and that women are chasing after non-sexist language rather than grappling with the real issues of the day.

Of course, it is true that language reinforces power relations. It is true that women's experiences, perspective and capacities perhaps are undervalued by party preselectors so there is a kind of barrier in the perception of the electorate. The electorate would perhaps rather have women because women are not yet smeared with that dreadfully bad reputation that male politicians have in Australia. Women are not seen as so cynical or power seeking and so on. The electorate is ready for them but the party preselectors still are not.

QUESTIONER - This is not a question; it is just a comment that I think there is cause for hope in this regard. In the recent by-election for the seat of Floriat in Western Australia, Dr Liz Constable failed to gain pre-selection for the Liberal Party, due to some numbers deals, and stood as an independent and won the seat, which was a very, very safe Liberal seat. She won it as an independent so perhaps that is a message from the electorate to the parties that they can really see through what is happening.

Dr SAWER - Thank you.