

Mirrors, Mouthpieces, Mandates and Men of Judgement: Concepts of Representation in the Australian Federal Parliament*

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OVER THE LAST few years there have been a number of major debates in Australia which have raised issues concerning the meaning of representation. These have included the debate over Pauline Hanson, the euthanasia debate and the debate over quotas for women.

Thanks to the Clerk of the Senate, I was able to spend some time in late 1996 as Honorary Senate Fellow exploring these issues with current members of the federal Parliament. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 members of federal Parliament in November and December 1996. Included in the sample were seven members of the House of Representatives and seven senators, of whom five were Liberal, one National Party, four Labor, two Democrat, one Green and one Independent. Half were male and half female and there was also a mix of other demographic characteristics, such as age and ethnicity, as well as a balance between newcomers and long-serving members or senators. Interviewees were asked what representation meant to them; their personal representational priorities; how they balanced the interests of majorities and minorities; whether there were groups which needed better representation and, if so, how this could be achieved. This paper reflects the range of views on representation I was exposed to through these interviews, and relates these views to academic discourses on representation.

One perspective on representation which has gained much media attention over the past year is the populist view associated with the Member for Oxley, who claims that existing political

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parties do not represent ordinary or mainstream Australians. The argument here is that political parties become captured by special interests of one kind or another (ranging from ‘the Aboriginal industry’ to agencies of world government) and so do not represent the ordinary Australians who have voted for them. Populists such as Pauline Hanson claim to be the unmediated ‘voice of the people’.

Another debate touching on the understanding of representation has been the euthanasia debate. As an editorialist in the *West Australian* (6 August 1997) wrote, politicians do not in general have a mandate to decide issues of personal morality. These are not usually issues included in election platforms, on which political parties base their so-called mandate from the people. In the case of euthanasia, as in the case of abortion, the consciences of politicians differ from majority views of the community as revealed by opinion polls. It has been an issue which has brought to the fore the view of representation expressed by Edmund Burke in 1774—that members of Parliament owe the electorate their informed judgement rather than the slavish following of local prejudice or majority opinion.

The argument over quotas for women has been in part about the mirror theory of representation—that parliaments which are 80 per cent male, as is the case in Australia, are unrepresentative and undemocratic. I shall discuss this view of representation and its implications at greater length below, but suffice it to say here that this argument assumes the importance of embodiment and that only those who have shared the experience of being treated as a woman (or as a person with a disability, or an immigrant from a non-English speaking background etc.) can adequately represent the issues involved.

One final issue concerning representation which I wish to touch on here, although it does not directly relate to federal Parliament, is the recent decision of the Rev. Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon to resign from the position of National Director for Mission of the Uniting Church because she felt that she was unable to represent effectively a range of people within the church who had difficulty with her declared sexual orientation. In this case the overt embodiment of difference was felt to impair her ability to function as a representative.

I shall now look at some of the conceptions of representation which have currency in federal Parliament. Basically the conceptions of representation expressed by those I interviewed can be categorised in terms of electorate representation, party representation, representation of the national interest, functional representation, mirror representation and representation of various voteless constituencies. I shall begin with one of the perspectives on electorate representations, the idea of the representative as the voice of the people, or as ‘mouthpieces’, the term I have used in my title.

Mouthpieces

The idea of the MP as the mouthpiece or delegate of the electorate is usually contrasted with the trusteeship model of representation originally expressed by Edmund Burke. The trusteeship view of representation was articulated in Australia by Sir Robert Menzies in his collection of wartime speeches published under the title *The Forgotten People and Other Studies in Democracy*.¹ Here Menzies poured scorn on the belief of electors that ‘the function

¹ My thanks to John Uhr for alerting me to this source.

of their member of Parliament is to ascertain, if he can, what a majority of his electors desire, and then plump for it in Parliament'.² Menzies called this the 'phonograph' or 'sounding board' concept of representation which permitted knowledge (of the legislator) to be overthrown by the temporary clamour of electors.

Most of those interviewed for this project were careful to distance themselves from populist constructions of representation, but there were exceptions. One MP explained that she was unable to accept the concept of a 'conscience vote' because: 'it's not me that's talking in parliament. I'm there to represent people. It's like working in a shop—you may have to sell a product you don't necessarily believe in but it's your job to do so'. The same MP said that she was representing the view of the people of her electorate on euthanasia, but if they had expressed the contrary view she would also have represented that.

One obvious problem with the mouthpiece concept of representation is the transient nature of the majority views which the representative claims to be articulating. A well-known example is the effect of different wording in opinion polls, meaning that a majority in favour of lower taxation will evaporate if the consequences in terms of reduced health and education expenditure are spelled out. As well as being transient, majorities on different issues are differently constituted. Or, to put it another way, we are all part of a minority on some issue.

Democratic theorists also argue that those caught up in deliberative forums, ranging from community organisations to parliaments, are inclined to modify their views both because they need to defend them in rational rather than purely self-interested terms and because they need to address opposing points of view.³ The claim of populists, by contrast, is to articulate the immediate concerns of the electorate unmodified by the process of democratic dialogue.

Another issue is, of course, the priority given to 'majority' or 'mainstream' opinion as determined by the populist representative. This not only overrides the views and rights of minorities, but also constructs the majority as the victims of minorities. Noisy minorities have pushed their interests at the expense of the mainstream who supposedly feel 'utterly powerless to compete with such groups'. Moreover the mainstream is silenced by the imposition of political correctness by minority interests. Only the populist leader can reverse this situation and speak for the silent majority.

Within populist discourse the silent majority is also construed as those who produce real value in society—minorities are the parasites who live at the expense of the mainstream. The chattering classes who promote political correctness, 'fat cat' bureaucrats and, of course, representatives of industries, such as the welfare industry, Aboriginal industry, multicultural industry and so forth, all have an interest in maximising redistribution away from the real producers of wealth, those who have worked for their land as the Member for Oxley would say. In another version of this trope the mainstream are the taxpayers, minorities are those who live at the expense of taxpayers. Minorities are never construed as taxpayers themselves

² R.G. Menzies, *The Forgotten People and Other Studies in Democracy*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1943, p. 37.

³ Jane Mansbridge, 'A deliberative theory of interest representation', in Mark P. Petracca, *The Politics of Interests: Interest Groups Transformed*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1992.

who, like all citizens, need community support at vulnerable times in the life-cycle or migration process.

The interviewee in my sample who most clearly articulated elements of populism believed that mainstream Australians had not been as effectively represented in Parliament as they might have been in recent years, particularly considering ‘they also contribute very strongly to the wealth of Australia which can then be redistributed’.

Historically populism has been associated with the resentment stemming from economic insecurity and falling living standards. It is characteristic for this resentment to be redirected by populist politicians (or talk-back radio hosts) towards visible minorities who are made the scapegoats for the economic distress being experienced. Eva Cox argues that such resentment has been exacerbated in Australia by the ever-tighter targeting of public benefits—so that instead of citizens seeing themselves as both contributors to and beneficiaries of the public purse, a line is drawn in the sand between those categorised as dependent on welfare and everyone else.⁴

Recent manifestations of such politics of resentment have included a backlash against anti-discrimination policies which recognise and accommodate significant difference. Measures taken to ensure that citizens who differ from the ‘mainstream’ have equal opportunity, such as ramps for those with disabilities, are reconfigured as forms of ‘special treatment’ at the expense of mainstream Australians or taxpayers. As we have seen, minorities are not conceptualised as taxpayers or as those who can become taxpayers if they are provided with ramps, English language teaching and/or childcare. The Member for Oxley articulated such views in her first speech in Parliament, apparently believing that equal treatment means same treatment.

Where priority is given to voicing mainstream fears and frustrations, not only are the rights of minorities at risk but the rights of unpopular individuals may also be sacrificed along the way. The attitude that there was no need for a trial in the case of the Port Arthur gunman, Martin Bryant, was one example cited to me.

Men of Judgement

The Burkean position concerning the importance of the independent judgement of the legislator was put to me in this way: ‘You have to be conscious of aspects of legislation which perhaps the community is not familiar with. There is an additional responsibility in representation when constituents may not necessarily have the full picture ... You have to be in a position to make a decision which reflects their best interests even though that may not necessarily be their expressed will or view. Most people do not have the opportunity to read legislation, I do that on their behalf, deal with practical aspects, develop an in-depth view of how the legislation will work. In many cases people would not have the expertise or training to be familiar with how the legislation will work. Public sentiment is very dynamic, it will ebb and flow as particular events occur’.

⁴ Eva Cox, ‘Feminism, racism and populism’, *Refractory Girl*, 52, 1997.

Another MP expressed similar views, talking of transient majorities in the electorate which were likely to shift if people were exposed to the full range of arguments: 'My role as a representative is to reach a judgement on what's right, regardless of the polls'.

The Burkean view of representation also emerged as legislators discussed their role in taking up issues of the national interest, issues such as foreign policy and international human rights, issues which were not necessarily of interest to their constituents. In dealing with these issues legislators transcended their geographical electorates and became representatives of Australia. One MP talked of these issues in terms of 'providing direction and leadership in the national parliament, a focus for where Australia might be heading'.

Women MPs have generally been found to be less comfortable with the Burkean view of representation than are men (hence 'men of judgement' in my title) and to put more stress on setting up adequate consultative mechanisms through which community views can be crystallised and expressed. This emphasis on consultation and participation has generally been associated with women's contribution to politics, both in Australia and elsewhere.⁵ This was reflected in my sample, where women generally were more likely to talk in terms of context and process than in terms of their own judgement.⁶

Mandates

Modern political parties were early to develop in Australia and levels of stable party identification have been very high by world standards, even if eroding in recent times.

Parties are still largely the gatekeepers to Parliament and party or factional loyalty is usually the price of political success. Political scientists have long found that party allegiance is the most important predictor of the attitudes of legislators in this country and have also shown that Labor representatives are more likely to stress party factors than non-Labor representatives.⁷

This latter point, the claim that party discipline was more significant in the Labor Party, was taken up by one of my Liberal interviewees who argued that in his party, 'while we generally push the agreed party line', there was greater scope for the exercise of personal discretion and putting the electorate before party. Not surprisingly, a different view was put by the Independent, who talked about the degree of 'duress' applied to backbenchers, particularly when they were all competing to get onto the first rung of the ladder.

The primacy of party representation was certainly put forward most strongly by a Labor senator who claimed that, contrary to the views of the Clerk on the role of the Senate, the

⁵ Anne Phillips, 'Democracy and representation: or, why should it matter who our representatives are?' Paper presented to the Humanities Research Centre, ANU, 29 April 1994.

⁶ Exceptions included a male parliamentarian who spoke extensively about how parliamentary consultative mechanisms and outreach might be improved and another who spoke of the continuous and inclusive process of policy-making in his party.

⁷ Donley T. Studlar and Ian McAllister, 'Constituency activity and representational roles among Australian legislators', *Journal of Politics* 58 (1), 1996. See also Ian McAllister and Donley T. Studlar, 'Gender and representation among legislative candidates in Australia', *Comparative Political Studies*, 25 (3), 1992.

Senate was the more party political House ‘because most people here would never make it except for their position on a party ticket’. This senator praised the primacy of party in terms of the discipline it provided and its centrality to responsible government. This meant that voters had a much better idea of what would be delivered by government than, for example, under the American system. A Labor member of the House of Representatives agreed that: ‘It’s what party politics teaches you—that you’re not there because of yourself but because of your party’.

Another angle was provided by a senator who spoke of frequent conflicts between the views of his electors and the views of the party he represented, the latter being constrained by coalition arrangements. He spoke of the need on occasion to fulfil the trust of his electors that he would represent their views, against the line adopted by his party. He also stressed the need to be selective in choosing the issues on which to go with his electorate rather than the party, ‘otherwise I would have to be an Independent’. The same senator was the most explicit of the interviewees in discussing the role of representing broader functional groups as well as a geographical constituency—although this topic of functional representation did emerge in some of the other interviews.

An interesting version of the mandate view of representation comes from senators from minor parties—these senators are representing political minorities, or perhaps a series of political minorities. One senator told me that he was constantly having to remind others that he was not in Parliament to represent the majority viewpoint. He did, however, feel an obligation to represent the majority viewpoint where this was being ignored by the major parties. This occurred, he believed, because of the undue influence of the corporate sector. There are no senators currently in Parliament who take the view adopted by former senator Jo Vallentine that she not only represented a political minority but that her mandate was restricted to a limited range of issues.

This importance of party was expressed in a different way by both Liberal and Labor interviewees who stressed the importance of representing underlying party philosophies and of taking an active role in guiding their respective parties back to these principles. One Liberal parliamentarian described himself as a ‘custodian of the principles of modern liberalism, an advocate for them and applying them on a daily basis’. In his view, ‘the Liberal Party was never meant to be a conservative party’. The same parliamentarian stressed the significance within liberal philosophy of protecting the rights of minorities, whatever the view of the majority.

An Independent MP no longer bound by a party mandate pointed out that this created an interesting problem for him. Contrary to his own expectation that there would now be greater scope for his individual judgement on issues, the expectation of people in his electorate was that since he was no longer bound by party discipline he would be freer to express *their* views.

Representing Individual Constituents

Both senators and members of the House of Representatives talked about their work, and that of their staff, in representing the interests of individual constituents—whether as first port of call for information or as an avenue of appeal against bureaucratic decisions. Interviewees cited immigration work, family law and social security issues as being the most common forms of individual casework. The mix varied in accordance with features of the electorate, such as the proportion of people from non-English speaking backgrounds and average household income. Some spoke of the need to generalise from this individual casework, such as that relating to pensions, and use it as a base for detailed policy research and development.

One MP with a strong policy bent has written about the sometimes daunting tasks of individual constituent representation. Former MP John Langmore had the experience of being woken at 4.00a.m. by a female constituent who had herself been woken by a rubbish truck and thought that, as it was a government truck, her representative should share this experience.⁸ This insistence that parliamentary representatives share at first hand the life experience of their constituents is much stronger in Australia, where representatives are expected to live in their electorates, than in the United Kingdom, where the MPs may only visit their constituency for a monthly ‘surgery’.

Representing Voteless Constituencies

Another form of representation considered by some of my sample revolved around the representation of the interests of voteless constituencies. Such constituencies might include future generations, endangered species, the planet itself, overseas communities suffering from disaster or oppression and, of course, children.

While members of Parliament are elected to represent living voters, some feel strongly concerning the need to balance the rights and interests of future generations against the demands of the present. This was expressed as protecting future generations against the economic fundamentalism of the present. Another issue raised with me was the representation of ‘the living fabric of the planet, the need to balance the rights of human and other species’. This parliamentarian felt that the current system constrained representations on behalf of the myriad of non-human species. Such representation could only be articulated in other than anthropocentric terms if it were to be taken seriously—that is, in terms of the utility of biodiversity to human beings.

Nonetheless there is clearly a section of the electorate that is concerned with these issues, even if they are a minority. This is the post-materialist constituency identified by political scientists and there is indeed now a certain amount of competition for this post-materialist vote.

⁸ John Langmore, ‘Parliamentarians, econocrats and the people’ in Julian Disney and John Nethercote, *The House on Capital Hill*, Federation Press, Annandale, NSW, 1996.

Another MP saw herself as having a particular role as an advocate of the rights of children. Advocacy on behalf of children has historically been viewed as part of the role of the woman MP.⁹ Indeed it has been striking that it has been women MPs in both state parliaments (including NSW, Queensland and South Australia) and in the federal Parliament who have been at the forefront of raising the issue of paedophilia. In doing so, these MPs have often referred to their own embodiment as women and mothers as the reason they feel driven to raise this difficult issue.¹⁰

Politicians have often expressed the view that there are no votes in taking up overseas humanitarian issues, part of the received wisdom that voters are basically moved by the hip-pocket nerve. This perspective is strongly contested by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid and, regardless of votes, a number of politicians expressed a sense of responsibility to represent such issues. Another variant on the voteless constituency is the concept of representing ‘disenfranchised views’—views which have been denied a hearing in the mass media and which would be largely unheard if not taken up in the parliamentary arena. This issue was raised, in particular, in relation to the monopolistic representation of one particular economic viewpoint in the mass media and the lack of representation of alternative economic viewpoints, even those which were majority viewpoints until 20 years ago.

Mirror Representation

The prevalence among MPs of traditional views of representation was to be expected, although somewhat at odds with the rise in post-modern societies of forms of political identification other than those defined by party or geographical unit.¹¹ What was interesting was the extent to which emphases on embodiment and the politics of presence emerged in the comments on representation made by interviewees. These post-modernist views of representation were quite strong in about half of my sample of parliamentarians, who talked about the importance of representing some aspect of their identity shared with others in the broader community, in addition to more traditional party and electorate representation.

These parliamentarians believed that some degree of ‘mirror’ representation of the community was important in strengthening the legitimacy of Parliament and ensuring that the interests of different sections of the community were not overlooked. Examples given of under-represented groups included Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, Australians of Asian backgrounds, indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, young people, people of low socioeconomic status and women. I was told: ‘I’m sure there are a lot

⁹ Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, *A Woman’s Place: Women and Politics in Australia*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993.

¹⁰ In relation to children, the representation of a voteless constituency shades into the mirror representation of mothers. In the ACT Legislative Assembly a woman MP told of her personal experience of sexual abuse as a child and spoke of the importance of having people in public life who had shared such life experiences.

¹¹ Ian Marsh, *Beyond the Two Party System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1995.

of groups out there who feel that nobody here is culturally attuned to them or able to assist them in that more focused way which might be possible if MPs shared their characteristics’.

A gay parliamentarian spoke of how under-represented gay and lesbian groups felt by a Parliament which often seemed to avoid their issues, fearing they would be politically unpopular. Because of his personal identity, these groups looked to him in particular to raise these issues, despite their not being vote-winners in his electorate. As political scientist Carol Johnson has said, a number of aspects of identity are currently being marginalised at the national level as ‘private matters’, making public representation of such issues that much harder.¹²

A parliamentarian from a non-English speaking background articulated the additional representational tasks which this brought him. He was called upon to represent the interests of minority ethnic communities in general or of multiculturalism—not just his community of origin or the communities found in his electorate. He found that for his parliamentary colleagues issues only rated attention if they appeared in the English-language media—they did not try to represent the issues of concern to the ethnic media. As Gianni Zappalà has found, MPs from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), whether representing electorates with a high proportion of NESB Australians or not, are more likely to take on a broader representational role in relation to issues of multicultural policy and ethnic rights.¹³

A young senator talked of representing her age group. She said that beyond her obligations to her state and party, she felt a special obligation to represent the interests of young people. One reason was the generally low priority given to issues affecting young people and a problem with negative stereotyping. While she was often called upon to speak on ‘youth issues’, she felt that it would be naive and arrogant on her part to claim to be able to represent all young people in view of their diversity: ‘many would not identify with me for a minute’. There were similar issues in relation to the other constituencies with whom she identified, namely women and feminists. In view of the diversity of each of these constituencies she felt that a first priority was to seek broader representation of them in Parliament. As well as broader representation there was also a need for better representation, including more structured consultation with representative groups.

A state upper house MP, born in Hong Kong, has spoken of the way in which she embodies multiple political identities and representational roles. She sees herself as a representative of a political party; as someone from a non-English speaking background who has shared the experience of migration and linguistic exclusion; as an Asian Australian subject to the kind of discrimination experienced by those who are visibly different, whether or not they are Australian-born; and intersecting with all of these, her identity as a woman.¹⁴

While in these cases embodiment led to an expectation of issue representation, in other cases

¹² Carol Johnson, ‘John Howard and the revenge of the mainstream: some implications for concepts of identity’, Paper presented to the Political Science Program, RSSS, ANU, 7 May 1997.

¹³ Gianni Zappalà, *Four Weddings, a Funeral and a Family Reunion: Ethnicity and Representation in Australian Federal Politics*, AGPS, Canberra, 1997.

¹⁴ Helen Sham-Ho, ‘Ethnic women in politics’, *Without Prejudice* 7, 1994.

embodiment may present a barrier to such expectations. One senator pointed out that the Democrats, seen as middle-class ex-teachers, who did not engage in populist rhetoric, and whose support came in particular from the well-educated, were not seen as embodying the interests of the ‘battlers’. She saw this as an image problem for a party whose economic policies had been more concerned with the interests of the ‘battlers’ than had the major parties. She believed that at the end of the day, workers would not identify with the Democrats, despite the latter’s opposition to policies catering for ‘the big end of town’.

While the Democrats may feel that their middle-classness is a barrier to acceptance as representatives of blue-collar workers, middle-classing has also been taking place in the Labor Party, which no longer provides the kind of avenue into Parliament for manual workers which it once did. There is only one person in the thirty-eighth federal Parliament who lists their occupation prior to entering parliament as ‘tradesperson’—and that is a National Party MP. While a handful of Labor parliamentary representatives have trade backgrounds, their pathway to Parliament has been as union officials. On the whole Labor parliamentarians now embody quite different characteristics, such as higher education and professional qualifications, than do voters in the Labor heartlands. These changed attributes of Labor representatives have been implicated in what some have seen as the betrayal of traditional Labor values such as solidarity and egalitarianism.¹⁵ Current Labor representation is contrasted with the postwar reconstruction governments where manual workers made up almost half of the ministries led by J.B. Chifley, himself a former train driver. Since that time the workforce has changed under the impact of mass migration, increased female participation, service sector expansion and the decline of manufacturing. Nonetheless, blue-collar workers are the most under-represented occupational group in federal Parliament.

While there has been a decline in blue-collar representation, Parliament has become more representative in terms of gender and ethnicity. A number of parliamentarians in my sample spoke of the way that representation of such characteristics added another layer to their representational tasks. One MP spoke of his representational tasks in terms of three constituencies: firstly, his local electorate; secondly his party, its supporters and the ideas and philosophy it encapsulated; thirdly, that section of the community that shared an aspect of himself and that was under-represented in Australian parliaments—Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds. A senator spoke of four constituencies—electorate, party, nationwide constituencies with which she had a natural affinity, plus a parliamentary constituency: ‘the secretaries of every committee you serve on demanding your time’.

Apart from the issue of physical presence, parliamentarians were mostly able to identify groups of citizens who faced systemic barriers in terms of access to Parliament and who were not effectively represented through existing peak advocacy bodies. One senator identified the new working poor as lacking in advocacy groups and consequently suffering from lack of parliamentary representation of their interests. Another respondent believed that this was true of the poorest people generally, whether in or out of the workforce, because of the political timidity of peak bodies such as ACOSS which were reliant on government funding. It should also be noted that a number of peak bodies representing groups categorised by

¹⁵ eg., Andrew Scott, *Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class*, Pluto, Sydney, 1991.

parliamentarians as under-represented have recently been defunded. This includes the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia (ANESBWA).

Theoretical Arguments about Mirror Representation

The mirror theory of representation, also called descriptive, microcosmic or social representation, has been much discussed in the theoretical literature¹⁶ and it must be kept in mind that a representative from a specific group will not necessarily be more responsive to that group or represent the interests or views of that group better than someone from outside that group. Twenty years ago political scientists went so far as to say: 'No one has demonstrated that differences between representatives and the represented have an impact on actual behaviour or public policy'.¹⁷

Feminist political science has called into question such extreme statements about the irrelevance of embodiment to representation. It has always been easier for members of the dominant group to be accepted as disembodied political agents for whom characteristics such as gender or race are irrelevant. It is harder for an indigenous Australian to win acceptance as an impartial representative of all Australians than is the case for an Anglo-Australian. Similarly, while the pronoun 'he' has been happily taken to subsume the interests of 'she', the reverse is much less the case. And as we have seen, heterosexual Australians do not always believe they can be adequately represented by gay Australians.

There are real issues involved, however, in linking embodiment to representation. For example, Rosabeth Moss Kanter has provided an extremely influential analysis of the importance of numbers in group life. Token representatives of difference are placed under peculiar pressure to assimilate to the expectations of the dominant group. They have to overcome distrust arising from difference and survive loyalty tests which may involve distancing themselves from the group whose characteristics they embody.¹⁸

Another issue is the lack of formal accountability mechanisms in most cases between representatives of difference and their constituencies.¹⁹ The constituencies are self-defined identity groups (such as the gay community) with no formal membership or electoral mechanisms. Another issue is that the assumption that embodiment is necessary for adequate representation may also reduce the pressure on legislators to seek to understand and represent issues of difference.

The relevance of mirror representation to interest representation should not, however, be dismissed out of hand. Evidence has been coming in of what happens when female

¹⁶ eg., Hannah Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Cal., 1967.

¹⁷ Jill Vickers, *Reinventing Political Science: A Feminist Analysis*, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax, NJ, 1997, p. 108.

¹⁸ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 'Some effects of proportions on group life: skewed sex ratios and responses to token women', *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (5), 1977.

¹⁹ Judith Squires, 'Quotas for women: fair representation?', *Parliamentary Affairs* 49 (1), 1996.

parliamentary representation reaches what is termed critical mass (30 per cent). This is the level where women's issues become interesting rather than dismissed as marginal and marginalising for those who raise them. Content analysis of Senate debate indicates this sea change: issues such as violence against women have been raised three times as often in the Senate as in the House of Representatives.²⁰

The pressures on token minorities to conform with dominant group values and priorities noted by Kanter would appear, however, to militate against the effective representation of groups which constitute a relatively small part of the population and cannot expect critical mass representation. For example, there are some 120 ethnic communities in Australia quite apart from indigenous communities. For such groups, the development of forms of nonparliamentary representation, as through democratically constituted peak bodies, may be equally important as parliamentary representation in ensuring an adequate voice. A peak body may play a crucial role in ensuring that the interests of a section of the community are represented in policy development which affects them. Overseas, the principle of subsidiarity, or devolution of decision-making, has been described as one way to ensure that different groups are involved in different levels of decision-making.

Apart from interests and voice, there are also issues of legitimacy tied up in the mirror theory of representation. As one of my sample commented, there is the symbolic issue that when people can look and see people like themselves, they are much more likely to identify with an institution and have a sense of ownership of it. As well as this symbolic issue there is the more substantive issue of equal rights. In modern times the legitimacy of government has been closely linked to the provision of equal right to participate in the political process. Australia is party to international instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that reinforce this democratic right to participate in public life on an equal basis. Where some social groups appear to be locked out of public decision-making, this casts doubt on the legitimacy of government because of what it says about equal rights to participate and equal opportunity in political careers, quite apart from the representation of interests.

Another argument associated with the equal opportunity argument is the utility argument—that only by removing the systemic barriers to some groups participating in public decision-making will institutions of government be able to draw on the best talent available in the community. This is the kind of argument put forward a couple of years ago in the Karpin Report on Leadership and Management Skills—that only by increasing diversity at the top can Australia become competitive in world markets.²¹ There are also arguments from partisan advantage—that parties with a deficiency of female votes, like the Labor Party, will make themselves more attractive to this constituency by increasing the visibility of women in their ranks.

Representation of Women: A Matter of Simple Justice?

²⁰ Historic *Hansard* (1981–93) records 69 items in the Senate on the subject of violence against women and 74 speakers. Of these, 55 were women. By contrast, the House of Representatives only records 19 items on this subject over the same period, and women made only six of the contributions on the subject.

²¹ David Karpin, *Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills*, AGPS, Canberra, 1995.

Women have, in the 1990s in particular, successfully politicised their absence from parliaments.²² In doing so they have drawn on the rich ambiguity of political language which tends to distress political theorists seeking rigour and precision in the definition of terms. For example, there has been much talk of under-representation of women, which has blurred the distinction between representation of interests, the representativeness of the legislature and the equal right to act as a representative. As noted above, a more representative legislature does not guarantee the more effective representation of interests—in other words men may act as effective representatives for women and women may not. However, as we have also seen, embodiment is relevant in a whole number of ways to representation and to the way representative roles are performed. Furthermore, the politicising of women's absence was helped along by the televising of Parliament and increasing community rejection of the 'aggression and confrontation formula of the old order'.²³

As Carole Pateman has pointed out, women have been differentially incorporated as citizens, meaning that their primary obligations as citizens have historically been construed as being in the private rather than the public realm. In other words, women have been expected to put their families before fame, or their domestic duties before service to the broader community. Political parties have rescued women from the kind of serious interruption to domestic duties which might be caused by preselection for safe seats. It is only in the last 20 years that there has been real discussion, let alone action, on how public life might be changed to accommodate family responsibilities. Prior to this, women's family responsibilities were construed as insuperable barriers to equal participation in public life.

Instead women achieved a token presence and, as we have seen, serious constraints are imposed on token representatives of difference. This means that while women parliamentarians come under such pressure to behave as honorary men and while their male colleagues roll their eyes or groan when issues of special concern to women are raised, the representation of women is very difficult. It has been suggested that critical mass or critical events²⁴ are required before women can bring about a politics conducted 'as if women mattered', to use Canadian political scientist Jill Vickers' expression.

The importance of numbers has been one justification for the target adopted by the Australian Labor Party in 1994 of 35 per cent representation of women among its parliamentarians at Commonwealth, state and territory levels, to be achieved by 2002. Federal intervention in preselections would be invoked if the target had not been reached by that point. This proportion, around a third, is seen to be that where women can exercise real influence on the political culture. There has been considerable resistance to the achievement of this target in

²² Campaigns were begun by Labor women, such as the 'Half by 2000' campaign; non-government organisations formed a new coalition called Women into Politics; women's advisory councils and women's policy units put out 'how to' material; and the Liberal Party Women's Forum undertook training programs and provision of support networks for women contesting preselection. All of this was underpinned by international instruments and commitments relating to the increase of women in public decision-making.

²³ Rod Cameron, 'Address to the 11th National Convention of the Public Relations Institute of Australia', Canberra, 19 October 1990.

²⁴ Drude Dahlerup, 'From a small to a large minority: women in Scandinavian politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11 (4), 1988.

some branches of the party, particularly in Queensland and NSW. In Queensland, Labor women became so frustrated that some broke away from the party to create the Australian Women's Party.

Coalition parties criticised Labor Party quotas as 'patronising to women' or putting gender before merit. By contrast, a delegate to the National Conference which adopted the quotas pointed to the hold which male-dominated concepts of merit had over the party: 'a bit like testing people for preselection according to how far they can kick a football or how well they sing bass baritone'.²⁵ Prime Minister Paul Keating supported quotas by drawing on the utility argument of the need to harness the talents of all people in the community.

A different concern to that over merit was the fear that factional leaders would put forward 'tame' women who would do more to promote factional interests than the interests of women in the community. This is where a new initiative, headed by former Victorian Premier, Joan Kirner, comes in. EMILY's List, inspired by its American counterpart, seeks not just to increase the number of women in Parliament but to increase the number of feminists. EMILY's List is a vehicle for providing financial and other forms of support to Labor women candidates who have been preselected for winnable seats and who have 'demonstrated a commitment to and ongoing advocacy of women's rights'.

Before being selected for support, candidates are interviewed on issues such as the policies they would advocate to help people balance their work and family responsibilities. EMILY's List was launched around Australia in 1996–97 after a prolonged struggle over its control between the Labor women initiating it and the National Executive of the party. It is now completely independent of the male structures of the party. The first six candidates to whom it has given endorsement and support are contesting the South Australian election.

Of my sample of federal parliamentarians, most of the women believed they had a special role to play in safeguarding the interests of women while numbers in Parliament remained so low. Conversely, women in the community tend to look to women MPs to support their causes, expecting that those who have shared their life experiences will have greater empathy with their concerns.

Parliamentarians articulated the dilemmas involved in being called upon to represent all women and saw one important role as being to provide resources to community organisations, or allowing their offices to be used as a base, to assist women or indigenous groups to represent themselves. These natural affinities had to be balanced with the interests of the electorate, which might be somewhat different. Such dual responsibilities also involved representatives dressing for different parts on different days. This kind of juggling was seen as something which women's lives prepared them for quite well.

One interesting fact was that when asked to nominate groups who might be under-represented in Parliament, male respondents were often more comfortable in talking about specific groups of women such as indigenous women or those from non-English speaking backgrounds than in talking about women who might be closer to home. For example, in discussing the

²⁵ Candy Broad, 'Affirmative action and the Australian Labor Party' in Marian Simms, *The Paradox of Parties: Australian Parties in the 1990s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. 82.

responsibility of political parties to make the Parliament more representative, one senator said: ‘You might say, let’s get a black woman in and that’ll kill two birds with the one stone’. Another MP identified women from non-English speaking backgrounds as both under-represented and ‘almost unreachable’, being cut off by language and patriarchal family structures.

It is clear that the major parties appreciate the symbolic importance of mirror representation. Liberal Ministers have routinely deflected criticism of impact of their policies on women by referring to the large increase of Liberal women sitting in the House of Representatives—these women have in some sense become an alibi for policy. There is also the matter of ‘smoke and mirrors’. Female MPs are commonly allocated the seats directly behind the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, so that the images of Question Time seen on the television news give the impression that women are present in the parliamentary parties in much greater numbers than they really are.

Conclusion

The major findings of the study were, firstly, that despite the salience of populism and constructs of the ‘mainstream’ in electronic media such as talk-back radio, parliamentarians were in most cases anxious to disassociate themselves from such views of representation.

Secondly, and perhaps more interesting, was the extent to which parliamentarians expressed post-modernist views concerning the importance of embodiment and the politics of presence—that is, that difference needs to be physically represented to be fully registered. This was not a view of representation that emerged at all in the most recent published study of the views of Australian legislators concerning representational roles.²⁶ This was, perhaps, because of the nature of the survey instrument used.

I believe that the understandings provided by parliamentarians when they have the opportunity to expound more fully their views of representation provide a richer picture and one which accords more with the complexity of contemporary political identities. These identities are not confined to political party or territorial unit, and this complexity is reflected in the way in which our parliamentarians are now thinking about their roles.



Question — You have mentioned emerging diversity and recognition of diversity, greater complexities. What implications do you think that has for the shape of political parties as we know them, in the future?

²⁶ Donley T. Studlar and Ian McAllister, ‘Constituency activity and representational roles among Australian legislators’, *Journal of Politics*, 58 (1), 1996.

Dr Sawyer — In Australia, as elsewhere, there has been a certain amount of partisan de-alignment, which means that people identify less strongly with political parties than they have in the past. One consequence of that is that they are more volatile in terms of voting. It also seems to leave more space for Independents and new minor parties to emerge. I think those are some of the consequences of the weakening of the old forms of political identification in Australia.

Question — You spoke with some scorn of the populist or mouthpiece politician. I am curious to know how would you see the role of representatives at the upcoming constitutional convention, given that a majority of the people are in favour of a republic; getting rid of the Queen, electing an Australian head of state, and so on. In fact, most people do not even know that we have a Constitution, let alone what is in it, and the desire for a major change can be dismissed by those who have studied the Constitution. Harry Evans, for example, has pointed out that we are already a republic, and Sir David Smith has pointed out that the Queen is only the ceremonial head of state. The real powers belong to the Governor-General. Would you say that those who mouth the populist, ignorant view for a republic are doing their jobs or should they be providing some education for the people?

Dr Sawyer — I think that we will find in the Constitutional Convention there will be men of judgement on both sides of the debate over the head of state and it is not as though there is emotion on one side and reasoned judgement on the other. I think that we will find that emotion and judgement are part of both sides of that issue and the way it will be represented.

Question — It seems to me that one way to reflect what you referred to as the post-modern view of representation is actually to change the electoral system. For example, to move towards some form of proportional representation as occurred in New Zealand. Did any of your interviewees make reference to such a possibility?

Dr. Sawyer — Half of my interviewees were senators who already enjoyed the benefits of proportional representation in terms of the flow-on effect of greater diversity of embodiment. It was not raised by any of the members of the House of Representatives, I have to tell you. Clearly, if we are talking about more effective representation of diversity, proportional representation will bring that about. But, even so, we will still have all those issues of unrepresented minorities and, in that case, I think we have to look towards their representative bodies outside Parliament and to ensure that those can access Parliament. Another issue, of course, is what in Europe is called subsidiarity, trying to devolve decision-making so that more and different minorities can be involved in government at different levels.