

The Power of One*

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This year celebrates the centenary of the first Commonwealth election at which women had the right to stand as candidates. Australia's first female political candidate was Catherine Helen Spence (1825–1910), who stood in 1897 as a candidate for the South Australian delegation to the pre-federation Constitutional Convention.

Spence campaigned for proportional representation in the new parliament. Her writings on proportional representation and on her notion of an 'effective parliament' stand out as being among Australia's most important contributions to international discussion of parliamentary government, including the rights and responsibilities of parliamentary opposition.

Many of you may think that I have stolen the title of this lecture, 'The Power of One', from Bryce Courtney. Not true, but I can tell you where he may have got it from: if you do a Google search on your computer, you will find that there are a lot of places that Bryce could have gone fishing to find the title. It is commonly used for works of art—lots of videos, old films, plays, novels, rock videos, DVDs; it seems to be the title of choice for people looking for a snappy little way of explaining themselves. Why have I chosen it?

I want to declare at the outset that I certainly haven't chosen it because I think Spence is some sort of 'heroic' figure, all-powerful, all-wise, a kind of guardian of our democracy; a person to whom we can trust our fortunes or place our political

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prudence in her care. It is not that sort of leadership that I think she exemplifies. She is not the great solitary hero leading from afar. Rather, she is somebody who can demonstrate the power of a non-politician—somebody outside the system, who is not ‘one of them’, but ‘one of us’—who can help us understand our place in the system. That is an astonishing achievement, because mostly we listen to ‘them’, those who are *within* the system, explaining where we fit in. Here is somebody who is *outside* the system, explaining where we can fit in and, in fact, take charge. So the ‘power of one’ is the power of Spence to help us understand our place in the system.

And there is another ‘power of one’ element that she has, which is the capacity to bring out the best in us. Again, it is the reverse of the normal leadership image we have of deferring to somebody all-powerful, all-seeing—somebody who is able to see over the horizon and help us go in directions and towards destinations to which they want to lead us. Spence’s achievement is not that; she is actually trying to bring us forward. Her slightly crazed commitment to proportional representation was designed to bring more of us to the table of politics, and to widen the pool of people who were there, to determine the agenda and the business. I think that is important. Her public career certainly demonstrated her commitment to the idea of proportional representation as a pre-requisite for an effective parliament; to parliament as a community institution, not just as an institution for routine politics or party politics.

Proportional representation is what the Senate now has. That is, seats are allocated more or less fairly according to voting support with even the losers—the people who didn’t win the election, the minority—getting their fair share of parliamentary representation. What proportional representation indicates is that democracy doesn’t have to mean majority rule. Certainly there is something privileged about the rights of the majority finally to determine lots of rules and lots of outcomes. But it is not majority rule, full stop. There is a lot of distance, opportunity, potential between the ‘majority rule’ and the ‘full stop’, and Spence moves into that particular area—minorities, too, have rights, even if those rights are only rights to be heard. And proportional representation promotes the rights of minorities as well as majorities.

Spence was an active campaigner in federation; part of what motivated her was to get support for a federal parliament which would be welcoming to proportional representation. Spence was 75 or so at the time of federation when she was active on the hustings. Aged as that might sound, she was 50 years or so ahead of her time. It took until after the Second World War for the Senate, the institution that she was targeting as the likely embodiment of proportional representation, to finally vindicate her claim and for senators to act upon her thesis: if we really want an effective parliamentary chamber—trusted by the community because it fairly represents the community and not just the winners—then we really should insist on proportional representation.

It is as though she was arguing, at that time, that proportional representation protects the ‘power of one’—each of us as individual voters—so that we can see some correspondence between the vote that we cast and the political institution that is eventually formed on the basis of our participation.

The first Commonwealth Parliament, which met in Melbourne in 1901, spent a lot of its first term, between 1901 and 1903, hammering out fundamental electoral law, which included provisions guaranteeing the rights of women across Australia to participate as voters and as candidates. Not all women, however: indigenous women were not included. Although in initiating the legislation, the Senate, to its credit, had included indigenous males and females as full participants, the House of Representatives had struck that out. So the 1903 election was the first opportunity for most women to exercise these rights nationally.

It is appropriate to mark the occasion of the centenary by looking at the person who was Australia's first female candidate. Spence was the first female candidate in the nation that was the first *internationally* to protect the rights of women, not just to vote, but to stand as candidates. New Zealand, of course, beat Australia by half a decade or so in giving women the vote, but was behind us in protecting their right to stand as candidates. There is a curious gap or time lag in most countries in bringing in those two phases of related rights.

The 1903 election which allowed women to stand as candidates was, in fact, a sad affair. There were only four female candidates at that time—three for the Senate and one for the House of Representatives. And it took 40 years or so before women finally entered Commonwealth Parliament as elected members: in 1943 with Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney. Things were a little better at state level with Edith Cowan in Western Australia winning in 1921.

What I want to do in this lecture is to try and set the scene by going back to the foundations, and looking at the 'mould breaker': Catherine Helen Spence, the person who broke through and became the first candidate in what became the first country to protect the rights of women to be candidates. I will try to bring her to life a little bit; to explain what she was on about; and to do justice to her over zealous, slightly crazed, commitment to proportional representation.

To put it into context, Spence was a pioneering activist of women's voting rights, but she wasn't the first, or the foremost, or necessarily the most influential. She was one of a bunch. Even in her home state of South Australia there were others, like Mary Lee and Elizabeth Nicholls, who were really much more prominent and much more influential.

She was the first political candidate, but she wasn't successful. She lost the only election she stood at, and she didn't come back to stand for any others. That was before federation. And there are many other feminists who came in on her heels, stood at elections, lost, stood again, lost, and stood again. Spence is *not* one of those.

Her one and only attempt to stand at election was in 1897 when she stood as a candidate for the South Australian delegation to the Constitutional Convention, the last phase of the pre-federation movement, trying to be involved in the crafting the constitution. At 73, she had had many achievements and she had committed herself to a lot of causes, and there were many more to come. She didn't win one of the ten South Australian vacancies, she came I think twenty-second on a list of 33, but the cards were really stacked against her and it wasn't necessarily her fault that she lost.

Prominent South Australian federation activists Charles Kingston and Richard Baker slyly did a 'boy's job' on her: they let it be known that Spence, if she stood, probably wouldn't be eligible to claim her place within the Constitutional Convention.

The explanation of this is in the chequered history I mentioned, which is sad to record. South Australia was the first Australian state to protect the rights of women as voters in 1894, but back in the early 1890s there were attempts to stop the passage of the legislation.¹ In an early version of 'wedge politics', opponents introduced what I think is called a 'wrecking amendment'. The amendment explicitly declared that if women were given the right to vote as electors, they would also then be permitted the right to stand as candidates. This stymied the bill, as the men proposing the legislation recoiled for fear that they would be opening up more than they had bargained for.

Spence's campaign manager was Jeanne F. Young, who later became secretary of the Effective Voting League. Young understood that the electoral officials would probably be pressured by the political class to deny her nomination forms, so they waited until about the last five minutes or so before the close of nomination to put the forms in, which left no time for the electoral officials to use their discretion to rule them out of order. Spence's name was then immediately printed on the list and off she went. But there were plenty enough in the community who had already heard the contaminating 'boys talk' that she wasn't really 'one of us'. Spence lost.

But by losing, I think she felt she had won in a way. She had proven a point: that the losers really have no place; that the federation process was going to go on; and that those who were on the list of ten (all males) would go on to craft the constitution, maybe not even thinking about the women in South Australia who had been in a position to vote for them.

Spence wasn't just thinking about women as part of the minority of losers, she was also thinking about the labour movement. As she matured, she became closer and closer to working men's associations, and the United Labor Party² eventually tried to promote her as an active candidate. She wanted to make her point that working people deserved a place as well, even if they weren't part of the ruling majority. And she was issuing a warning that the constitution crafted by these dominating, established interests was not likely to want proportional representation, and that would 'forever shut us out', as she put it.

Having lost the election, she went on to other things and other facets of public life, in part because she doubted that the right to vote, even the right to stand as a candidate, was all there was to public life. Without the possibility of proportional representation, she considered that there were a range of other social reforms that women and other active citizens should focus on.

She admitted, later in life, that she was regarded by a lot of other feminists and 'real'

¹ A total of nine women's suffrage bills were introduced into the South Australian Parliament from 1888, but the legislation was not passed until 1894 following the events described.

² Formed by the United Trades and Labor Council in 1891, and forerunner of the Australian Labor Party, South Australian Branch.

workers as a ‘weak-kneed sister’: ‘I had failed to see the advantage of having a vote that might leave me, after an election, a disenfranchised voter, instead of an un-enfranchised woman.’ Better for her, she said, to be an un-enfranchised woman, not even participating in the system, than to be somebody dragooned or co-opted into voting but her vote not counting—‘wasted’, as she put it. Her simple way of explaining what ‘effective voting’ meant in the scheme of proportional representation was to say that it would minimise the ‘wastage’ of voters, as the losers would see that the people they voted for had a direct opportunity to form part of the parliamentary assembly.

How to explain, unravel and reconfigure, this pioneering woman? I think the best way of opening our minds to her is to open our wallets; because she’s there in our wallets. Her contribution to Australian public life is really symbolised by her presence on the federation five-dollar note. She sits there opposite Henry Parkes, and the two of them tell us something about the importance of Australian federation.

I note that Edith Cowan, the first woman to be elected in Western Australia in 1921, is on the fifty-dollar note, so winners are clearly worth more, but Spence is there, and republicans should take quiet pride. She has displaced the Queen on the five-dollar note. The Queen may well come back at some point when we forget the excitement of federation, but Spence is there—displacing the Queen.

Think of the contrast between Spence and Parkes. Spence clearly female, Parkes clearly not. Spence the first female candidate; Parkes one of an endless number of male candidates—no great distinction there. Spence the failed candidate, Parkes a winner at every turn. Spence the non-politician, somebody who flirted with politics; Parkes, in there for everything he could get. Spence, the outside community activist; Parkes, the inside partisan worker. Spence, best known in politics for her advocacy of electoral reform and proportional representation; Parkes best known for a whole range of things, but not for adjusting electoral systems to broaden the base of public participation.

So what exactly is it about proportional representation that attracted Spence?

It is easier for us living here in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) to appreciate, because it is the system that we have used for our Legislative Assembly since 1989, when we got the right to govern ourselves. It’s also the system that is used in the Senate—but only since 1949, and only then because people were trying to act upon the urgings that Spence had laid down well over 50 years before.

Proportional representation simply means that representation in parliament should be distributed in proportion to voting support. So in the ACT, for example, if 40 per cent of voters want the Stanhope party to be elected, then the Stanhope party should get 40 per cent of the seats in the House of Assembly. If another 30 per cent want the Smyth party to be elected, then they should get 30 per cent of the seats.³ If the other 30 per cent of the voters want 10 per cent here, 10 per cent up there and 10 per cent over

³ John Stanhope is leader of the Labor Party in the Legislative Assembly of the ACT, and current Chief Minister. Brendan Smyth is the leader of the Liberal Party in the Legislative Assembly.

there, then those 10 percentages should also be represented by smaller parties, Independents and others.

Proportional representation is also at work in the Senate, where the distribution of seats more closely matches the distribution of voters' wishes than it does in the House of Representatives. The two major parties get pretty much an even share of Senate seats, but neither is really able to dominate or control the Senate, because there are other voters whose wishes are also protected and respected. There are the little parties accommodating those individuals that vote for them—the Democrats, the Greens, the Independents. There are even new parties that we didn't vote for emerging out of the parliamentary process, like Senator Lees' Australian Progressive Alliance.

The ACT system and the Senate system differ because they are group systems—proportional representation is really like a committee system model. The House of Representatives is an example of the more traditional system based upon single-member constituencies; lots of single-member constituencies are scattered around Australia, and the electors in each of those constituencies try to agree on one person, and only one, to represent them. In the Senate and the ACT government, however, it is more like a committee model, where we vote for a range of representatives in multi-member electorates to represent us, and to reflect the spread of our own political preferences.

Contrast that with the House of Representatives. At the last national election, the current governing party, the Liberal/National Party Coalition, got 43 per cent of the votes nationally but they got a bonus: they won 54 per cent of the seats, a *disproportionate* representation. Labor did okay, they got slightly more seats than they may have deserved. But the minor parties, which as a group attracted nearly 20 per cent of the vote—scandalous to report—have at best only two per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives, even though they have 20 per cent voter support! There is something odd about that and, by contrast, perhaps something virtuous and decent about proportional representation.

So how did Spence get on to that? What sort of person was she? What made her so special? Her life story is easy to tell. She was born in Scotland in 1825. There was a financial collapse in the family, but there is nothing special about that. She emigrated to South Australia as a teenager, and died in Adelaide in 1910 at the age of 85, regarded as the 'Grand Old Dame of Australia'.

It sounds provincial, but she got out and about. She had two overseas trips, one in the 1860s to the United Kingdom. This was not a casual little jaunt to the Lake Country or somewhere similar. She was there to meet George Eliot and John Stuart Mill to try and cut a deal with them and work out what, together, these giant intellects from both sides of the world could do. She was in close personal contact with both George Eliot and John Stuart Mill.

Spence went overseas again in 1890s, this time to the US and Canada, working with American feminists on the proportional representation cause, which was surprisingly strong in America at that time. So she was very much a connected sort of woman. Her life is about connections—making connections, bringing people together, and using

proportional representation as a social connector and a connecting device, to mould or shape better civic relationships.

What sort of figure did she cut? You can get an impression of her by looking at the five-dollar note, or going back to the original, which I think might be Margaret Preston's portrait located in the National Portrait Gallery at Old Parliament House. That portrait was painted just a year after Spence died, when a citizens' commission got together and invited Margaret Preston—who was famous even then and was just back from Germany and France—to do a portrait for the Adelaide community. Go and have a look at it.

Initially you think there is something off-putting about it. Spence is dressed in black on a brown background, and the portrait seems dark, sober and uninspiring. And then suddenly there are two bright sparks which shine out from the painting: there is a bright ruby ring on Spence's left hand, and there are these puzzlingly sharp green eyes. They are muted, but there is something that attracts you in the red below and the green above. Spence is seated, but she is leaning forward toward the viewer and she is pointing. The ring on her left hand is next to the finger which is pointing. The desk that she is leaning on is littered with papers—not newspapers, but committee papers, working papers, party papers, meeting papers. This is a picture of somebody who is very busy. She is dressed as though she is about to go out and do a whole lot of things. It's a very impressive Margaret Preston painting. Spence is not a wallflower—no way.

What did Spence do when she went out? Think of the various public roles that she had, and then you can put her commitment to proportional representation in perspective. She started adult life as a teacher and a governess, and then said no to both. She then became a novelist who published six novels, and two other works of fiction. Four of the novels were published in her own time, another two were completed but not published.

One of her novels was not published because it was considered too radical, insidious and subversive. That novel was *Handfasted*. It is a truly wonderful story, written just before 1880, which she submitted to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, then edited by Robert Garran's dad. She was writing for the *Herald* anonymously, so she submitted this in a novel competition. The story is set in a utopian community in Central America—a relocated Scottish community working in partnership with indigenous communities, fashioning a utopian community, founded by a woman and committed to sexual equality. The term 'handfasted' refers to the ancient Scottish custom of betrothal or commitment, lasting for a year and a day, that is then revokable by either party, male or female—a kind of symbol of equality.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* wouldn't even consider it for their novel competition. It was seen as 'calculated to loosen the marriage tie', too socialistic and consequently dangerous. Spence couldn't find a publisher: so this was that quiet woman with the ruby ring and the green eyes—dreaming, 20 years before federation, about utopian communities.

Spence was a journalist, and that was probably the way she made most of her money.

Initially she wrote anonymously, but when she was able to get proper recognition, she wrote in Melbourne and Adelaide. Initially, she worked as a literary journalist, but then more often on public affairs.

She was a Unitarian preacher. This may seem kind of remarkable, but she wasn't the only female Unitarian preacher in Australia. She might have been, however, the only one to write a book called *An Agnostic's Progress*. It was slightly embarrassing to the religious cause, but then Unitarianism is a kind of focused and lean form of Christianity. She wrote this parody of *Pilgrim's Progress* to try and relieve the world of the misery of a Presbyterian background that she knew only too well.

Spence was a social activist and a voluntary community worker: just think of the things she tried to do from the outside, the kind of leverage she tried to exercise in her own South Australian community.

Fostering out and looking after children was the initial cause that got her closely involved in community work. She formed the Boarding-out Society to get children out of institutions and reformatories—'barracks', as she called them—established by the state in its misguided zeal to look after children. She also organised an early example of volunteering, where women supported foster parents and worked to protect the rights of children boarded out into the community. She used the power of the state to work in a partnership with the family to put children in more nurturing environments. This approach was later taken up by Great Britain, which acknowledged her pioneering role.

She was a public advocate of female suffrage, which brought her a lot of prominence. She became publicly involved with the establishment and presidency of her Effective Voting League. She was not just committing herself to female suffrage, but to a specific form of political representation based on female suffrage, which she called 'effective voting'—her name for proportional representation.

She was able to pressure her brother John, a member of the South Australian Legislative Council who had also been involved with promotion of female suffrage, to be her link with the political class in South Australia. She was thus able to attract a lot of bipartisan support for her proportional representational, or 'effective voting', society. Tom Price, the first Labor Premier, was one of her supporters. Joseph Vardon, who represented South Australia in the Senate as an Anti-Socialist, was her successor as President of the Effective Voting League. She was able to attract both sides of the political contest.

Spence was influential in helping to establish children's courts in the 1890s, and was a founding member of the Criminological Society, also in the 1890s. She committed herself to ridding correction societies of the view that crime was hereditary and tried to attune them to the fact that social environment was a more crucial factor, and that was what needed to be worked against.

She worked with Rose Scott in New South Wales opposing the Boer War; she helped establish the National Council of Women in South Australia and she established her own co-operative clothing company, to help keep women productive—not just busy,

but productive. She was president of the board of directors of this clothing co-op. So she was a person whose hands were busy beyond belief.

Spence was foundation president of the Women's Political Association, later the Women's *Non-Party* Political Association, to indicate that it wasn't just another front group for one of the 'boys' clubs'. But it doesn't end there. She was also active in the defence of the public monopoly of tramways in South Australia. As a public resource, she felt it should not be privatised, so she stood in defence of the rights of the community to have taxpayer-funded public transport.

And then she was also an activist for the kindergarten movement. This was something she welcomed, and she became the Vice President of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia.

Because she was an outsider able to exercise leverage, and because her brother, John, was able to help her knock on some doors, she was then invited by the Government to be a kind of adviser and was appointed:

- a member of the State Children's Council;
- a member of the Board of Education;
- Commissioner to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, where she went delivering briefs on behalf of the South Australian government about crime correction and criminology, while doubling as spokesperson for proportional representation, so attracting lots of notoriety;
- a member of the South Australian Destitute Board; and
- a member of the State Hospitals Commission.

And so on.

She was also invited by the South Australian Department of Education to write Australia's first civics textbook in 1880—*The Laws We Live Under*—twenty years before federation. This was an astonishing achievement. She had yelled so clearly from the outside that people wanted her on the inside helping to clarify things.

Where does the proportional representation story fit in? In two ways, as she has two sides to her public career: one as an author, and the other as a citizen and community activist.

As an author, probably the best and clearest expression is her novel writing. Believe it or not, in her novels, there is the story of proportional representation writ in dramatic form. They are like little plays, dramatising the virtues of proportional representation.

She wrote *Clara Morison*, her first novel (and maybe the only one still in print), in the 1850s. This was around the time of responsible government entering Australia, and there she is writing a novel about the gold rushes in South Australia. It is a wonderful conceit. Here is a woman who is around 30, writing a novel about the Australian gold rushes while the gold rushes are on, and her take on it is: 'Imagine what Adelaide would be like if all the blokes left, if the gold lured them off. We'd have a chance, maybe we could actually get this place right!' And so she has this wonderful story of

women getting on with it while the men are away. Of course, the men eventually come back with sad stories of how the gold had all gone, but she has already established that women can—given the right opportunities—set the tone. All they need is a chance, and the gold is a sort of sad surrogate for better opportunities.

That was her first work. Her last work was called *A Week in the Future*, and was written to celebrate the Australian Centenary, in 1888. It was an attempt to imagine what Britain would be like in 1988. We can now test it and see if she was right. She was writing this in 1888 for both British and Australian audiences, imagining a future that Britain might have.

And what did she want Britain to look like in 1988? There are three features that are worth looking at. First, there is no monarchy; it has gone, but an elected presidency hasn't quite arrived (Tony Blair might still be hopeful). Second, the House of Commons is totally reformed, and now has proportional representation with minorities holding significant power—big parties, but also significant little parties. Finally, the House of Lords is replaced by a Senate—indeed, called a Senate—with regional representation. This was once on Blair's wish list, but it seems that it has almost faded back a hundred years already.

So in all her works, from beginning to end, Spence tries to weave in the story of proportional representation.

What about in her active life? How does proportional representation work as part of a political campaign or a strategy? Spence's education began early; she learnt from her dad. She came out as a teenager, and her dad, David Spence, was Town Clerk of Adelaide. In 1840, when Adelaide had its first City Council election, David Spence had the responsibility of organising that election and he was told by the authorities back in London, particularly by Roland Hill (later famous for establishing the penny postage), that he would have to work on a system of quota representation. As far as we can tell, this was the first time a form of quota or proportional representation had been experimented with in any significant jurisdiction. Adelaide did it, and Spence's dad helped arrange it. It collapsed soon after because Adelaide collapsed—but it was there.

Spence tried to develop a framework of practical principles that would entrench a preference for multi-member quota representation in the community. Her first great theoretical exposition of this was in 1861 in a pamphlet called *A Plea for Pure Democracy*. This is 1861: forty years before federation. The pamphlet is Australia's 'lost gem' of political theory. It is the first real exposition, not just of proportional representation, but of the rights of minorities and oppositions to participate freely and fairly in the parliamentary process. And 1861, that's within a year or two of when Thomas Hare, the apparent founder of the mechanics of proportional representation, finally delivered his thousand-page textbook. Spence whacks out a fifty or sixty page pamphlet, of which Hare says, 'I wish I could have done that!' So he might be the theorist, but she became the one who was able to win over public support for proportional representation.

In the same year, John Stuart Mill published his *Considerations on Representative Government*. Spence was able to quickly seize on things like that and turn them into matters of easy public consumption. Hare and Mill—both advocates of proportional representation—deferred to her as having a better gift of public speech and public communication than they would ever have.

Generally, Spence's understanding of proportional representation has been reduced to her slogan 'Effective Voting', and so we tend to misunderstand it, and misread her, in thinking that all she was concerned about was giving folks a chance to front up to a polling booth and to have the right to vote. In fact, what she was trying to articulate, right from this early pamphlet and then in lots of other public opportunities, was an effective vote understood as the protection of the rights of minorities to have a vote and to see the people they voted for represented—even if they are the 'losers', part of the minority, rather than the winning majority. And not just protecting the rights of the minorities, but promoting a true majority in a parliamentary system so that majority rule can properly reflect a widened, dispersed, or properly distributed majority that takes account, not just of the rights of the winners to say what it is that the government is going to do but to join together with the losers as part of a true parliamentary majority.

Finally, to return to federation, South Australia recognised the right of women to vote in 1894, and Spence was part of the push for that. She had come back from the World's Fair in Chicago, coming late into that 1894 campaign, but her momentum added significantly to it.

The first election at which women were able to vote and to stand as candidates was 1896 in South Australia. Labor associations approached Spence and said: 'You're the one for us.' She said no. She didn't want to be actively involved in state politics, maybe because she saw that something bigger was coming along—that federation was moving, and she wanted to be a participant in that. So she stood a year later, in 1897, hoping that she could join the delegation to the Constitutional Convention.

She lost out there, but that didn't stop her being a public advocate for the causes she believed in. She still worried about children, the destitute, criminology, tramways and the rest of it, but she continued to use the opportunities of the moment to try and inject her political cause into the political movements of the time. And she used the time between 1898 and the referendum bills on the proposed constitution to urge, at every opportunity, that voters bear in mind that they shouldn't be voting just for a constitution but for a process that would allow the people who formed the constitution to protect their rights by establishing a system of proportional representation as the basis for the electoral system in the new parliament.

The constitution was leaving that to the first parliament to devise. She wasn't unhappy about that but she wanted to make sure that those elected in 1901 understood the strength of community opinion and were against the same old business of single-member electorates with major parties dominating the process. Instead, they should commit themselves to a system of proportional representation.

Spence targeted the Senate. That is almost unbelievable. She was one of the few people, maybe the only person, to recognise that the Senate was going to be the multi-member constituency: the component of the national parliament that was ideally suited to proportional representation. She had sketched it out 40 years before, she had lived with it, and she recognised that it was a viable experiment in Tasmania right at that time, with two electorates being formed to experiment with proportional representation. She argued that, if we haven't got proportional representation entrenched in a constitution, at least the community sentiment must be understood. That is, if the Senate is to contribute anything, it has to be the complement to the House of Representatives—with its array of single-member electorates—by being the body that has an arrangement of multi-member, state-wide electorates, and we have to insist that these are committed to a form of proportional representation. Her words were echoed and circulated in the life of the First Parliament, but it took until after the Second World War for the Senate to wake up to the sense of her initial view.

In conclusion, let me try to identify three aspects of her legacy that are worth bearing in mind as we celebrate the larger cause, which is not proportional representation but the cause of women as full citizens.

First is her realism. If you look at her novels, there is something astonishingly real about her portrayals. In one sense they are utopian idylls, but if you look at her description of the potential of women to contribute to politics, and the potential of things like marriage to contaminate social life, there is some sort of gritty realism there.

Another element of this realism is her recognition that democracy can be corrupted, particularly after she spent time in the 1890s in the United States and Canada. She became more and more aware of the dangers of money in politics, parties in politics, money buying parties in politics. Again, part of the hope of proportional representation was that it would secure greater transparency and openness in politics. Her recognition of the realities of corruption I think is something that we can still live with.

Second, is her innovation. She was early to recognise the rights of the state to protect the rights of children, and she recognised the importance of getting children out of state-run homes—which might be the worst place for them, as schools of crime. But her innovation goes further than that, and has to do with her hope and her optimism. Part of that was her understanding that she was out of synch with a lot of mainstream Australian opinion.

At the time of federation she wrote something called 'The Australian in Literature', which was a complaint about the lack of optimism and hope in Australian portrayals of our community and social relationships. In a dig at Lawson and the other 'blokes', she writes:

In prose as well as in verse, the deadbeat, the remittance man, the gaunt shepherd with his starving flocks and herds, the free selector on an arid patch, the drink shanty where the roustabouts and shearers knock down their cheques, the race meeting where the high and the low, the rich and

the poor, are filled with the gambler's spirit and cursed with the gambler's ill-luck, fill the foreground of the picture of Australian life. There are occasional episodes more cheerful and more tender, but the impression given to the outside world is that, in the fight with nature which is man's task everywhere, he is more often worsted in Australia than anywhere else.

She wanted to try and oppose that, and part of her innovation was using her novels, and lots of other ways, to try and turn things around so that brighter opportunities could come through.

Lastly is her recognition that democracy is really a work in progress. It is not something that you ratify and vote for only in terms of having a constitution or not, or having the right to vote or not. It's something that you have work at, and there is a spirit of equality that has to be worked through. Right from her early 1861 pamphlets, it is equality that has to take different expressions as community standards evolve, and proportional representation is one way of making sense of that.

She was a woman of hope, but she also had courage. Where did she get her courage from, and how could she commit herself to all of these causes? You can understand the hope, but the courage? She explained it simply: 'Start each day with a cold bath, end each day with a glass of scotch, and work hard in between.'

Catherine Helen Spence is now part of our formal financial currency, and I think we should look back at her and make her part of our intellectual and political currency as well. If we can do that, we can celebrate this anniversary in the right spirit.



Question —In the last months in this country and throughout the world we have been through a rather dismal period of national and international politics, dominated almost entirely by men. I'm mindful that many of those women who were working for women's greater involvement in politics at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were deeply committed to the belief that, if more women were involved in politics and had the vote, then they would vote against war. I wonder if you could tell us where Catherine Helen Spence stood on that issue?

John Uhr — I mentioned that Spence was opposed to the Boer War. That is a practical illustration that she understood the temptations of nations mistakenly going to the aid of causes that are really going to imperil rather than enrich human rights. She understood that women had an important role in clarifying the options open to the political decision makers. She was also took part in formal peace associations and was part of a peace society established in South Australia.

Her association with the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 brought together lots of people who understood that the world was shrinking rather than expanding, and that there were opportunities to get together and provide opportunities for women in

particular to be the linkages. I have to balance that with the recognition that, internally, there were aspects of warfare going on that she did little to alleviate.

She had little to say about the rights of Indigenous Australians, or Indigenous women. So while we can be enthused that she stands as part of a larger cause of international feminism in the early part of the twentieth century, avidly seeking peace, I don't want to so romanticise her role that I fail to draw attention to the fact that there were lots of other things that required attention back at home.

I welcome the question and I welcome the theme, it is really part of the larger agenda of 100 lectures in honour of the 100th anniversary. You are certainly right in spirit—and Spence was in keeping with that spirit—but there is a range of other issues that we should not be too shy about raising as well.

Question — You've mentioned that Spence was very well connected and how useful that was to her in seeking political change, particularly through her brother John. I wonder if you could comment a bit more on Spence's colonial background, and in particular her South Australian background. She was very glad that she spent her life in a colony rather than in Britain; she saw this as very liberating. I suspect that she reflected a lot of the good things that were coming out of South Australia. I was interested in the extract you read of her criticism of the melancholy side of Australia and Australian literature. Certainly South Australia, with a different balance of the sexes, the different history and the fact that it was a different sort of settlement, tends to reinforce that bent in her development.

John Uhr — Absolutely, she understood South Australia as a colony, and Australia generally as a land of new opportunity. Part of her understanding of equality was equality of opportunity, and her novels in particular became celebrations of this. Not just of the rights of women to finally break free from the traditional rigidities and live, or commit themselves to, an emancipated life, but the opportunity in Australia for that life to become a reality. In all of her novels, beginning with *Clara Morison*, Australia is the scene where the story culminates. I mentioned *Handfasted*, which begins in a romantic utopian community in Central America. Eventually a travelling Australian struggles his way into the community and takes this fabulously independent woman back to Australia, and she turns him into a fabulously good politician. So all her stories become opportunities to work through the kind of hope and optimism provided by Australia.

Australia does matter—absolutely—she is not simply a cosmopolitan figure or a global citizen. There is something significant about the social possibilities here in Australia. In her novels, but not just in the novels, her political advocacy is all about not having to do things the way they have been done in the past. If I gave the impression that by going and talking to Eliot and Mill she simply wanted to be credentialed, externally valued by the northern hemisphere, that is not the case. It was a personal test to see whether she had integrity that they would value, but the field of experiment was back in Australia absolutely. All her earnest political endeavour was here, not there. The novels might start there, but they ended here. All her practical social activity, her busy-ness, is all here, and in South Australia in particular.

I don't know how the family chose to come to South Australia, but they did, and the fact that her father was the original Town Clerk meant that they were quickly part of that South Australian political scene. She died there, properly revered. If you go to North Terrace now, to the State Library, you will find the Spence collection properly and prominently displayed as a gift to the rest of Australia. She saw South Australia as a field of experiment that Australia as a whole could look to and learn from.

Question — Could you comment further about her particular views on or involvement in Indigenous struggles and whether she saw proportional representation as a way of enabling an Indigenous voice to enter politics. Or was that not really part of her view?

John Uhr — Remember she was born in 1825. Feminists have not been altogether comfortable with Spence for a number of reasons, the most recent of which is that her understanding of Australian nationalism seemed to have no place or articulation for Indigenous Australia. There are only two references in her novels to Indigenous characters, and they are clearly subordinate and do not display any potential for being anything else.

Lots of her works weren't published, so we can't blame her. There may have been lots of lost works that we don't know about, or lots of parts that publishers omitted. There may be a case that, added to her list of causes, there was another one that we have forgotten about because it was expunged. If I strained to give a best case for her, it would be something like that—that her work was severely edited. I mentioned the example of the *Sydney Morning Herald* competition even refusing to consider her entry, but that's a kind of strange case.

There is really little that she in particular had to say about Indigenous questions; her strengths went in a different direction. She had so much to contribute and so many other areas of endeavour, that I wouldn't identify that as a mark of shame, I would just say that we should acknowledge it and move on. In her case, it doesn't feature as an important area of achievement in the celebration of the 100th anniversary. There must be a lot of people saying a lot of things about the gaps between the promises of the legislation of 1903 and the realities of today, and the way various parties have contributed to or screened things out. She's just one actor—a 'power of the one'—and she fell short in the field of endeavour you have identified.

Question — Could you tell us more about Catherine's ability to encapsulate arguments in a very vivid way and be very persuasive, but relate it back to the United States. About four or five years ago in San Francisco there was an attempt made to get proportional representation for local elections, and it failed. I had the opportunity to speak to one of the major proponents when he visited Australia and I asked him how they had gone about explaining their case. He said that, basically, they fumbled. People would ring up on the radio to ask about it, and they'd say, 'Well if we had 20 minutes we could explain this to you'. I told him that we got our case down to about 30 seconds, and I also mentioned 'effective voting'. And when he heard those two words he said, 'If we'd had that, we would have won.'

John Uhr — There were a lot of other activists for proportional representation in Australia at the time. Most of them were so wound up about the excitement of the mechanics and the arithmetic of representation that, even though they could convince themselves and their fellow closet specialists about the virtue of proportional representation, they could not convince anybody else who wasn't already interested.

John Nanson, the mathematics professor at Melbourne, was the most internationally famous Australian advocate of proportional representation, and he conceded that Spence was able to hold an audience in ways that he, the professor of mathematics, could not. He could use the board to explain the arithmetic of representation so that there were no wasted votes, but the room would be empty by the time he was at his third entry. But Spence had a gift, as a journalist, for showing people that if they wanted to participate, she could show how their vote wouldn't be wasted, and 'effective voting' was the way.

The term is not one that she invented: she was the first to acknowledge that her brother John, who was involved in politics, suggested it to her. But she was then able to explain it on one-page flyers, which she did in the 1890s, to alert women to the importance of having not just any vote, but an effective vote. She had an astonishing gift, one I don't have, but she had it and I have tried to write about it in other places. That was her distinctive attribute—she was a communicator of extraordinary deftness, and others deferred to her.

She came back from the United States at the time of the 1894 hammering out of the legislation in South Australia, and the other feminists said: 'Thank God you're back, we need you. We know we're doing something important here in the platform issue of female suffrage, but we need you to help us get across the line. You are the one who can do it.' Her particular contribution was, partly, inventing the cause of proportional representation, but it was also mobilising support for female suffrage and then lining it up with proportional representation. She was a mobiliser, and that is partly why she was attracted to novel writing, to mobilise the emotions. That was the gift she had, and it is one that we can appreciate even if we can't emulate it or duplicate it.

Question — I congratulate you on the detail and the way in which you presented your talk. But I don't have very good hearing and I may have missed comments about her menfolk. Were there any menfolk in her life? And were they supportive, or otherwise? She may well have had no time for them, in all else that she achieved, but I'd be interested to hear any details.

John Uhr — I mentioned her brother John, who was actively involved in South Australian politics. She supported him and he supported her. And then there was her father: she learnt a lot from her father, who was the Town Clerk. Another male influence was Senator Joseph Vardon who, as I mentioned, was famous in the annals of the Senate. He challenged someone else for the right to sit in the Senate. The other person had connived to get ahead of him in the voting ticket or something, and eventually got tossed out. Vardon was her successor as head of the Proportional Representation Society in South Australia.

There were heaps of other men with whom she was closely involved and with whom she worked. She records in her autobiography that she had two proposals of marriage, but she turned them both down—she was too busy. Go and look at the portrait, and you'll see how busy she was.

There was also the importance of the United States. *The Proportional Representation Review*, the first professional journal on the subject, was founded in the United States. In the first four issues there are two articles by Spence—astonishingly effective and simple statements for a general democratic audience about the importance of what she called 'effective voting'. The rest of the journal is riddled with this incomprehensible arithmetic of representation, designed to bring fellow professors of mathematics to the cause. But her two examples just shine out, and the fact that they are in an obscure American journal is somewhat significant.

