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## Contributors

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## **The Trailblazers The First Women in Cabinet\***

*Margaret Guilfoyle and Susan Ryan*

### **Dame Margaret Guilfoyle**

I am delighted to be here with Susan Ryan to talk with you today at this conference.

I suppose we should say that everyone is a product of his or her own timing. My timing to enter the Parliament in 1971 was at the end of the 1960s when women had become so much more active with regard to their careers, to their requests for more educational opportunities, and for more opportunities in general for work outside the home. Although in the 1960s I worked in organisations and the Liberal Party, I was in Parliament before the real effective work of Women's Electoral Lobby and some of the other groups who, in the early 1970s, were very notable.

My entry was at a time when there was only one other woman in the Parliament—that was Dame Nancy Buttfield from South Australia. You are fairly evident if you are one of two. Nancy immediately went to the United Nations for three months, so I was one of one in that first Parliament in which I sat. But I did enter the Senate with a number of new senators, and I think in the Senate they had been accustomed to working with some women. At some time in the past there had been four or five women at one time. In the Senate, you are expected to have a full share of responsibilities. So it wasn't a case of having to demand opportunities; it was really being required to accept responsibilities.

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\* Keynote addresses at the Australian Womenspeak Conference, Canberra, 31 March 2003.

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My first opportunities in the Senate were to be appointed to such bodies as the Finance and Government Operations Committee, and the Joint Public Accounts Committee, which really did relate to my prior career as an accountant. In the Senate I had the opportunity to look at many things in more detail than I had in a practising career.

The emphasis on economic rationalism at that time led me to a Senate committee looking at the financial arrangements of our mining industry. Such things were important and informed you. It's been said that experience teaches. I think that experience can teach slowly, but it can also be experience gained at the cost of some mistakes.

I was appointed to the government in 1975 as Minister for Education. I had been shadowing education for the year of 1975, and that was a very interesting time for me to be looking at education all around Australia, with no resources other than my own energy. I found that year particularly productive, having the previous year been shadowing the Minister for the Media and looking at the creative work that was being done in writing, film-making and all of those sorts of things. So that kind of experience was very helpful.

After the caretaker government period, I was appointed as Minister for Social Security in the new government. Perhaps the first thing that alarmed me a bit was when the Prime Minister said, 'Now, for the swearing in, we'll all be wearing striped pants.' I didn't really know whether that included me, but he was indicating that it was a morning ceremony and morning suit was the appropriate garb.

In the position of Minister for Social Security I was the largest spending minister. It was a time when expenditure was expected to be curtailed. There were the demands through the whole of the early period on looking at restraint of expenditure, where expenditure could be cut and where programs could be changed. I think perhaps the nicest headline I ever had during my time was the one in a Sydney paper that said, 'Minister unhelpful'—unhelpful in cutting the programs that coherently gave income security to millions of people; unhelpful perhaps in not seeking to improve many of the welfare programs that were in conjunction with the states; and maybe unhelpful in trying to persuade other ministers that there were essential matters that needed to be built upon and not destroyed from time to time.

I said that experience teaches but I think responsibility educates. Responsibility educates you to know that it must walk hand in hand with authority and indeed with power for you to be able to do the kind of job that a responsible minister needs to do in the cabinet system of government in this country. When we were appointed ministers, the Prime Minister said to us: 'Use your departments. Use their experience and listen to them.'

I would have to say that, as a new Minister for Social Security, I was very well served by the officers of the Department. They were the people who would brief you for your arguments in cabinet. I always regarded Andrew Podger as the best briefer of a Cabinet Minister, because it didn't matter what silly questions you were asked or what

important matters were raised, somewhere in the briefing material there was that information that you required. It really was a case many times of looking to win the argument on things that other people might want to change that maybe didn't work.

In that department, the Office of Child Care was directed by Marie Coleman, who had the opportunity to devise most of the child care programs that were started in the 1970s (as well as the women's refuge programs and many other programs for disabled people, families and children). That was a very rewarding side of the work because, unlike many of the other programs in the Department, it had some money that was just a little bit flexible because it was a new office. All the money had not been already spoken for, so we could be creative through that particular office. It was a very useful time to see that new things can be done, new arrangements can be made and many people's expectations can be fulfilled.

In my time in the Department of Social Security, I was often asked: 'How do you relate to the women?' I remember one statistic my department gave me said about 83 per cent of the payments that were made through the department were made to women. They were such payments as widows' pensions, aged pensions for women (who live longer than men), family allowances, handicapped children's allowance and those sorts of things. Payments made directly to women were the predominant contact with the department in the 13 million inquiries that they had each year while I was minister.

It was a huge department, and I was interested some years later to have the opportunity to review the department's system for appeals. During that inquiry, we found that the department was making payments to six million Australians of about fifty billion dollars. I had a statistic ready so that if anyone said: 'Why don't you give them another dollar a week?' I could say: 'Well, that's one hundred million dollars a year.' The figures are huge and changes are at great cost.

I don't know how the Department works in Cabinet these days but I do know how it worked when I was there. Perhaps because I was the largest-spending minister and perhaps unhelpful, in 1980 the Prime Minister thought I should be the Minister for Finance and stop all of the other ministers spending money. One thing I learnt particularly as Minister for Finance is that ministers are all 'wets' as far as expenditure for themselves is concerned; there are no 'dry' ministers. I used to marvel at some of the things I'd read in the press about my colleagues and think, well, you should do a bilateral with that Minister and see whether he's a wet or a dry.

It was a very interesting time for me as Finance Minister having that overall look at the accountability of government—to sit on every Cabinet committee dealing with economic matters and with the security of the country—because it is the accountability of government through the Department of Finance that is the responsibility of that Minister. So those years as Finance Minister were very enlightening to me.

After the government changed in 1983, I stayed in the Senate until 1987 and then left to complete a law degree that I was undertaking at the Australian National University. The last few years of my time in the Parliament were with the Public Accounts

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Committee, dealing with some of the things that I had started when I first became a Senator. I took four years to become a minister; I stayed there from 1975 to 1983; and left the Parliament in 1987 having had, I felt, a very rewarding time. It was a very demanding time, but I would say to people who would wish to have that kind of career, be active in your own party and learn as much as you are able to about the political system before you enter the Parliament. Because one bright idea is not going to find much merit in a system of government that is entrenched with many programs that simply move from one year to another and build upon each other.

My years in the Parliament have led me to understand that governments must govern for everybody. The people who are affected by government are very widely spaced in our country and to have an understanding of good government, of sound government, is invaluable. There are those who say that very few women have entered the Parliament. But I am delighted to say that, from being one of two, those who are now in the Parliament are ones of many. I hope that there will be many more.

Since my time as a minister, I have seen women who have been Commonwealth ministers, women who have been state premiers, women who have been chief ministers, women who have been state ministers. Someone who was born in my year in Britain said: 'If the men talk about being the mainstream and they exclude 50 per cent of the human people from that stream, then it really can't be very main at all.' It is perhaps getting a little bit more 'main', and I hope that many more women stream into the Parliament and fulfil all the expectations that we have for them.

### **Susan Ryan**

It is just about 100 years since Australian women first exercised the vote and I think after 100 years of this historic exercise by Australian women (except for indigenous women) of this historic right to vote and to stand for Parliament, we can report progress. We can celebrate progress—sometimes glacially slow, sometimes faltering—towards the implied, if not stated, objective of those who framed the Australian Constitution. This objective, as I infer it, is the participation by women, fully and on an equal basis with men, in our political institutions. Now that in 2003 female cabinet ministers are no novelty and female representatives are over a third of our national Parliament, the objective is almost fully achieved.

From the first federal election after the passage of the Commonwealth Franchise Act, in December 1903, no constitutional or legal barriers obstructed this objective. Other factors, however, were responsible for the length of time—65 years—that transpired before Margaret Guilfoyle took her place in cabinet with portfolio. It's those other factors, not the constitutional and legal, that became the basis of my political motivation when as a young woman with small children I set about politics. It was the restrictive impacts of those other factors that formed the basis of a lot of my work when I followed Margaret Guilfoyle into the cabinet.

What were these other factors? Despite the historic inclusion of women as voters in 1903, Australian society, like all others, continued to discriminate against women so that in education, employment, property and financial rights, and in a vast array of essential services, women continued for many decades to be excluded or afforded inferior treatment.



When talking about the development of my own political ideas, I have often been asked when it was that I first became aware of the different and inferior treatment of women and girls. As I was born in 1942 and started school before the onset of the 1950s—a decade that was no milestone in women’s advancement—my answer is this: from when I started school. At that time and right up to the late 1970s there were things that girls were told they could not do: subjects like maths and science at advanced levels; professions like law, engineering, architecture or accounting; executive levels of business were way out of bounds, as were university chairs and heads of government departments. Nor could young women aspire to careers in the burgeoning mass media. They would not, society agreed, have the authoritativeness to read the news, much less as current affairs journalists to produce it. While they could be teachers or nurses, they should certainly cease this activity after they married. So there was little danger of females assuming powerful leadership roles even in health and education where talented and committed women abounded. The message at the lower end of the labour market—factory, shops and offices—was the same, and was accepted by trade unions as much as employers. That was the world I grew up in.

Unsurprisingly then, I did not aspire from an early age to Parliament. The possibility of this course really only occurred to me much later when participating in the vigorous and focused Women’s Electoral Lobby. Through WEL’s activities I came to see the importance to our whole society of female participation in government, as well as in all other areas that mattered. And, I might add, I also came to see—coming up close to male politicians by lobbying them for the Women’s Electoral Lobby—that we could do it. If they could do it, I thought, we certainly could do it.

So I became convinced that the male-only ethos of the Parliament was yet another self-serving mystification of power perpetrated by the patriarchy, as we used to say in those days. It suited men to have us think that Parliament was too demanding, too rough and tough, too complex in its tasks and procedures for women. Well, I decided to give it a go and, to the amazement not to mention the outrage of many in my own party, I got there.

When I arrived, following the traumatic defeat of the Whitlam Government in December 1975, I had help from a most unlikely source. Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, sitting opposite me in the chamber with only two female colleagues, was living proof that women could do the job; first as social security minister and then as finance minister. The competent, cool, sympathetic and, yes, the authoritative way Margaret Guilfoyle carried out her duties provided me with a daily and most valuable tutorial. None was available on my own side. I also had only two female Senate colleagues, Ruth Coleman and Jean Melzer. No woman sat in the House of Representatives at that time on either side. So that was it—six senators. How different and how much better the situation is in 2003.

I hope that, like Margaret, I was able to contribute somewhat to this improvement. ‘What was it like?’ I am often asked. To use the analogy from my memoirs, *Catching the Waves*, it was very like being thrown into a huge surf full of rips and dumpers and being left to drown or maybe make it back to the sand. My own party was indifferent

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to the outcome. If I was sucked into oblivion by the undertow, there were plenty of men queuing up to take my place.

I will try to summarise how I dealt with the tasks and the environment. I tried to keep at the front of my mind the reason I was there. It was, as I saw it, to use the resources of Parliament and government to create a fairer and stronger society; one that developed and included all talent regardless of gender, race or background and provided dignity for those who, for whatever reason, didn't make it. This sounds obvious, but the dramas and brawls of parliamentary and party life can distract from the obvious, and often do. Some members start to think their real purpose is to look after their own faction or to stay there as long as possible, or—perhaps worst of all, in my view—to become a celebrity.

I tried to avoid these red herrings and focus on policy and legislation. What did this mean in practice? From the outset in Parliament it meant that I looked for issues about which I felt passionate—that's an important motivating factor—where the Labor Party had good policies and where I could add value. I devoted my energies to these, and kept out of faction wars and the endless jockeying for positions.

In my dealings with the media and the community, it meant that in interviews, statements and endless speeches, I talked about these policies—not about my own lifestyle issues. If they asked about my children and how they were cared for, I would plunge into an extended case for publicly provided childcare services. If they wanted to check out my marital status—divorced—and whether I was thinking of amending it, I would take the opportunity to point out the need for single mothers to get better training in more flexible jobs.

Now, my view is that it's a huge mistake for a female politician to let the media into her personal life, be it her relationships, her children or the trivia still beloved by some such as her choice of clothes, fitness regimes, make-up and hairstyles. I'd like to say I'm not being 'Ms Pure' or 'Ms Above All That' here; all these things matter and they matter to me. In the case of relationships and children, obviously they mattered a lot. But also, I am willing to admit, it matters whether your new hair cut looks good or terrible on TV. But you can keep all this private, and in my view you should. It still seems to me that, as soon as a serious female politician starts to acquiesce in becoming a celebrity, then sooner or later she will pay a high price for the extra publicity by the extra—often unfair—criticism that inevitably follows. For better or worse, my approach was this: the personal is private; the policies are public. And that took me through my first seven years in Parliament.

Then, after seven years of opposition, a long training ground but a useful one, we got into government and I got into cabinet. And then I had to work out another complex area of challenge. How far do you persist with proposals that, while they might be in your party's election platform, have been abandoned or demoted by your Cabinet colleagues?

There is no easy answer. If you roll over too easily, you will avoid their hostility but you will risk achieving nothing and fail to justify your presence. You can't, however, hold out alone too long and expect to prosper. Government is, after all, a collective

activity. The Cabinet is a team, even if the prime minister and some other ministers are more equal than others.

You don't achieve anything all by yourself and in my view, martyrdom, like celebrity, is the wrong look. In my role as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, coming in in 1975 and starting in 1976, I had a huge agenda—obviously not all of it was going to be achievable. I opted for what I thought would have the widest positive impact on the community and the longest lasting effects.

My proposal to bring the Sex Discrimination Bill before the Parliament in the early days of our government was not greeted with enthusiasm by my own colleagues. I persisted and it was introduced. The bill was wildly controversial—something younger women these days can barely believe. Because it gave rise to lots of negative media for our bright, shiny new government, thousands of critical petitions day after day in the Senate, daily lobbying and literally tons of hostile mail to MPs' offices, the general idea was that I should go slow or even withdraw for a while. Well, this was a crunch issue for me. I kept going, and after hundreds of hours of debate and numerous amendments the bill became law. Australian women then and now benefit from these protections.

In Education, of course, I also had huge challenges. I think it was the second largest spending portfolio at that time—probably Defence is second now, I would think. Again, I risked hostility from my own colleagues and powerful interest groups by pushing on. But, ultimately, the achievement of greatly increased participation by young Australians in the last two years of schooling, in TAFEs and in universities, was a good outcome for me personally as well as for our society.

However, by maintaining the policy of no tuition fees for university, in the eyes of my colleagues, I had gone too far; I paid the price and lost the job. Others can decide whether I should have given in or not. But the point I want to make here is that none of these decisions were easy or obvious. Government is a demanding task at every level. Those outside of government, even close observers and one's own supporters, do not always appreciate that fact.

These are reflections from the past. The business of government is crucial, never more so than now. There are other powerful positions in business, in the professions and in other institutions but none, I think, with as much potential for doing good. To be elected by your fellow citizens to this forum is a massive responsibility and a great honour.

I'm delighted that in 2003 so many more women are afforded this honour on both sides and in both chambers than in 1975 when Margaret Guilfoyle became Australia's first Cabinet Minister with portfolio and I was elected to represent the ACT in the Senate. I look forward to all of these women contributing in their own ways to Australia. I hope they will, and therefore justify the hopes and expectations of those pioneer Australians, men and women, who established our constitutional rights, first exercised 100 years ago in December.



**Question** — I'm finding is that, to try and create a political future, the environment may not be ideal at the moment. It's been suggested to me that I move state, which is not something I have on the agenda. I live here in Canberra. Did you have to engineer your career? Do you have a Sydney background? Did you deliberately move to Canberra to create better potential for your career?

**Susan Ryan** — I wish I could say I had been so strategic and sought it out but, in fact, I left Sydney to come to Canberra in a very traditional way. I came as a young married woman following my husband's career. That's what happened in those days. He was in the foreign service and then I spent a few years, again very instructive years, in Europe and in the United States with him.

When I came back to Canberra, the only reason I stayed, rather than returning to my beloved Sydney, was that I had tried to complete some post-graduate work at the ANU while I was travelling around being a diplomat's wife and a mother. It was almost complete so I thought I would come back to Canberra for a short period of time, finish my Masters and then go up to Sydney.

I came back in the middle of 1971, which was a very electric time politically in Canberra. Everyone was politics mad. People on the Labor side were very enthusiastic about Gough Whitlam, and I got caught up in that and therefore learnt how the preselection system worked in the ACT. I managed, with a lot of work and planning—and the planning did come in then—to secure preselection.

But there was an element of luck there because the Labor Party, particularly the New South Wales branch of it, was not at all sympathetic to people like me, let alone women like me. I used to say to Graham Richardson, who was state secretary at the time: 'If I moved back to Sydney and tried to pursue a career in the Labor Party there, I would still be cutting up the cabbages for the coleslaw at the Labor Party barbeques.'

So it was fortuitous that I found myself back in Canberra because of my marital situation. The branch here was autonomous. It was not controlled by Sussex Street in New South Wales so we were able to have a very democratic election process. I should finally say I always support democratic preselection processes, not only philosophically, but I believe women always do better when they have a democratic system to work in.

**Question** — You have spoken of the difficulties of women in the roles that you took on and the fact that you didn't get a great deal of party support. I wonder whether it's going to be another 73 years before we get a woman Prime Minister. Do you think that the party system will allow that kind of movement forward or are we still going to have to wait a very long time?

**Margaret Guilfoyle** — I think it depends a lot on circumstances. If we look at the instance of, say, Margaret Thatcher, two years before she became leader of her party,

she made a public statement that there wouldn't be a female leader of the Conservative Party in her lifetime and there certainly would never be a female Conservative prime minister. She managed to overcome whatever she had felt at that time to become leader of her party in opposition and then to win government.

I think very often timing and circumstances make things possible that may seem to be distant. But you really do have to have experienced women in position, who have taken responsibility, and have won the support of their colleagues in their judgements, who believe leadership could be undertaken by them. We've had state leaders who have been women. I foresee that some time there will be a woman in that position in the Federal Parliament. But who knows? These things happen very often through a chain of circumstances. I don't see it happening easily because I think that women need to get that experience, to be in position to be the right person for the leadership role. So let us just hope.

**Susan Ryan** — I think Australia is culturally ready for a woman Prime Minister now, which it was not perhaps when I first went into Parliament. We have had women premiers. We've had a number of women in cabinet. It's not a novelty. Then if you look across the ocean to New Zealand, they've had women prime ministers on both sides and, again, the novelty—the 'Can this happen?' aspect—has gone. I think the electorate would be ready for a woman prime minister. But I agree with Margaret, to get to the leadership position you usually need to have put in a lot of hard yards and demonstrated to your own colleagues that you can carry them forward. There may be women who are setting about doing that right now, and we could see a woman prime minister in the next decade. I certainly hope we do.



## **Australian Feminism and the British Militant Suffragettes\***

*Barbara Caine*

Although many feminists at the turn of the twentieth century were very strong nationalists, this did not mean either that they had no international interests or that they did not welcome others or become involved in the feminist activities of other nations. On the contrary, the British militant campaign in the years leading up to the First World War acted like a magnet to feminists from throughout the British Empire as well as to those from Europe and North America. Australian women in particular became intensely involved, and their engagement offers an interesting insight both into the history of Australian feminism and into some of the complex currents of international feminism in the early twentieth century. Although this involvement often took the form of a relatively brief and in many cases uncharacteristic episode, it was usually a very intense experience and had long-lasting and varied consequences.

The early enfranchisement of most Australian women meant that those feminists who visited London in the course of the militant campaign, between 1905 and 1914, already enjoyed the rights and privileges of citizens at home. As a result, the suffrage struggles in Britain had a very special meaning for Australian women, providing them with their first opportunity to turn the imperial tables as it were, and to offer their unfortunate British sisters help, guidance and advice. Vida Goldstein exemplified this privileged status when she visited England in 1911 as a guest of the militant Women's

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 31 October 2003.

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Social and Political Union (WSPU). She had gone, readers of her paper, the *Woman Voter*, were told:

in response to repeated invitations ... to assist the suffragettes in England to teach Englishmen, by militancy of speech and the logic of experience, that the road to chivalry is the road to justice.<sup>1</sup>

And Goldstein was introduced to English readers of the WSPU paper, *Votes for Women*, as ‘the woman who has not only helped to carry the fight for the vote in her own state, but is one of the foremost leaders of the Australian women’s movement, and is now helping her sisters in England to win their freedom.’<sup>2</sup>

Goldstein’s visit was a busy one, during which she engaged in a number of different activities, giving speeches across the length and breadth of England and taking part in many suffrage demonstrations. She was active in other ways too, enjoying many of the activities that London offered its feminist community. She met the leaders of almost all the suffrage organisations, dined and made speeches at the Lyceum Club, and helped to establish the Australian and New Zealand Women Voters Committee, an organisation designed to help Antipodean women make their voice heard in imperial concerns.<sup>3</sup> This committee worked to support the suffrage struggle in Britain, but also kept in contact with suffrage and feminist groups throughout the empire.

Goldstein was perhaps the most prominent, but she was certainly not the only Australian woman to be in England at that time, nor was she the first to become involved in the British suffrage campaign. A large number of other Australian women found themselves in England between 1903 and 1914, travelling sometimes for pleasure and with family, but equally alone and in search of careers and opportunities<sup>4</sup> and were similarly involved. Alice Henry attended mass WSPU protest meetings in 1905 before moving to Chicago, where she became the organiser of the National Women’s Trade Union League.<sup>5</sup> Dora Montefiore and Nellie Martel, both of whom had been born in Britain and then moved to Australia, returned and became actively involved in the WSPU.<sup>6</sup> Muriel Matters was perhaps the most spectacular of all, achieving fame in October 1908 by chaining herself to the iron grille of the Ladies’ Gallery in the House of Commons—and distributing suffrage pamphlets from an airship soon after she was released from prison.<sup>7</sup> Although she was imprisoned in Holloway for one month, her actions did force the dividing grill to be permanently removed.<sup>8</sup> All of these women joined Goldstein in the Great Suffrage Procession of 17

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<sup>1</sup> *Woman Voter*, no. 18, 6 April 1911.

<sup>2</sup> *Woman Voter*, 12 May 1911, p. 532.

<sup>3</sup> Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity*, London, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 105–138.

<sup>4</sup> Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Kirkby, *Alice Henry: the Power of Pen and Voice*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian to Modern*, London, E. Archer, 1927.

<sup>7</sup> The West Australian newspapers covered Matters’ exploits quite extensively and she became something of a local celebrity. See the *Morning Herald*, 23 June 1908, p. 5; 30 October 1908, p. 5; 31 October 1908, p. 9; 3 November 1908, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Carly Millar, ‘The Making of a Feminist: Bessie Rischbieth Encounters the English Suffragettes’, *Lilith*, no. 12, 2003.



June 1911, where she and Margaret Fisher carried the banner instructing England to 'Trust the women Mother as I have done'.

Even women who were such bitter opponents in later decades—the left-leaning Jessie Street and the very conservative Bessie Rischbieth—were swept into the militant campaigns. Street arrived in London at the age of 22 in 1911 and relished her capacity to become actively involved in meetings, processions, and the selling of newspapers. It was an exhilarating experience that made an indelible impression on her.<sup>9</sup> Rischbieth visited London a couple of years later in May 1913, and she too was immediately swept up in the British suffrage campaign. 'Oh!' she wrote to her sister, Olive Evans, 'this is an interesting place and an interesting age to live in.'<sup>10</sup> There were few Australian feminists who came away from their British experience untouched by the intensity of the suffrage struggle and by its many different symbolic meanings.

One of the things that is most interesting about these Australian women in London is that all of them became fascinated by and enmeshed in the militant campaigns of the Women's Social and Political Union, rather than joining the moderate campaigns of what is often referred to as the 'constitutional', or moderate, suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. For the older generation of Australian feminist campaigners, such as Rose Scott or Maybanke Anderson, it was the moderates who were natural allies and among whom they found colleagues and friends. But even those who had gone to London assuming that they would form a connection with the moderates found themselves swept up by the militants. Some became disillusioned by the WSPU, but generally they campaigned with the militant breakaway group, the Women's Freedom League, rather than with the moderates.

It seems clear that the close involvement of Australian women with the militant campaign was a result of the intense sense of drama that the militants always generated. For many of them, the suffrage struggle was an all-consuming affair in which passion, dedication, self sacrifice and even martyrdom were integrally connected to politics.<sup>11</sup> This attitude was in sharp contrast to the much smaller-scale suffrage campaigns that had developed in Australia. The drama of the militants, moreover, was evident not only in their public displays and demonstrations, but in their ideology, in their structure, and in their development and internal dynamics.

The British women's suffrage movement had begun in 1866—at a time when the Second Reform Act raised the question of an extension of the franchise to larger numbers of middle and working-class men, and thus raised again the issue of women's enfranchisement. The philosopher and feminist supporter, John Stuart Mill, was elected to Parliament in that year, and the first step in the British campaign involved the gaining of signatures for a petition to support women's suffrage that Mill presented to parliament.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose*, Sydney, Australasian Book Society, 1966, p.45

<sup>10</sup> Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 3 July 1913, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004 /1/10, NLA.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton, 'In Sorrowful Wrath: Suffrage Militant and the Romance of Feminism', in Harold Smith (ed.) *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, Aldershot, England, Elgar, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> See Jane Lewis, *Before the Vote was Won*, London, 1987; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, c 1780-1980* Oxford, 1998, pp. 115–123.

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The mid-Victorian suffrage movement, despite the radicalism of its demand for equality for women, was a fairly cautious one. It was composed largely of middle and upper-middle class women and, in order to maximise support for the cause, every effort was made to shock the sensibilities of the British middle class as little as possible. Under Mill's stern guidance, the campaign worked through drawing room meetings held in respectable homes. When a public meeting was held, every effort was made to ensure that the platform was graced only with attractive and decorous women, who looked as if they enjoyed what were termed 'the normal pleasures of womanhood'. Anyone who looked strong minded was required to sit at the back of the hall. The British suffrage movement had a somewhat troubled history for all of this, and was subject to a number of divisions over questions about whether or not to protest at the regulation of prostitution through the Contagious Disease Acts, or about the differing views of supporters on major imperial questions including Irish Home Rule in the 1880s and the Anglo-Boer War in the late 1890s. There were questions also about how the suffrage movement related to the labour movement, especially in light of conflicting views between middle class feminists and trade unionists concerning how best to protect or to empower women workers. At the turn of the twentieth century unity had been restored, but there was a general sense that, although some women had become prominent in national politics over imperial questions, the suffrage struggle itself was rather in the doldrums.

The women's movement had made some progress in the United Kingdom as elsewhere: there had been marked improvements in women's education both with the establishment of academic secondary schools and with the admission of women to universities, and women had gained access to some professions—although not to all and not on the same terms as men. There had also been some moves to extend the legal rights of women in marriage and their custodial rights over their children once marriages came to an end.<sup>13</sup> The demand for women's suffrage, however, had advanced little in Britain and the suffrage campaign continued to be organised as it had been for several decades—through the setting up of local organisations to attract members and to call meetings, on the one hand, and through private members' bills in parliament, on the other. It received little publicity—indeed, it was of almost no interest to the press.

The British press and public, like the Australian women who found themselves in London at the time, were all galvanised with the advent of the militants. The primary militant organisation, the WSPU, was founded in Manchester in 1903. It began essentially as a breakaway from the labour movement: the Pankhursts left the Independent Labour Party and set up the WSPU when they discovered that women were not to be admitted to the new branch of the Independent Labour Party being set up in Manchester. From the start, the militants eschewed the genteel approach of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). They regarded private members' bills as a waste of time and insisted that all campaigns had to be directed against the government in power. Their first public appearance, which involved the interruption of a campaign meeting being addressed by the Liberal Home Secretary,

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<sup>13</sup> David Rubinstein, *Before the suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, NY, St Martins Press, 1986.

demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Christabel Pankhurst and her friend, Annie Kenney, interrupted the meeting to ask whether the Liberals would grant votes for women. The two women were rapidly hustled out of the hall, and spat at police and attempted to address the crowds as they were ejected. They were arrested for disturbing the peace, and their subsequent court appearance, and imprisonment for seven days, was extensively reported by the national press.

The publicity generated by this event made clear the importance of courting arrest, which allowed for dramatic speeches from the dock and the appalling spectacle of middle class women in gaols. After this first national success, the WSPU moved its headquarters to London, where they extended their range of activities. They continued to interrupt political—and especially campaign—meetings, but also arranged street corner speeches and meetings, suffrage caravans, marches and large scale public meetings and demonstrations. They showed considerable imaginative flair in their approach to campaigning, and injected drama into everything through the dramatic ways in which they played out their own sense of the brutality of women's oppression and the immediate need for their emancipation.

The older suffrage organisations benefited greatly from all the publicity generated by the WSPU, both in terms of donations and memberships. They, like the militants, began to engage in more and more public demonstrations, especially marches, pageants and vast public meetings. Women took to the streets in ever greater numbers making full use of colourful clothing, banners and music, serving, as Lisa Tickner has argued, to transform the face of political campaigning.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is clear from recent research that it was the moderate suffragists who benefited most from these developments, increasing hugely in numbers and in wealth, something which allowed them, amongst other things, to pay significant numbers of women, especially working class women, as full time suffrage organisers. All the British suffrage organisations showed a wonderful capacity both to create new approaches and to draw on labour traditions and on the Edwardian fascination with pageantry in their use of banners, costumes, music and special formations. They were fortunate to have teams of artists, actresses and musicians to draw upon, who greatly enlivened the spectacles they created.

Suffrage demonstrations of all kinds were very much costumed affairs.<sup>15</sup> Unlike their latter day counterparts, early twentieth century feminists regarded fashion as very important. Indeed, Christabel Pankhurst issued a stern injunction to her followers: 'Suffragettes must not be dowdy', and enjoined them to outfit themselves appropriately at Selfridges. Every suffrage or women's organisation seems to have developed a close relationship with a particular West End department store, which provided them with the appropriate apparel—and also offered sufficient advertising in the pages of their weekly papers to allow the development of a suffrage press. Even in their dress, however, one can see something of the differences between the moderate

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<sup>14</sup> Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1987; and Barbara Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and Sites of Suffrage, 1905–1938*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> See W. Parkins, 'What to wear to a protest march: Identity politics and fashion in the suffragette movement', *Southern Review*, vol. 28, 1995, pp. 69–82.

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and the militant suffrage organisations. Thus the moderates chose as their stores Derry and Thom, or Swan and Edgar, or Burberry—stores that provided sensible coats and skirts, and silk blouses or overcoats, ‘serviceable attire at moderate prices’. This was the kind of garb which women normally wore in their daily round of shopping, work or social visits, and which, as the advertisements stressed, allowed for walking or free movement. The militants chose the rather more up-market Selfridges which offered a far more elegant array of clothes. Selfridges advertised regularly in the suffragette paper *Votes for Women*, featured the suffragette purple, white and green in its windows, and offered many different designs in white with delicate stripes of suffragette colours to wear to demonstrations.<sup>16</sup> The store went out of its way to court suffragette support—even donating a smart white military style costume to Flora Drummond, who was the chief marshal at the WSPU events.

What is particularly notable here is that the Selfridges garments usually chosen by suffragettes were not the hardy beige or brown outdoor coats and skirts, but rather white suits or delicate white tea gowns, of a kind normally worn indoors. The white garments emphasised the physical fragility of women and contrasted strongly with the heavy and dark clothing of male suits and jackets, enabling the suffragettes to play out in a visually dramatic form the confrontation between pure and ethereal femininity and gross brutal masculinity which underlay so much of their rhetoric and imagery. London streets offered the most fitting backdrop to this kind of demonstration.<sup>17</sup> The stress on femininity was evident in many activities of the suffragettes—embodied by the beautiful and often frail-looking Emmeline Pankhurst, who was both the leader and the most potent symbol of the movement.

The militants referred often to their sense of women as being threatened by male violence—and, from the very start, violence was evident in their campaign. Members of the WSPU were often subjected to brutality of a marked kind, being literally thrown out of meeting halls, and attacked by irate members of the public. In their demonstrations, some were subject to sexual assaults and possibly even rape from bystanders, and apparently on some occasions by police. This was something that seems never to have happened to the moderates. In some ways it seems clear why this was so. Those who organised the demonstrations of the NUWSS went out of their way to establish friendly relations with the local police forces and other relevant officials—something the militants never did. There have also been suggestions that the militants courted violence. Cicely Hamilton, for example, who was first attracted to and then left the WSPU, commented on the fury that she had felt when her views were never able to be heard, and suggested that the militants perfected a way of heckling that left no alternative for their opponents apart from violence.<sup>18</sup> But this is not a sufficient answer. One has a sense here that there was something about the militants that was deeply discomfiting to audiences, perhaps connected to their own sense that the fight for women’s suffrage was a life and death struggle.<sup>19</sup> This approach was seen perhaps

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<sup>16</sup> The best discussion of this whole question is in Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre & Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Caine, ‘Feminism in London, c1850-1914’, *Journal of Urban Studies*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant*, London, J.M. Dent, 1935.

<sup>19</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, London, Virago, 1985.

in its most dramatic form in the death of Emily Wilding Davison, who ran in front of the King's horse at the Derby on 4 June 1913, suffering a fractured skull, from which she died five days later. Davison regarded herself, and was seen by her colleagues, as a martyr for whom death was the appropriate way to show the sufferings of womanhood. This death of course allowed for an immense funeral procession, which was held from Victoria Station to St George's Church in Bloomsbury, with Davison's coffin surrounded by thousands of suffragettes all clad in white.<sup>20</sup>

The extent to which violence was endemic to the militant cause was made even more evident in the ways that it increasingly became a feature of militant activity as the campaign developed. The militant campaign began in what is often thought of as a defensive way, and one in which the militants themselves were the victims of violence. But the militants soon escalated both their disruptiveness and the violence of their own activities, at the same time exposing themselves to greater violence. Thus in 1908, the militants began to engage in new activities including throwing acid at polling booths or breaking shop windows, or burning sporting fields and mail boxes. At much the same time, imprisoned suffragettes protested against the refusal to them of the status of first class political prisoners, by undertaking hunger strikes. The government responded by ordering them to be forcibly fed—an undertaking sometimes depicted as being very like rape. Forcible feeding led to renewed public outcry and increasingly to a sense of heroic martyrdom amongst the suffragettes themselves. In 1913, there was a further escalation with the start of an arson campaign.<sup>21</sup>

The moderation of Australian suffrage campaigns makes it very intriguing that Australian women were drawn so very strongly to the militants rather than the moderates. Older Australian women's rights pioneers often voiced negative responses to the militants. Maybanke Anderson had little time for the suffragette campaign, remarking that 'If you can't convince an Englishman by argument, you certainly won't do so by breaking his windows.' Rose Scott, too, harboured misgivings about militancy. Considering physical force to be 'the weapon of the Barbarian', in 1910 she wrote a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* condemning the actions of the suffragettes.<sup>22</sup> But this had no impact on their younger colleagues.

One of the things that clearly intrigued Australian women was the dramatic and extreme sense of sexual antagonism and conflict that was integral to the WSPU and the militant cause. Of course the women's suffrage movement in Australia had drawn attention to discrimination against women in the legal, economic and educational sphere, and to the ways in which women suffered from a sexual double standard and from domestic violence. Rose Scott certainly had a strong sense of the ways in which

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<sup>20</sup> Liz Stanley with Ann Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison: A Biographical Detective Story*, London, The Women's Press, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> For recent discussions and evaluations of the Pankhursts, militancy and the whole suffrage campaign, see Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts*, London, Allen Lane, 2001; June Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: a Biography*, London, Routledge, 2002; and June Purvis and Sandra Holton (eds) *Votes for Women*, London, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Roberts, *Maybanke Anderson: Sex Suffrage & Social Reform*, Avalon, NSW, Ruskin Rowe Press, 1997, p. 96; and Judith Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 205–6.

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marriage and heterosexual expectations oppressed women. However, there had been rather less emphasis on this amongst many feminists who sought rather to stress the need for a more general form of social transformation. Vida Goldstein, for example, rejected the very idea of sexual antagonism as an issue. With her simultaneous support for the labour movement and her concern about the oppression of women, she shared with other Australian feminists, like her friend Alice Henry, and with British socialist feminists, a belief that 'the woman movement and the labour movement must advance in combination.'<sup>23</sup> Looking back in later years, Goldstein characterised her early vision as one involving 'the complete equality of men and women, of absolute protection of children and young people, of peace and good will between nations, and of justice and economic security for all.'<sup>24</sup> Her enthusiasm for women's suffrage co-existed with her advocacy of a non-revolutionary form of socialism based on 'the collective ownership of the means of living'. Goldstein argued that it was class privilege, rather than male dominance, that maintained the oppression of women—and indeed, that the enfranchisement of women in Australia has depended largely on the generosity and support of working men.<sup>25</sup>

Exposure to London itself played an important role here. Goldstein certainly seems to have become much more intensely aware of the dangers which masculine sexual privilege and the whole sexual double standard posed for women in London than she had been in Melbourne. Like Bessie Rischbieth, she was forcibly struck by the extent of poverty and of prostitution in England. Rischbieth, who visited London in 1913, wrote to her sister of the 300 000 women in London, estimated to be earning two shillings per day. There were, she added:

25,000 people in London earning a living by the proceeds of the white slave traffic. That does not include the girl slaves but people earning money at this traffic and I forget how many small girls they reckon are outraged every month. Some of our laws relating to our state children and destitute mothers are far in advance of the laws here and I can see the influence of the women's vote in Australia.<sup>26</sup>

Goldstein, like Rischbieth, saw Australia as better than England in regard to the question of women's employment and their sexual enslavement. But the intensity of concern with these questions amongst English feminists had their effect in making her far more sensitive to the many cases of women's sexual abuse which occurred in Australia. Her discussions of the suffragettes place great emphasis on the importance of women's chivalry to other women and serve to illustrate her increasing concern both about the extent of women's sexual oppression and her growing sense that the emancipation of women had elements which could not be contained in a general

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<sup>23</sup> See Diane Kirkby, *Alice Henry: The Power of Pen and Voice. The Life of an Australian-American Labor Reformer*, Cambridge University Press, p. 81; Barbara Caine, 'Vida Goldstein and the English Militant Campaign,' *Women's History Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1993, pp. 363–376.

<sup>24</sup> Vida Goldstein, 'Towards a new social order', undated typescript, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/4/211, NLA. For Strong, see C.R. Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, 1971.

<sup>25</sup> Vida Goldstein, 'Socialism of Today—An Australian View', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 62, 1907, p. 410.

<sup>26</sup> Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 3 July 1913, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/1/10, NLA.

program for greater social justice. The experience of cities like London or Liverpool brought her and other Australian feminists into contact with urban life and with social and sexual problems on a larger scale than they had ever known in Australia.

The issue of prostitution in particular and of sexual abuse in general was the subject of widespread comment in the daily and in the feminist press—as well as being discussed by conferences and public meetings run by a range of social purity and feminist organisations, most particularly by the National Council of Women. The passionate concern of Christabel Pankhurst with the consequences for women of male sexual promiscuity evident in *The Great Scourge* had not yet been published when Goldstein was in England, but there was constant discussion nonetheless of the ways in which male sexuality contributed to—even underlay—women’s oppression. While these issues had certainly been canvassed in Australia, often in Goldstein’s own papers, they were not as widely discussed either in the general press or as subjects of feminist debate as they were in England. Goldstein’s depiction of the militant campaign tended to stress the martyrdom and the purity of the militants as they fought against sexual oppression and exploitation. In response to those who attacked the destruction of property perpetrated by the WSPU, especially in 1912, she insisted, in language strongly reminiscent of the Pankhursts, that ‘we must remind critics that the choice for the suffragettes lies between broken windows and the broken lives of helpless women and children.’<sup>27</sup>

The dedication and the intensity of the suffragettes was also very attractive to Australian feminists, some of whom felt that their countrywomen were less engaged with their new rights and duties as enfranchised citizens than they should be. Very shortly after Goldstein arrived, she commented on her wish that some of her followers could be with her and be able ‘to get an insight into the working of the offices at 25 Clement Inn and at 14 Charring Cross Road’ (the headquarters of the WSPU). ‘I wish too’, she wrote, ‘that all members of the WPA [the Women’s Political Association] could be transhipped here so that they might learn what devotion to a great cause means. The spirit in these women is simply heroic.’<sup>28</sup>

The contrast between English and Australian feminism was of course particularly marked at this point, as Australian women were grappling with the inevitable fragmentation that followed the granting of the suffrage and the attempt to establish what a female vote or a woman citizen might mean, while their English counterparts were in the throes of the most intense stage of their suffrage campaign. In the 1920s, after the granting of partial women’s suffrage, the English women’s movement went through conflicts and faced problems considerably greater than those evident in Australia in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1911, however, Goldstein was struck by the concentrated energy of the English militant movement in contrast to her own organisation, the Victorian Women’s Political Association. She explained:

Concentration is the watchword of the WSPU and its leaders. They do not dissipate their energies taking up other questions besides the suffrage, and this is the rock which might endanger the future of the W.P.A. if it is not

<sup>27</sup> *Woman Voter*, 12 April 1912, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Woman Voter*, no. 20, 1 June 1911, p. 2.

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careful ... The W.P.A. cannot become a strong self-supporting organisation without a *fighting platform*.<sup>29</sup>

Involvement in these activities was a risky business and those who undertook them often literally thought of themselves as devoting their life to the campaign. This sense of self-sacrifice and martyrdom was constantly reinforced by Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, who used millennial images, suggesting somehow that their fight for the vote was connected with a second coming or a complete transformation of humanity.

Although moderate British feminists were often attracted to and welcomed the militants in the early stages of their campaign, by 1908 when the WSPU turned to acts of violence and destruction, they distanced themselves very markedly from them. Some Australian women did too, but others did not. Bessie Rischbieth is an interesting case in point, and indeed is in some ways the most interesting case of an Australian entranced by the militants. Although a prominent feminist activist in the inter-period, Rischbieth had not seriously become involved in feminist campaigns before the First World War. At the time, she was quite well known, but as a prominent wealthy young Perth matron, who arranged her elegant dinner parties and dances, and had exquisite taste in clothes. She was also a public-spirited woman, interested in philanthropy. She was a foundation member of the Children's Protection Society in 1906, the National Council of Women (WA Branch) in 1911, a Vice-President of Women's Service Guild in 1909, and Honorary Secretary of the Kindergarten Union of Western Australia in 1911.

Initially, Rischbieth had applauded the dedicated work toward enfranchisement of the constitutional suffragists of the NUWSS and was equivocal about the WSPU stratagem. She readily acknowledged the momentum of the militant campaign. Indeed, the Women's Service Guild even sent a message of support and sympathy to the WSPU in 1910. But she expressed apprehension as to their direction: 'of course the militants are going strong and will be going stronger', she wrote, but 'I really think there will be murder before things get much further.' Nor could she condone the violent conduct and lawlessness of the WSPU, bemoaning the fact that 'nothing but militant methods are reported in the English Press. All the great Constitutional Societies and the magnificent educational work they are doing lies unreported.'<sup>30</sup>

Rischbieth's attitude changed markedly when she found herself in London in 1913. She was there accompanying her husband, who had business interests in Britain, and had originally intended to spend her time studying developments in kindergartens. Soon, however, she found herself entirely caught up in the suffrage struggle and other feminist activities. Her frequent letters to her sister detail the activities and the fate of the Pankhursts and the WSPU to the exclusion of almost anything else.

The year of Rischbieth's visit was a dramatic one in the suffrage world. The WSPU had declared a truce in 1912, while the government considered a 'conciliation bill' that promised a measure of women's suffrage. The failure of the third Conciliation Bill in March 1912 and then the withdrawal of the Reform Bill in January 1913 led to a

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<sup>29</sup> *Woman Voter*, no. 22, 1 Aug 1911, p. 1 (italics in original).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Millar, *op. cit.*



resumption of full-scale arson assaults. In the face of its continued refusal to grant the suffragettes the status of political prisoners, the government faced fierce criticism over its forcible feeding policy. It wanted to prevent any suffragettes from dying in prison from hunger striking, something that would give the movement both martyrs and more publicity, thus the Asquith Government enacted the Cat and Mouse Act (Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act). The Act was designed to keep suffragette prisoners alive by temporarily releasing them on condition that they did not undertake any suffrage agitation, and then subsequently re-arresting them to serve out their sentence when they were deemed well. Emmeline Pankhurst, who assumed full responsibility for WSPU militancy, was continually in and out of prison and in a constant state of ill health due to perpetual hunger striking during this time.

Bessie Rischbieth attended a meeting of the WSPU shortly after Emmeline Pankhurst was released from prison where she had been on a hunger strike. I 'was at the weekly meeting at Pavilion on Monday when Mrs. Pankhurst & Annie Kenny came on to the platform', she wrote to her sister:

I can tell you it was a day in a life time. The place was packed out and the enthusiasm enormous of both men & women. Annie Kenny was the first to come forward looking like a shadow. She is like a lovely spirit, quite small and indomitable courage. Mrs. Pankhurst [was] so weak and ill, but immediately she got going she was magnificent. I don't wonder she is able to lead as she does. None of her pictures do her the slightest likeness. Her face is so soft & full of soul. Really as I listened I felt my back-bone growing longer, as though you gained courage and freedom from her. There is no doubt this movement is the real thing from the very opposition it is arousing. To me they were both like two lovely spirits standing there. You can imagine the audience. They sent up cheer after cheer.<sup>31</sup>

'The Cat & Mouse Bill,' Rischbieth told her sister,

is considered by all thinking folk to be the most scandalous bill & quite an arbitrary one. They let a man out last week after only having served four months out of nine of his time. He was imprisoned for assaulting three little girls under fourteen & is out because his health is suffering. Under the Cat & Mouse Bill as applied to the suffragettes he would have to go into Hospital & get well & then go back, but no.<sup>32</sup>

Like Goldstein, Rischbieth came more and more to echo the views and to use the language of the militants. She told her sister: 'Mrs. Pankhurst was arrested on leaving the Hospital & has again been committed for Holloway. She is very very ill & there is hardly any hope. If she dies in prison the responsibility rests with the government, but they think it likely that she will be taken out just to save their skins, as they did in the case of her sister.'

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<sup>31</sup> Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004, NLA.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

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Almost despite herself, Rischbieth's initially guarded and somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the militant suffragettes had developed into a stance of whole-hearted endorsement. The animated tenor of her letters home reflects this change: 'The Government are hiding behind the militant methods and break all their promises and have been most dishonourable.' She hailed Emmeline Pankhurst a 'living miracle', censuring the government and the 'torture it was meeting [sic] out to these women not punishment but absolute torture.' Of course, some of Rischbieth's sympathy for suffragette prisoners, and empathy with their plight, can be attributed to her interest in and work for women's welfare. By this stage, however, Rischbieth was so taken with the militants that she even referred to the recent birth of her niece, Mary Evans, as 'the arrival of the little suffragette.' Occasionally, she remembered that her correspondents were not privy to her own feelings and experiences. 'Oh, well you will think I am dotty,' she laughingly told her sister after writing yet another impassioned condemnation of the government's 'infamous' and 'disgraceful' Cat and Mouse Act.

Although Rischbieth did not write much about this aspect of the suffrage campaign, other Australian women were also caught up in another aspect of the militant drama: the constant internal tensions and divisions that served as a counterpart to the public spectacle, as one after another, individuals and groups, seen by the Pankhursts as critical of their approach, were either forced out or resigned. The 1907 formation of the Women's Freedom League (WFL) by a breakaway group of socialist women, led by Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Grieg, constituted the first major split. The Pankhursts' autocratic style, as well as their support for women's franchise on the same terms accorded to men (thus entailing a property qualification) was the major reason. The WFL sought a more democratic organisation as well as full adult suffrage without qualifications. This signalled the narrower demands of the WSPU, as well as indicating the ever more conservative direction of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhursts' politics.

Many Australian women became involved in the internecine battles of the militant suffragettes. Some, like Dora Montefiore and Muriel Matters, rejected the Pankhurst approach, and several others went with the WFL. But some remained entranced by the WSPU, which became more and more like a military organisation in its demand for obedience and self-sacrifice. With a sense of awe, Jessie Street recalled the WSPU as operating like 'an army during active service'. Members 'pledged themselves to carry out any instructions they received. They were in the category of guerrilla fighters.'<sup>33</sup> In 1912 the Pankhursts even succeeded in expelling the Pethick-Lawrences, two of their most devoted members, when they questioned the use of violence. Katherine Susannah Prichard related the importance of suffragette allegiances in her autobiography: 'Whether you were a Peth or a Pank became the burning question. I was a Peth ... It does seem awful altogether the state of affairs here, & the Government are absolutely to blame.'<sup>34</sup> Rischbieth, by contrast, although unknown to any of the leaders of the WSPU, remained definitely a 'Pank'. Everyone was involved in some form or another in this deeply felt emotional drama—and many insisted in letters and memoirs that,

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<sup>33</sup> Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose*, Sydney, Australasian Book Society, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Susannah Prichard, *Child of the Hurricane: an Autobiography*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1963, p. 184.

although their involvement in the militant campaign was short-lived, it had changed their lives.

The love affair between most Australian women and the British militants had come to an end in 1914—when indeed militancy itself ceased. When the First World War began in August in 1914, the Pankhursts immediately ceased their suffrage activity, dedicating themselves to supporting the British government with all the vehemence they had previously applied to fighting for the vote. This was the last straw for Vida Goldstein, who had already been dismayed by the Pankhursts swing towards the right in politics—and was appalled by the WSPU jingoistic support of the British war effort. As a pacifist, Goldstein opposed the war in general and conscription in particular—discovering in her pacifist activities some of the male violence and brutality that had been so central a part of militant rhetoric.

Ironically, it was the most conservative of Australian women, Bessie Rischbieth, who remained most devoted to the militants. It was she too for whom the consequences of that brief moment in Britain were most visible. As a strong supporter both of the war effort and of conscription, Rischbieth felt none of Goldstein's sense of distance from the Pankhursts. On the contrary, she returned to Perth very much enthused with the need to campaign for social reform and with a stronger sense than she had had before of the need to promote equal citizenship between men and women. Indeed, her time in London had made Rischbieth much more self-consciously into a feminist, as was made evident in her role in the Australian Federation of Women Societies for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, founded in 1921 (later the Australian Federation of Women Voters). On her return home, she ensured the affiliation of the Women's Service Guild(s) with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (soon to become the International Alliance of Women). She also began to edit *Dawn*, the monthly organ of the Women's Service Guild and the AFWV. Rischbieth's devotion and dedication to the WSPU was evident also in her interest in keeping alive the history of the militant campaign and in her attempts to collect suffragette memorabilia and to have it exhibited in Australia.<sup>35</sup>

The question that still remains to be answered centres on whether and to what extent the involvement of Australian women in the militant campaign—apart from Rischbieth—had a continuing impact on the individual women involved and on the broader history of Australian feminism. This is a hard question to answer in any definitive way, as the letters and the recollections of the women who were in London deal with the intensity of the moment, rather than with any lingering or permanent consequences. It is clear, moreover, that those women who were active in the next phase of Australian feminism, in the 1920s, 30s and 40s in particular, were unlike the militants, not only in their approach to campaign strategies, but also in their goals and outlooks. While the militant WSPU became more and more conservative in its political outlook and narrower in its aims, as it relinquished any ties with the labour movement and discouraged any support from working class women, many Australian feminists in this period were notable for their broad interest in social questions, their concern with Aboriginal rights, and particularly with the rights of mothers to care for

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<sup>35</sup> English Suffragette Collection, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/3, NLA.

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and maintain their own children, and for their internationalism.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, if one were to look for direct links between the time in London and the later feminist interests of Australian women, one would focus more closely on the concerns about imperial and international questions that were articulated in the Lyceum Club and in the Australian and New Zealand Committee of Women Voters. Rischbieth remained very active in that organisation, especially in its later incarnation as the British Commonwealth League. She was involved in the Pan-Pacific Women Association and, like Jessie Street, also with the League of Nations.

Nonetheless, the impact of their militant moment remained important and, arguably, played a significant role in the later development of Australian feminism. As Marilyn Lake has argued, the pattern of Australian feminism was unique.<sup>37</sup> While feminists in Britain and the United States dedicated themselves for decades to the suffrage struggle, they faced a period of exhaustion and inertia when suffrage was gained. Two generations had devoted their lives to the struggle, but there was no new one to take up the baton when citizenship was granted. Australia was quite different. After a relatively brief suffrage campaign, Australian feminism flowered once the vote was won. The period from 1910 to 1950 is, in Lake's words, the golden age of Australian feminism, and a period which saw the establishment of innumerable feminist organisations and many different campaigns for better welfare for women and children, for maternal rights and for the wider participation of women in the social and legal world.

Rose Scott and her fellow pioneers withdrew from active engagement and many of them died in the decade after the granting of suffrage. Goldstein was probably the last, and she gave up any feminist activity after the War. The inter-war period thus saw a new generation of women coming to the fore. Rischbieth and Jessie Street were the most prominent, but there were many others as well, some of whom, like Rischbieth and Street, had gained their first taste of feminism in the course of the militant campaign. Thus the imperial wheel turned full circle as those who went to London to offer their British sisters the benefits of their status as citizens, found their feminist interests and commitment developed or revived there, in the course of the militant campaign—and came home to devise a new feminist program and platform that was not seen anywhere else.



**Question** — Regarding the suffrage colours, you have indicated that the Australian women who were most prominent in the militant campaign in London belonged to the Women's Freedom League, rather than the Women's Social and Political Union, so their colours were white, gold and green, not purple, white and green. On the other hand, quite soon the purple, white and green were adopted in Australia, and I had

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<sup>36</sup> Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism*, St Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1999; Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights, 1919-1939*, Carlton South, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Lake, *Getting Equal*, op. cit.

assumed this was because of Vida Goldstein and the fact that she used the colours in her own election campaigns in 1913. But your mention of Bessie Rischbieth's continuing relationship with the Pankhursts made me wonder whether perhaps Bessie Rischbieth might have been equally responsible for the fact that Australian feminists cottoned on to white, purple and green and not the other kinds of militant suffrage colours which they had been more identified with in London.

Another issue is about Mahatma Gandhi. I think Dale Spender taught a number of us that Mahatma Gandhi had been very influenced by his observation of the strategy of non-violent direct action civil disobedience when he was in London in 1906–7. But later, when he returned to London just before the First World War, he was quite distressed at the degree of violence against property which was then going on in the militant campaign. So at that stage he really distanced himself from any influence that the militants might have had on the campaign strategy that he was going to be associated with, Satyagraha, and he also then stressed much more the Hindu roots of that. And I wondered what has emerged from your own research in relation to this vexed question of the degree to which Satyagraha directly came about because of the militants' campaign.

**Barbara Caine** — I would think that the Australian adoption of the colours has to do with Goldstein rather than Rischbieth. Rischbieth is very interesting because she collected an enormous amount of suffragette memorabilia, and her collection has extraordinary artefacts. For example, with the boxes of her papers in the National Library she was terribly keen to set up museum displays of the militants. However that was slightly later, in the 1920s, whereas it seems to me that Goldstein began to use the colours almost immediately. So I would think that that was where that came from.

There is a very interesting research project on Gandhi being undertaken at the moment, looking at the ways in which he connects with different movements in London such as non-violence, vegetarianism, and the kind of coalition of different groups that become part of the support groups that he finds, who are opposed to Empire on the one hand, and anti-violence on the other. I don't think there is anything beyond the point you have already made, that initially the idea of large scale non-violent demonstrations is part of what he takes up. But Gandhi's connection with issues about women is always a very complicated one, and in some ways the idea of the simplicity of women, the suffering of women, is something that is immensely attractive to him—but it clearly ceases to be so when women themselves are engaged in any kind of violence.

**Question** — What counter-forces were generated by the militancy of WSPU and the suffragette movement generally? The Gandhi question has raised one aspect of this, and I was wondering if there were other counter-forces, and if there were, what directions they took?

**Barbara Caine** — Do you mean counter-forces in the sense of seeking pacific solutions? There has been a long-standing debate about Britain in the years before the First World War—that it was almost on the brink of a civil war, and that in some ways the escalation of suffrage violence came at the same time as increasing trade

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union violence and Irish rebellion. There was a very popular book called *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, that argues that these three things together really threatened the nature of British democracy. I think in the last few decades people have come to believe that it was not really as fundamental as that, but I certainly think there was a very strong sense of extreme discontent with the prevailing enfranchisement system and the prevailing approach to government policy that fed into making the militant campaign in some ways more violent.

There was an argument often put forward by the militants that male political opponents were treated as first class misdemeanants, whereas members of the Women's Social and Political Union were just ordinary common criminals. That was one of the reasons for the hunger striking, and so one can see quite clearly, in one sense, the things that fermented the violence. If one looks within the suffrage movement, the other thing that happens here is that the other larger suffrage groups distanced themselves more and more from this kind of militant campaign and wanted to work more clearly through their old quiet means—through meetings with individual members of parliament, through a very orderly procedure, through wanting to demonstrate, as they keep saying, that women have the capacity to exercise the vote and that they have the skills and judgement that is required of citizenship.

**Question** — Could you say a little more about the social and economic background of the Australian feminists? I assume those who went to London were relatively affluent? They did have some link with the Labour Party in London, and you have spoken about that, but what about the Australian feminist movement in Australia—was that essentially a movement of the more well-to-do, or did it cross different classes?

**Barbara Caine** — I think a little bit of both. It was largely a middle-class movement at that stage. The Australian suffrage movement always had quite strong connections with the trade union movements, so there were always significant numbers of women who were involved in the labour and trade union movements, like the Golding sisters in New South Wales.

I am not sure that anyone has actually done research on that question, but certainly the feminists who were more prominent and the ones who were better known tended to be middle and upper middle-class women.

I think one of the things that quite a lot of feminists in that pre-World War One period would have wanted to argue was that they were talking on behalf of all women, and that one of the things that they were trying to do was to reduce the sense of division. Sometimes, of course, there were enormous differences in experience and in access to opportunity and way of life, but many feminists—and Goldstein is one of them—would have seen themselves as wanting to bridge that gap and to have an effect on working women and working men, as well as middle class women. So yes, the majority were middle and upper-middle class women, but they always had close ties with working class women.

The Australian movement was less wealthy than the British movement, and it is interesting that the British moderate movement—much less than the militants—in the

years after 1905–6 actually supported quite a large number of working-class women to work amongst working-class communities. There were more women in Britain than in Australia who left the trade union movement because they felt it neglected women's rights, and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies had quite considerable numbers of these women on their payroll, getting them to try and build up support for the suffrage cause. The Australian movement, as far as I am aware, never actually had the resources to engage in that kind of activity. But the links were certainly there.

**Question** — I was wondering about the philosophy by which the militant British suffragettes reconciled their campaign for suffrage as a remedy against male violence in society, with the violence of their own campaign?

**Barbara Caine** — That's a really interesting question. It is a hard one to answer. In one sense it is like the demonstration that says 'From the Prison to the Vote', which is a campaign of lawlessness in order to get the right to be legislators and law-makers.

Certainly when it began, the Women's Social and Political Union was a kind of left-of-centre group, really. They wanted both political change and social and economic change. I think that one of the things that happens—and there is quite a lot of recent research that has looked at this—is that, increasingly, they began to become a kind of millennialist organisation. Christabel Pankhurst talks about her mother as if she's Christ: 'My mother has come amongst you to raise you up'. I think there is a point at which another sort of political philosophy or political approach gives way to the idea that the vote in and of itself will be a kind of transforming act that will change society in a major new way. And there is no theoretical underpinning of that, but it is absolutely a religious kind of faith.





## **Public Discourse and the Power of Women\***

*Moira Rayner*

First let me acknowledge that we meet on country traditionally owned by the Aboriginal people, and the elders who are the custodians of that land today.

### **Women in focus?**

I'm going to talk about the way we deal in public discourse with the 'power' of women. I do so as a feminist and a lawyer and a woman who has occupied statutory offices which carry 'power'—or at least the perception of power—including chairing the Law Reform Commission in Western Australia in the late 1980s, Equal Opportunity Commissioner in Victoria and WA and as a hearings Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Currently—temporarily!—I am a Commissioner of the soon-to-be abolished Anti-Corruption Commission in Western Australia.

Power is a term women tend to avoid using, but as Joan Kirner and I wrote in 1999 in our co-authored *Women's Power Handbook*,<sup>1</sup> power is a public good that does not belong only to men, or only to institutions and groups that enjoy its privilege and comfort. Having power is about setting your own agenda, not reacting or responding to or resisting that of others. In the process of writing that book we came to be friends—though she was Premier for the first two years of my term as Victoria's Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, I had met with her only once—and came to a

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\* A lecture based on this paper was presented in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 28 November 2003.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner, *The Women's Power Handbook*, Ringwood, Vic., Penguin, 1999.

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shared understanding about what ‘power’ means for women. Even today when our lives have changed so much for the better, everyone has some power to make choices about their own lives. Though it cannot be bought and may have to be fought for, it does have to be claimed.

Like Joan, I use the term ‘feminist’ without embarrassment or apology. Of the many definitions of ‘feminist’ I like best that which emphasises the different life experiences that women have, the fact that societal attitudes and assumptions have historically put women’s needs, hopes and plans second to somebody else’s, and that if we want to make a difference in our own lives and for those we care about, we have to work for the betterment of other lives than our own, our own families and children, and our own network of friends. It means making our own decisions, listening to other women, as well as acting on our own feelings, and understanding what Mary Robinson, formerly President of Ireland and later the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, called the ‘small print of people’s lives’: taking action as a group to improve the quality of all women’s lives, and those of all of us. We agreed power has to be both shared and used, and that women tend to use it, through networks and negotiations and persuasion, for win-win and ultimately beneficial purposes: a society that all of its members find worth living in, and indeed, fighting for.

When Freud wrote, ‘The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is “What does a woman want?”’ he said it all, really. Any woman could have told him, if he had asked—and listened to—her. We want to become what we potentially are, to develop our full human personalities. Freud couldn’t see it because he could not see the world through a woman’s eyes. He was as much a prisoner of his own blindness as women of his time and ours are of their public invisibility.

Joan Kirner was the only child of working class parents who became a ‘politician’ after discovering that her first child was expected to learn in a class of more than 50 children, in a school that was expected by government to raise its own funds for the very basic requirement for a good education: a library. She became active in Victorian Mothers’ Clubs—as they were then called—and became part of a national movement for parent participation in education and the centrality of inclusive schools for equitable outcomes for all children.

What is truly remarkable is her journey from community to parliamentary politics. Joan Kirner was a remarkably effective Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, but came to national prominence when, in 1990, she became the first woman premier of Victoria, a so-called ‘poisoned chalice’ from which she drank in full knowledge of its toxins. The extraordinary public campaign of denigration and personal attack which began then has been perpetuated among the ignorant though she continued a successful post-Parliamentary career, developing post-secondary education and training, and in her own political party working to ensure that set achievable targets for the equitable representation of women in parliament by selecting good candidates for winnable parliamentary seats.

Her championship of women in parliamentary politics, including speaking for a national network of women, EMILY's List,<sup>2</sup> which raises funds, mentors and supports ALP women candidates in their campaigns, has contributed to an explosion of women in parliament and as holders of real power including the first indigenous woman in a state parliament—Carol Martin, in Western Australia—and the first woman to head government in the Northern Territory, Clare Martin.

I am writing Joan Kirner's biography for Hodder Headline, which has meant talking with people who have worked with—and fought against and criticised—her work. It is a surprising story. It is worth writing, not only because of the effect she has had as one of two women premiers in Australia (the other of course is Carmen Lawrence) on young women's confidence to believe that they can succeed, and should, in political life, but also, I believe, to record the facts and set them against the myth. One brief period of vilification and a single, albeit brilliant, series of election campaign ads—the 'Guilty Party' campaign—has been allowed to rewrite history. It is time to set that record straight. It is important to remember that virtually all political careers end in the 'disgrace' of electoral defeat. It is the fate of all administrations to fall and make way for new governments and new policies, and new failures, as Jeff Kennett knows now.

It should not be assumed that I am a surrogate Anne Summers, a significant political activist in her own right in public life who has contributed to impressive achievements for Australian women, whose depressing recent book, *The End of Equality—Work, Babies and Women's Choices in 21st Century Australia*,<sup>3</sup> documents the fragility of such achievements, and the eagerness of the river of public policy to resume its accustomed course, privatizing, containing and diminishing the lives and aspirations of women in Australia. I, too, am a disappointed idealist. But as a lawyer and democrat—small 'D'—I have faith in the wisdom of the people.

I have focused on 'public discourse' about women and power, because as a democrat I believe in freedom of speech and expression, which protects and promotes conversations among people and with their government about the things that matter. These conversations are the most efficient way of sharing information, agreements on common problems and aims, and reinforcing important values.

I also know, as an advocate of the human rights of people who are excluded from those conversations because they are unpopular, or 'different', what the rule of law requires. But as a woman I acknowledge that public speech may have the effect of silencing some voices and—particularly for Muslim and 'Middle Eastern' women—driving some back into the relative safety, and isolation, of their homes, and out of the community.

I believe there is a need for ethical constraints on some speech, and a role for government to protect the very principle itself: through laws—against racial or religious or sexuality vilification, for example, and sexual and disability harassment—but more importantly by taking steps to ensure and provide an avenue, resources,

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<sup>2</sup> A concept developed in the USA. The acronym refers to 'Early Money is Like Yeast'.

<sup>3</sup> Milson's Point, NSW, Random House, 2003.

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support and the opportunity for the targets themselves to contradict lies and to ‘speak back’, to counteract the disabling, silencing, marginalising and disempowering effect of vilification. This should increase their own confidence, competence and participation in the community. That is the true meaning of freedom of speech and expression. It also sends a powerful message about the value Australia places on refusing to tolerate or embrace discrimination.

Free speech must not incite violence or intimidation or hatred because of membership of a social class; it must not take away from those criticised the capacity to reply effectively, especially if they are already members of a vulnerable and marginalised group; and they must not be deprived of, and if necessary should be given, the opportunity to put their position equally effectively.

I will focus on two different aspects of women’s experience of power in this community. First, the way we portray and talk about women who take formal political office and its effect on their use of power, and second, the invisibility of women who have none at all, to whom we owe a great responsibility: women who seek asylum in Australia.

Very recently I launched a report, *The Invisible Women*<sup>4</sup>, by Amnesty Australia, Feminist Lawyers and the Women’s Rights Alliance Network of Australia, which has conducted the first research to demonstrate how utterly our public institutions—government, media and the law—have failed to perceive the political nature of gender-based persecution of women and girls: the invisible cohort of that most publicly vilified group, people seeking asylum in Australia.

### **Snapshot**

When Carmen Lawrence became the first popularly-elected president of the ALP, the response in her home State, Western Australia, was telling. The local newspaper published a long article penned by former (deposed) Premier of the state, Peter Dowding, that her election risked further division in their already divided Labor Party, and that her ‘behaviour’—a term used mostly of dissident children—in resigning from the front bench over the party’s immigration policy—was ‘inconsistent and destructive’.<sup>5</sup> The *West Australian* saw her election as a reproof and further attack on Simon Crean, Opposition leader, and published alongside its editorial a cartoon which was familiar to those of us who watched the media’s attacks on Joan Kirner during her 1990–92 term as Victorian Premier. The ‘Presidential march-past’ showed a dumpy, middle-aged woman carrying a fringed banner, ‘Restoring Traditional Values,’ followed by a straggling procession of followers chanting ‘What do we want? Dunno. When do we want it? NOW!’ she is instructing a dim-looking chap in a reversed baseball cap to ‘take down that man’s name, we’ll deal with him after the revolution!’ In the sour-faced crowd, including Crean, Beazley and the ALP’s foreign affairs spokesman, Latham is crossly shouting, ‘Traditional values, Ha! In opposition forever, you mean.’ And yes, the President has a dowdy black haircut, is throwing off

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<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Cauchi, Mary-Jane Ierodionou and Angela Perry, *The Invisible Women: a Report on Gender-based Persecution Claims by Women Asylum Seekers in Australia*, Cauchi, Ierodionou & Perry, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Disunity flags slow death for Lawrence and ALP’, *West Australian*, 15 November 2003.

beads of perspiration and is wearing—yes—a polka-dot dress. The message is clear: ‘this hausfrau is not fit to run a government.’

For the first six months of Joan Kirner’s premiership, Jeff Hook, a *Herald Sun* cartoonist, repeatedly showed her as a harassed housewife wearing a spotted dress—Kirner has never owned or worn polka-dots. When she fronted Hook about it, Joan Kirner said he told her that: ‘I know how to draw Henry Bolte, and I know how to draw Bob Hawke, or John Cain or Paul Keating, but I’ve never had to draw a woman in power before and I don’t know how to draw you.’<sup>6</sup> She saw it, at once, as a personal attack aimed at undermining her power in the most effective way—and consciously got on with her work and even turned it to her own advantage, politically, by running a fund-raising ‘Spot on Joan’ concert—and reclaimed her confidence.

But this kind of attack is not limited to Labor politicians. The formidable Liberal senator, Amanda Vanstone, is regularly denigrated as a fat woman—and in an especially objectionable way, not long after she was caught out, as Minister for Immigration, bending the truth over the asylum claims of Kurdish men who landed on Melville Island, retrospectively excised from Australia’s ‘immigration zone’. On 18 November, Crikey.com, one of whose regular political commentators nicknamed Vanstone The Incredible Bulk, commented that:

Not since Joan Kirner was Premier of Victoria has a woman been so roughly treated by Australia’s cartoonists and, like Kirner, the feature being exaggerated for Vanstone is her weight. ... [T]he most outrageous cartoon was David Rowe’s effort in the Weekend Fin ... Rowe portrayed an oversized Vanstone with a grossly fleshy neck disappearing into a pink patterned shirt straining at its buttons as she stares out like a stunned mullet. Meanwhile, a number a mini-men in blue suits (representing the PM, the People Smuggling Taskforce and others) hide behind the great expanse that is her skirt.

These kinds of attacks have an insidious, long-lasting effect on women in public and political life—and on all women. It is lazy, and easy, to make fun of women using language and allusions that are not applied to men, focusing on physical revulsion and sexual allusions—and that do not have the same effect on men as personal attacks on women do.

Women do not usually feature as the first item on TV news bulletins, and when they do it is often in derogatory terms. Pauline Hanson, most recently spectacularly released from prison by the full bench of the Queensland Supreme Court on appeal from her fraud conviction and two-year jail sentence, was not mourned after her brief media flirtation, ‘red-haired’, slender and well-dressed. It was hardly noticed that her views had become government policy. Commentators took the opportunity of her release to criticise the women who had been associated with her conviction—the woman DPP who had conducted the prosecution found on appeal to be fundamentally flawed; the woman Supreme Court judge who had initially found, long before, that her claim for funding for her political party was ‘fraudulent’, and the woman judge

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner, op. cit, p. 95–96.

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who had convicted and jailed her—with gratuitous criticisms from the legal profession on the ‘poor quality’ of women in high legal office. There was more than a spectre, too, of jailed former Chief Magistrate, Di Fingleton, imprisoned for interference with a witness, again in Queensland, for attempting to discipline one of her magistrates.

The women who are approved are those who have relative youth, good looks, grooming and charm—Princess Diana, nice wives of political leaders, tireless voluntary workers for charity—qualities possessed by remarkably few men in positions of power, who are never described or portrayed as ‘gaunt’, rumped, or overweight, and therefore politically and administratively incompetent objects of ridicule.

### **A common cause for women in politics**

There are five common and effective techniques for undermining women and shutting them out and up in decision-making forums. Because of their historical disadvantage, women and other outsiders’ and parvenus’ hold on power is much less sure than men’s and more easily pried off. These are:

- making women invisible;
- making women ridiculous;
- keeping women ignorant and withholding information;
- making women feel inadequate; and
- encouraging their peers to betray them—what Joan and I called, in *The Women’s Power Handbook* ‘training Judas sheep’—the sheep that trots up the gangplank of an abattoir or live sheep transport, to encourage their peers to follow and meet their fate, while they are privileged by their own execution being delayed. It is only ever delayed.

It is necessary for all women to nullify the harm these little tricks do, to outsiders. This is not a party-specific issue: it is a matter of ethics. The women who entered the Victorian Parliament in such great numbers in 1982 with Joan Kirner made common cause with other women MPs in dealing with the bullying treatment that some of the ‘shellback’ men gave women in the House—the ‘bear pit’—whatever their political affiliations. An attack on one woman was identified as an attack on all women in the House.

So, too, it seems obvious to me that the belittling of women in political life should be seen as an attack on women’s political voice and presence. Deafness to women’s contributions in public debate, joining in sexist derision of other women, and permitting women to be frozen out are all profoundly undemocratic attacks on the equal participation of all women.

I am not arguing that ‘women’—as a group—necessarily use power differently in political life—I do not expect the cut and thrust of political debate to become a ballet merely because the opponent is a woman—but that the exercise of power by women in a masculine environment is very different from that of the men.

In 2002 I wrote a lecture, given around Australia, in the series established to record the achievements of Clare Burton, called *A Pound of Flesh*—an unsubtle reference to the price that women pay for entering the hostile environment of public political life.<sup>7</sup>

It was the start of my exploration of the big question: whether there are women with political power who use it in ‘womanly’ ways—whatever that means (Jeff Kennett at one point suggested that Joan Kirner was too ‘soft’ to run Victoria, which seems a profound misreading of this resilient and resourceful communicator)—and if there are, whether it made any difference to the political climate and decisions benefiting women.

It may be useful to summarise what I suggested then in relation to five issues:

- **Whether a ‘critical mass’ of women—either in large numbers or particular proportions relative to men—makes a real difference to the way political decisions are made or power is used.**

I came to the provisional position that politically active women do not necessarily become different kinds of political leaders than men and that much depended on how they got their power. Many women political leaders in countries in South America, Asia and India were parachuted in because of their position in powerful male relationships—dynastic families and marriages and established classes.

If it was as a result of family connections, the women appear more likely to model the attitudes and practices of the dominant political paradigm. Margaret Thatcher—the ‘Iron Lady’—is one example, and India’s Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi, and Sri Lanka’s President are others. There may be a veneer of ‘difference’—for example, Megawati Sukarno-Putri is ‘motherly’, (though her politics are not!), and Eva Peron’s apparent concern for the poor of Argentina—but this is not necessarily reflected in any challenge to the norms of their political parties, firmly in the hands of the men.

The women who ‘did it differently’—such as Norway’s Prime Minister, Gro Hartland, and also Victoria’s Joan Kirner—were those who rose out of community movements and used the strategies and tactics that those groups used, internally, to function politically, including co-operation, respect for others’ opinions and non-aggression. The way they operated depended on what they wanted to achieve, and whether they had an agenda based on ‘women’s concerns’—that is to say, a set of values based on their life experience as women, and commitment to women.

The ‘critical mass’ is not enough, but it is necessary to change a culture.

- **Whether women politicians bring different values, styles or approaches to the political process.**

This seemed to depend on whether or not they operated, as women tend to do socially, through networks based on the value of women’s friendship. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies*, 2003.

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apparently true that these tend to peter out when ‘shared troubles’ are succeeded by success, which changes the relative status between the friends.

In my research for the Kirner biography the value of friendship and disinterested and generous support by women friends was a highlight, and remarkable given that the political process is predicated on competition rather than cooperation. Again, this tended to be obvious where the women had been active in community politics, before their professional political involvement, where trust and cooperation were necessary qualities for success. That style, in Victorian politics in the 1980s and 90s anyway, was avowedly ‘woman-friendly’, powerfully influenced by the women’s perceptions that there was a ‘woman’s viewpoint’ that was different and needed to be talked through; and the personal benefits for them to be supported by other women, rather than powerful men or dynastic structures. They were more likely to remain sensitive to ‘women’s issues’ because they were constantly reinforced.

- **If so, do these values and styles actually result in different—and from women’s point of view, ‘better’—decisions?**

I think it is too soon to say. One fact is clear, though: women active in political life in or out of Parliament will never change a political culture in which they struggle, nor influence political decisions in ways that benefit them as women, unless they are so closely linked with the executive side of government that they cannot be sidelined.

Success in protecting and advancing women’s agendas—issues relevant to women’s lives such as protection from family violence; improvement of oppressive or exploitative conditions of work for women, decent provisions for maternity leave and help with child care and other services supporting working women with children and their right to a family life—depended on an open pipeline between the politicians and the community of interests of women, helping them keep the ‘ethical edge’ that makes women different.

We are yet to see whether, over time, women politicians can keep that ‘ethical edge’ if they have to give too much of it away by the conditions in which they gain pre-selection through men’s networks, political patronage through political or ministerial work, and in which they have to climb to candidacy and status in parliamentary politics through traditional alliances and deals. It can be easily blunted: just ask women lawyers!

- **I also asked whether our recent political women leaders have left a particular legacy, as women, that benefits women.**

It must include but be more than mere examples or role models to other women. The greatest legacy of women politicians lies in structural innovation, as much as their courage and persistence. Individual successes may encourage others to follow: there need to be pathways that make it easier for the next women. Women who want to create change are aware that they need to bring other women along with and after them.



It seems crucial, to me, that building and maintaining links among women without regard for party-political differences leads to the kind of ‘one voice’ among women that, at symbolically important times, can make a very great difference. That is what stymied the Kennett Government’s plans to close down women’s prisons and locate all the inmates in Pentridge men’s prison in 1993, and, as Summers has remarked, has so signally disappointed many women concerned that Coalition women have failed to speak out effectively within their parties on shared concerns to achieve paid maternity leave, and decent treatment for refugees.

The price women pay for political power is very high. I have already touched on women’s curiosity value to the media—and the sexual, sexist and insulting response to women who achieve prominence, such as former Democrat leaders Natasha Stott Despoja, Meg Lees and Cheryl Kernot (how was it that Gareth Evans did not attract the opprobrium she did?). Because they are less secure, women seem more willing to accept blame and feel uncertain about their own political judgements. The price in terms of physical distress and illness, loss of personal friendships and family time is enormous. The ‘rewards’, after politics, for women are less likely to be highly paid consultancies, plum diplomatic posts and appointments to prestigious boards, than for men.

All of our women political leaders have wanted and needed the support and understanding of other ‘outsiders’ in their work. Their successes, I suggest, are most obvious when they consciously accept their power as women, and their need for living relationships with women in the community—their support, constructive criticism, and companionship.

The greatest risk to the power of women is paradoxically when women attain office, and either ‘forget’ what drove them to it, or lose touch with their roots. Worse, if community women come to rely on one party allegiance, when governments change, their ‘links’ and hold on shared power go at the same time. That certainly happened when the Kennett administration swept in at the end of 1992, and the women’s ‘lobbies’ lost their power overnight.

That lesson should be thoroughly learned.

- **Powerless women and women with political power**

Women with political ambitions need to acknowledge that there are inequalities among women—that some women are not strong and competent, that it is not weak to acknowledge it, and that it is necessary to do something to change it. Women politicians’ agenda for change must be bedded into a framework of justice.

The most effective women politicians—in terms of bringing about a better set of policies for women—are those who remain conscious of their personal and shared experience of exclusion or discrimination and with a fellow-feeling for the others ‘on the outer’—men and children and women and the old and the poor and the ‘unlawful non-citizens’ and the prisoners and the mentally ill—for whom systemic change is required.

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This brings me to my second major issue: how Australian women should expect their political representatives to use their power to improve the status and treatment of the ‘invisible women’, whose lives are ruined by discrimination and oppressive social and government practices, and who look to us for protection.

I launched a report on gender-based persecution claims by women asylum-seekers in Australia at the Law School at Melbourne University on 12 November, researched and written by three remarkably talented young women—Stephanie Cauchi, Mary-Jane Ierodiconou and Angela Perry, supported by a consortium of voluntary groups concerned with the rights of these women: Feminist Lawyers, the Women’s Rights Action Network Australia and Amnesty International Australia.<sup>8</sup>

Each year a small number of women seek asylum in Australia by making claims for refugee status on the basis that they have been subjected to gender-based persecution.

These include claims of rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, sexual slavery and trafficking, forced abortions or infanticide, forced marriages and ‘honour’ killings (a disgusting term in itself to describe the murder of women who have breached masculine norms of behaviour). Some persecution is peculiar to women or impacts disproportionately upon women, being crimes perpetrated only on women because of their sex, or because defiance of social mores has violent implications for them.

This report documents that, for the most part, such women cannot successfully claim refugee status on this ground in Australia.

This report analysed publicly available decisions of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) over an 18-month period to 30 June 2000 and interviewed key stakeholders in depth—such women refugee applicants as could be found, refugee lawyers and academics—and reviewed the relevant research literature and case reviews.

The Refugee Convention provides that Australia must not expel or return a refugee to a place ‘where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, *membership of a particular social group* or political opinion’. Australia has ratified this as it has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which prohibits arbitrary deprivation of a child’s liberty and states that detention shall be a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time (in breach of this obligation Australia has detained 98 children in detention with about another 90 detained offshore).

In 2002, the High Court decided in *Khawar*<sup>9</sup> that, as a matter of law, women in Pakistan may be capable of constituting a ‘particular social group’ within the meaning of the Convention. This was an unpopular finding for the then Immigration Minister

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<sup>8</sup> *The Invisible Women*, op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> *Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs v Khawar & Ors* (S128/2001).

who dismissed the possibility that flight from domestic violence should be or even could be cause for a protection claim.

In that case a Pakistani woman sought asylum because she said she was the victim or survivor of domestic violence perpetrated by her husband and members of his family, which the state (police) had refused to protect her from, though there were laws against family violence. The case was followed in a later case in 2002 called *SBBK*, which dealt with a woman's claim to protection for herself and her son, who were victims of their husband's or father's violence in Iran.<sup>10</sup>

The trouble with this finding, to Australian decision-makers, is that it is still considered, in spite of the Australian evidence to the contrary, that violence to women is of a private, non-Refugee Convention, ground. They have routinely argued that persecution must be by the state—and harm against women was typically classified as 'private harm'—though the complicity of the state which either does not make such harm unlawful or will not prevent or punish such harms may be demonstrable.

The case was decided before our migration legislation was amended and devised to limit the grounds on which applications may be made. The 2001 amendments narrow the grounds (further than the Refugee Convention grounds) so that each of the following conditions must be satisfied:

- the reason for the asylum claim is the essential and significant reason for the persecution,
- the persecution involves serious harm to the person, and involves systemic and discriminatory conduct (Section 91R)

Serious harm is defined as a threat to the person's life or liberty, significant physical harassment of that person, or significant physical ill treatment, or significant economic hardship or denial of basic services or capacity to earn a livelihood that threatens the person's capacity to subsist.

The *Invisible Women* report documents the experience of refugee lawyers and migration agents as saying some types of persecution were more 'credible' than others—female genital mutilation, for example, in contrast with sexual trafficking and domestic violence, which are overwhelmingly seen as 'private' wrongs, even when they are perpetrated by state actors. Claims for protection arising from rape and sexual assault, for example, tended to turn on whether a woman is raped for an 'acceptable reason' such as her family convictions. One case mentioned to the researchers was a refusal of an application for protection by a ten-year-old rape victim, a minority community member from Iran—the RRT accepted the rape had occurred but said it was not for a Convention reason despite evidence that other girls of the same group had also been raped.

I will look at the reason why such decisions might be made in terms of the failure to ensure that decision-makers understand and apply the department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs' (DIMIA) gender guidelines, shortly.

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<sup>10</sup> *SBBK v Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs* [2002] FCA 565.

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The Migration Act also specially requires decision-makers to take into account the ‘credibility, manner and demeanour’ of applicants.

This is not a rule, but rather an invitation to exercise an unexaminable discretion. Often, the report finds, applicant women were found not credible because they didn’t mention their gender-based reason for flight in the first interview with immigration authorities. Yet there are many reasons why these claims would not be made, from the practices of officers themselves—when groups arrive, the woman’s claims may not be sought, and their right to protection is bundled in with the dominant male.

Women asylum-seekers are unlikely to be aware of the importance of their claims if they haven’t had good legal advice, and are unlikely to make these claims in front of male interpreters or even male relatives, because of social taboos. If they have been subjected to sexual violence they may be traumatised and unable to speak either at the border, or in later interviews.

Their credibility is also affected by the Tribunal’s preferred reliance on country information—for example, in one case a Somali woman’s claim was rejected because it was claimed that ‘Somalia’—which has no effective government—can and does protect girl children from female genital mutilation, and the mother’s refusal to go back for fear her daughter would be subject to it, was not grounds to stay.

Another problem simply arises from the nature of ‘discretionary’ assessments. Discretions are always exercised on the basis of a person’s value judgements. In one reported instance a member of the RRT left a hearing because the complainant could not stop sobbing, saying he would return when she had contained herself. There were many others where the women were unable to speak in front of a man, or to express themselves in the frightening environment of a Tribunal hearing. They were seen as dishonest or unreliable witnesses. In another reported case, a woman who said she had been raped by state officials and was also sexually harassed severely at work had her claim dismissed by a male Tribunal member who said that sexual harassment was merely irritating behaviour.

It is not known how many of the 9943 protection applications lodged in Australia—27 per cent were lodged by a female primary applicant—and 8488 decisions rejected on review were from women with gender-based persecution claims, because our government does not keep comprehensive statistics. We do not know how many women were not able to make their claims at all and were rejected on entry—only those who appealed against a refused claim. The only data that we have is of those few recorded Tribunal decisions that have been published. The Tribunal does not keep records, either, of the nature of those claims, or trends in decisions.

We simply know that most of the women’s claims of sex-specific, gender-related discrimination do not succeed at Tribunal level, and that there is evidence that Tribunal decisions are inconsistent and unlikely to create confidence in a just outcome for women.

In summary, the researchers have recommended substantial changes to the practice of DIMIA, its agents and the Tribunal to address the findings that:

- The Tribunal was unlikely to accept that women who experience gender-based persecution constituted a social group as required under the definition of a refugee in the Refugee Convention—though the High Court and the Gender Guidelines recognise it.
- In the process of applying for refugee status, the credibility of women applicants was often undermined because women did not make full disclosure of the facts of their case in the initial stages of their application. The research suggests that for the most part this occurred because women were ashamed or embarrassed by the facts they later relied on, or because of inadequate procedures on the part of the Australian government, which made them fearful of the consequences of full disclosure.
- In the decisions studied, the inconsistent practices of tribunals seeking to distinguish between sexual abuse and other gender-based misconduct perpetrated by ‘state actors’ and those perpetrated by non-state actors in the ‘private realm’—without protection of law or justice systems—hampered the success of claims of gender-based persecution.
- Women applicants from countries geographically close to Australia generally had greater difficulty proving their claims—which implies that factors other than the merits of particular cases might be in operation, including pressure of particular waves of migration.
- Based on the interviews, where the RRT found in favour of a woman claiming protection on the ground of gender-based persecution, DIMIA routinely appealed to the Federal Court. Such appeals can take up to three years or more to be heard, and the woman and her children may be held in detention for the entire period.
- Most concerning, DIMIA has gender guidelines, but there is a failure to apply the guidelines in a consistent manner. They are not published in its information sheets or on the internet. They do not appear to be necessarily taken into account by officials or by Tribunal members, though they have been in the Federal Court.

It is disconcerting that such Guidelines are not prominent. They expressly state that:

It should be accepted that gender can influence or dictate the type of persecution or harm suffered and the reasons for this treatment. Even where gender is not the central issue, giving conscious consideration to gender-related aspects of a case will assist decision-makers to understand the totality of the environment from which an applicant claims a fear of persecution or abuse of their human rights.

The guidelines advise decision-makers to have regard to ‘the general human rights record of the country of origin, and the experiences of other women in a similar situation’ which might reveal systemic persecution for a Convention reason, and

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emphasise the need for skilful and sensitive interviewing and understanding of torture and trauma's psychological effects—and the fact that women may not raise sexual assault matters due to trauma and cultural and social taboos. Those interviewed told many stories of incapacity to tell the women's stories, and be heard, because of inadequate conditions in which the interviews were held.

These Guidelines clearly envisage that women are capable of being members of a particular social group defined by their gender and possibly other characteristics, for the purposes of the Refugee Convention. That is not, in general, the DIMIA approach.

Unless they are applied, a personal predisposition to disbelieve rape claims means that a woman's 'credibility' can lead to refusal of protection. As one commentator has remarked sardonically:

Beating a man is obviously a form of persecution: raping a woman is not. Ethnically motivated attacks on men coupled with State indifference are race persecution—sexual or domestic abuse of women with similar indifference isn't!

Only around 27 per cent of Australian asylum-seekers were women for the period covered by this report, though on average 51 per cent of people of concern could be assumed to be women and girls. Women and children are in fact much more likely to be people of concern and refugees, but also much less likely to be able to get a place where they can seek protection from persecution because of their economic, social and physical frailties.

It seems from this report that our system of review of refugee claims is not tailored to ensure that the experience of women, as women, is properly taken into account. It has not seemed important enough.

This is an injustice, and it ought to be an issue for women in political life.

## **Conclusion**

Educated, confident, salaried and politically informed and active women in Australia have a fair idea about power and how to claim it—though I do not claim they are equal. But these women have to do something about the powerlessness of women who have less chance of surviving and living a decent life than the men who get here.

Sex discrimination against women is rife in every nation, including our own, particularly against women from racial and cultural and ethnic minorities, and not just within those cultures. It is not men who discriminate against women—it is privileged groups that discriminate against unpopular, different minorities.

It would be a tremendously important symbolic act for those concerned with the rights of women in Australia to act together to insist that we act fairly to all women, by making their voices heard, whatever their national or ethnic or cultural origin, and however they came here.

There is no sensible way to talk about the rights of women, and the distribution of personal power, and feminism, without acknowledging that respect for human rights means advocacy for those who cannot and will never vote at all. As Geoffrey Robertson wrote in his book, *Crimes Against Humanity*<sup>11</sup>:

The idea that people, wherever in the world they happen to be, possess a few basic rights that no political order can take away, has had a momentous impact on modern civilisation.

I have tried to persuade you to see the connections between powerful and powerless women in a world in which men's attitudes have designed the networks of influence. Even politically powerful women find themselves diminished, undermined, trivialised and attacked in public discourse, just because of their gender.

Assumptions are made about what is 'proper' in a woman, somewhat along the continuum but in very similar terms to women without power. There is an ongoing, clear message that even clever, educated and powerful women are less credible than men and that their 'behaviour' is evaluated differently and in a discriminatory way. There is an ongoing preference to contain women's concerns to their primary role in 'family' structures, without a correlative understanding that in some circumstances, private oppression without State protection can be persecution because the women are members of a persecuted social group.

For both educated, competent and wealthy women and those who rely entirely on the compassion of others, lip service to gender equity is still our experience. In the case of political women, while they are expected to 'get there' without 'special privileges' using existing networks of influence, male-dominated, they may find themselves in practice excluded from equal considerations. Rules, such as affirmative action targets for women in political parties, assessment of claims—whether to employment or protection—being treated on merit and taking into account gender-specific vulnerabilities and disadvantages, may be ignored with impunity. Gender guidelines by DIMIA are neither monitored nor even publicized. Discretionary judgements are assumed to be neutral judgements, when our experience of equal opportunity laws and programs is that they simply cannot be. There is an overall unwillingness to acknowledge the unique nature of women's experience for the most hopeless—and the legitimacy of the claims of women in greatest need.

We have hard evidence that women's complaints about sexual crimes have until very recent times been assumed to be unreliable, because they are women. We should note with alarm that the rate of sexual assaults on women continues to climb, even in this country, while the rate of successful prosecutions continues to drop, despite this knowledge. Knowing this, we should be able to do something about those who do not even enjoy the protection of the rule of law, let alone formal legal equality.

We owe it to all women to protect the vulnerable by ensuring that women's experiences are valued and that our administrative and justice systems allow them to be seen, voiced and taken seriously.

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<sup>11</sup> London, Allen Lane, 1999.

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Women who have succeeded in political life have an understanding of the lives of ordinary women, value and respect those experiences, and engage constantly in dialogue with those women, form and maintain relationships of friendship and support with women in the community, and use their networks, trust, cooperation and support to succeed in a hostile environment, including across formal political divides. We cannot succeed by becoming ‘honorary blokes’—a club of which we can only ever be associate members. We must change the culture, and the rules. Inclusivity is not a gold pass for the privileged. Women, as participants in ‘outsider politics’ must bring the other outsiders, in.

If we cannot do this by seeking justice for the desperate women, whatever our party lines, what moral claim do we have to be taken seriously in the Senate?



**Question** — It is with some trepidation that I raise the suggestion that you are perhaps a little bit sensitive on the subject of political cartoons and the way Joan Kirner and Amanda Vanstone are portrayed. If you look at the history of Australian cartoons over the past century, from Billy Hughes onwards, you will find that the cartoonists have been merciless and savage in the ways they portrayed the various prime ministers and other politicians. Don’t you agree that being the subject of political cartoons is just part of the job?

**Moira Rayner** — I believe that being subject to attack is a necessary element of political life. I was making the point, not that cartoonists should reign in their wit, but that they are *witless*—boring, lazy and stupid in attacking women politicians because of their appearance, their dress and their presumed sexual activity, which they don’t do to the blokes. I am saying it is different, and that they use a different approach, particularly in the examples of Kirner, Vanstone and Lawrence. They took a similarly different approach to Meg Lees, Natasha Stott Despoja and Cheryl Kernot. If you look at it objectively—which I have sought to do—they have taken a lazy and often not funny way of diminishing the seriousness with which we should take apparently powerful women, which is different to the way they treat men.

The other thing we must take into consideration is the relatively recent entry of women into politics and the way in which they are often judged in terms of appearance and their ‘proper’ behaviour in a society which isn’t very forgiving for deviants from norms—it’s not nearly as bad as some other countries, of course. As Joan said, when you are attacked on the basis that you are a fat, frazzled housewife wearing a polka-dot dress repeatedly on a daily basis—and she actually was assailed on a daily basis in this way—it actually does, because of your background, have an effect that it wouldn’t have on men. And the result is that it makes you doubt whether you are a sane and sensible sort of person, and therefore competent.

I think my major attack is against the cartoonists that do as Alston did in *The West Australian* to Carmen Lawrence, simply stereotype our female politicians as a polka-



dot dress with lumps. They are not being funny, they are not being satirical, they are merely hopping on the bandwagon with a bunch of other chaps not thinking very hard. Therefore they are not good cartoonists.

There it is an element of public discourse that has a knock-on effect. A lot of people who don't know Joan Kirner, have asked me: 'Why does she wear a polka-dot dress?' I can assure you she has never bloody owned one. And if you go back in history, you will also see from some of the early cartoons of the women suffragists that they were also portrayed as wearing voluminous dresses with polka-dots. It was a trivialising, child-like thing: 'These are not real people, and are not to be taken seriously. They are pretending to be serious, like children.'

Similarly, Peter Dowding, when he writes about Carmen Lawrence, talks about 'her behaviour'. Her behaviour? She chose, as a matter of principle, to resign from the front bench of the Labor Party. Well good on her. I hardly think that was a child-like thing to do. But they use the language of children—'discipline', 'inferiority'. And the depictions of it I are damaging and send a very bad message to other women and other outsiders that they will be ridiculed out of the place. Ridicule is a damned good way of shutting women up. I have seen a lot of women leave committees, for example, because they have been laughed at or other women have been laughed at, and I have been subjected to that sort of nonsense myself, actually, during the Constitutional Convention—not on camera, they wouldn't do that on camera. That sort of sexual allusion and references to personal appearance are designed to make you feel humiliated, and therefore quiet. So, go for it—but be clever about your commentary in cartoons.

**Question** — That is the same situation as when Rosemary Follett was made Chief Minister, and she was shown curtsying in the *Canberra Times*.

**Moira Rayner** — As you say, she was depicted as Chief Minister curtsying. And a polka-dot dress? Too right. I would like to see a cartoonist regularly depict on a constant basis men wearing sporrans, for example. It's equally valid. But they would have to be small sporrans. But they wouldn't do it. That's the difference—you can laugh at a fat woman, but you can't laugh at a man because of the size of his genitalia. One is acceptable, the other is offensive. And that's my point.

**Question** — For at least a hundred years Australian cartoonists have been depicting the terrible consequences of women having any political power, one of which is that the man ends up wearing the frilly apron, with his hands in the sink. This is of course a castrating image. So that is another approach which is a lazy approach, and it is a cliché which has been pulled out time and time again over the last hundred years.

Under what conditions can women in politics make a difference and improve the lives of other women, including those who claim refugee status on the basis of gender-based persecution? There is international literature on this issue of critical mass and the conditions under which women can make a difference, and it would concur with your findings that where women come from is very important, for instance whether they have come from community politics, social movements and so on. That is very important, and their networks when they are in parliament are very important.

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There are probably a couple of other things equally as important, and one of them is having structures which are mandated to focus on issues of gender equity, whether those structures are within parliamentary parties or within the parliamentary committee system. The existence of those structures which can legitimately focus on issues of gender equity is very important. And of course the other condition which is so important is actually having a strong women's movement outside in the community which provides a political base for women in parliament.

**Moirá Rayner** — I entirely agree. I think the greatest contribution that women politicians make is by establishing systems which will survive their departure, which require a focus on the rights and experiences of an excluded group—namely themselves. Without that, they simply come and, like a bright comet, make a flash on the horizon and then disappear. It is a lonely and ultimately futile experience. It took so long for women to come into parliament in any number, in part because the women who made it early were lone women who were not necessarily members of any particular party. It is not enough, we now realise, to simply want to go and do things for women, you have to have a mandate and an agenda to make any difference.

## **The Power of One\***

*John Uhr*

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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\* This paper is based on a lecture given in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 2 May 2003.

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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.

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Party<sup>2</sup> 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’

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> If the other 30 per cent of the voters want 10 per cent here, 10 per cent up there and 10 per cent over

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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 100<sup>th</sup> 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.'

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**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.



## **Personal Perspectives on Parliament Upper House\***

*Marise Payne*

It is sometimes suggested that parliaments would be better places if they had more female representation because women are perceived to be less combative, good listeners, superior relationship-builders and are thought to be inclusive consensus-builders.

I'm sure that if you were to put this hypothesis to a random group of women parliamentarians, you would get wildly varying responses. Some may hold strong views for example that militarism and trans-national terrorism are a direct result of women being disenfranchised from the political process and even that women are intrinsically better 'people'. Others may hold that women's participation makes no particular difference to policy outcomes—but that women nonetheless should be better represented in politics logically, if for no other reason than because not to do so runs the risk of ignoring 50 per cent of the world's capacity.

Much of the current research into leadership and managerial style has been carried out with a focus on how corporations are managed, with the results extrapolated to apply to the world of politics. From experience, I would argue strongly that findings from the corporate sector are not easily transferred to the political environment.

Mountains of analysis are testament to the fascination of researchers with the leadership style of women, and in fact whether there is one. On this the jury is still

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\* Reprint of 'Personal Perspectives on Parliament: Upper House', *Reform*, Issue 83, 2003, p. 31.

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out. For example, business research conducted by Elke Dobner<sup>1</sup> indicates that women do have a different management style from men. Men, it is said, tend to exert pressure from the top down, whereas more commonly women use teams to reach a common solution. She argues that the EQ (emotional quotient) is simply higher in women than in men.

Other writers, including German political and business adviser Gertrud Höhler go so far as to say that men might focus more, however women also take the periphery of the spectrum into account. The same research argues that men pursue goals, women look at the people who are to achieve them. In terms of communication, Ms Höhler observes that men communicate strategically, women communicate in order to engender trust.

Over the past several years there has been an abundance of research projects comparing traditional intelligence (IQ) with emotional intelligence (EQ) in the business world. The findings highlight that emotional qualities such as mentoring, relationship-building and team-building are increasingly sought by employers. The basic argument is that businesses can train up staff in the necessary technical standard, but if they do not possess superior interpersonal skills, overall company performance will not be maximised.

By their nature, parliamentarians tend to be social creatures, and so the vast majority of political men and women alike tend to be skilled communicators and relationship-builders—certainly the successful ones. Modern political parties are acutely aware of the importance of team-building to electoral success, and so there is a high commitment to this value.

The best illustrator in my area of activity of how this is so, is in the work of Senate Committees. Much of a senator's workload revolves around the parliamentary committee process. Away from the spectacle of the parliamentary chamber—an environment that often reflects and rewards aggression and combativeness—senators from a range of political persuasions come together with the prevailing motivation of working for the advancement and good governance of the country. Certainly political points can be scored, and often are, through the committee system, but on balance arriving at recommendations for improving government policy and legislation is far more often the norm.

Report recommendations are arrived at after the committee members focus on the issues, meet with experts, read background materials, and ask questions and listen to witnesses' answers during public hearings. Over many years I can vouch that the final stage of the process—debate within the committee on drafting a report—has little if anything to do with the gender of committee members. It is the strength of arguments, and of course the political numbers just occasionally, that will win over the committee, not the employment of 'wiles and guile'.

Another argument that stretches across the sectors is that women try harder to prove their competence in male-dominated industries In his interview in a recent *Business*

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<sup>1</sup> E. Dobner, *Frauen in Führungspositionen [How Women Lead]*, Sauer, Heidelberg, 2001.

*Review Weekly* article, Ron Walker says: ‘Women do more work in analysing board papers than men. By their own instinct, they want to make sure they don’t miss anything.’<sup>2</sup> In the same edition, Mark Leibler, a senior partner at the Melbourne law firm Arnold Block Leibler and a director of Coles Myer, says: ‘Some men think it’s their God-given right to sit on boards, whereas it is more unusual for women, so they make a better fist of it.’<sup>3</sup>

It would certainly be interesting to know if these observations have been reinforced by any research. My own casual observations on the effectiveness of parliamentarians—looking at political approach, work style, staff management, level of activity, preparation for meetings and so on—owes little to gender, but much to enthusiasm, commitment, engagement and, from time to time, ambition.

Most compellingly though, I return to the argument that any endeavour, political or otherwise, that does not encourage and actively pursue the involvement of women denies itself the benefit of 50 per cent of the community’s intellect, perspective and contribution.

And in political terms, particularly in the fraught world environment, it is apposite to cite the words of Burma’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi:

It is not the prerogative of men alone to bring light to this world. Women—with their capacity for compassion and self sacrifice, their courage and perseverance—have done much to dissipate the darkness of intolerance and hate.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. Gome and E. Ross, ‘The 20 most powerful women in Australian business’, *Business Review Weekly*, 3–9 October 2002, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. Speech delivered by videotape to NGO Forum on Women, Beijing, 31 August 1995.

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## **Personal Perspectives on Parliament Lower House\***

*Julia Gillard*

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

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

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

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

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\* Reprint of 'Personal Perspectives on Parliament: Lower House', *Reform*, Issue 83, 2003, p. 34.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **‘Carry On the Fight’ Women in the Australian Senate\***

Women throughout Australia have had the right to vote in elections for the national Parliament for one hundred years. For all that time, they have also had the right to sit in the Australian Parliament.

Australia was the first country in the world to give most women both the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament when, in 1902, the federal Parliament passed legislation to provide for a uniform franchise throughout the Commonwealth. In spite of this early beginning, progress to more than a token level of participation by women in the Parliament was slow and unsteady. It was 1943 before women were elected to the Senate and the House of Representatives. In June 2004, there are twenty-two women out of a total of seventy-six senators, and thirty-eight women out of a total of one hundred and fifty members of the House of Representatives.

*The Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* stated that ‘all persons not under twenty-one years of age whether male or female married or unmarried’ would be entitled to vote in federal elections.<sup>1</sup> One of the qualifications for candidates for election to Parliament is that they are eligible to vote in federal elections. The removal of the requirement that voters be male, which had been carried into the first federal elections in 1901 by all states except South Australia and Western Australia, also removed that qualification on eligibility to stand for the federal Parliament. Once women had the right to vote in federal elections, they had the right to become members of Parliament. This issue was barely discussed in parliamentary debates on the Franchise Act in 1902.

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\* This is a revised edition of Senate *Brief* No. 3 ‘Women in the Senate’. The full brief is available from the Procedure Office of the Senate or online at [www.aph.gov/Senate/Brief3.doc](http://www.aph.gov/Senate/Brief3.doc)

<sup>1</sup> The Act excluded Aboriginal women and men unless they were eligible to vote under state law.

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There was considerable reaction in the press, however, when, in December 1903, at the first federal election following the passage of the Act, four women nominated for election. Vida Goldstein (Victoria), and Nellie Martel and Mary Ann Moore Bentley (New South Wales), stood for election to the Senate, and Selina Anderson stood for the seat of Dalley (New South Wales) in the House of Representatives. They were the first women nominated for any national Parliament within what was then the British Empire.

The entry of women into Parliament would, it was claimed, undermine family life in Australia. Underlying the pillorying of female candidates in publications such as the *Sydney Bulletin* was the fear that women would usurp the position of men, and men would be relegated to the domestic sphere. There was little cause for apprehension. Australia was one of the first countries in the world to give full political rights to women, but was one of the last western countries to elect women to its national Parliament.

### **Women as federal candidates**

There were limited opportunities to vote for women candidates between 1903 and 1943, as during that period only 26 women in total nominated for election for either house. Having achieved the right to enter Parliament well before their counterparts in other countries, why did so few women stand for election?

Many Australian men and women of that era thought that it was not respectable for women to have paid employment. Women who worked outside the home generally did so out of financial necessity. They were concentrated in unskilled occupations, and were paid less than men who did the same work. While it was acceptable for middle-class single women to work, they were expected, and in some cases required, to give up their jobs upon marrying. The small minority of women who pursued professional careers usually did so with the expectation of not marrying.

Women did a great deal of unpaid work in areas traditionally associated with the interests of women, such as social work, education, and family matters. It was widely believed that women's best contribution could be made in these areas, rather than in the policy matters dealt with by the federal Parliament. The Commonwealth government did not begin to exercise power in relation to laws affecting family and domestic matters until after 1946.<sup>2</sup>

Faced with strong social conventions, al but a few women were deterred from seeking the responsible and public office of a member of parliament. In any case, for women with full responsibility for house, husband and family, the time spent travelling to and attending parliamentary sessions, especially in the days before air transport was common, would have been a formidable barrier to entering the federal Parliament. Even today, many federal parliamentarians find that the time which they must spend away from their homes puts pressure on their family lives.

No woman was endorsed by a major party as a candidate for the Senate before the beginning of the Second World War. Overwhelmingly dominated by men, the

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<sup>2</sup> In 1946, an amendment to Section 51 of the Australian Constitution gave the Commonwealth the right to legislate on a wide range of matters affecting social security.

established political parties saw men as being more likely to win the votes needed to advance their political causes. It was thought that neither men nor women would vote for female candidates.

Many early feminists distrusted the established parties, seeing them as being formed by men and protective of men's interests. Those who presented themselves as candidates did so as independents or on the tickets of minor parties. Vida Goldstein, for example, refused to align herself with the Labor Party, which espoused many policies similar to hers, and so denied herself possible back-up and support. In 1903 she wrote:

Women should carry on the fight and the campaign by means of their own organisations, and not by means of any existing ones controlled and directed by men. If they do the latter, they must adopt men's methods and men's aims, and simply help in perpetuating the old order of things. The right of the franchise will have been bestowed on them for no purpose.<sup>3</sup>

The Second World War brought about social changes that resulted in a less rigid perception of the role of women. With many men in the armed services, women were employed in jobs that had previously been reserved for men, and they did them well and enjoyed doing them. When the men returned from the war there was for a period a reversion to the old roles, but attitudes had changed and, in an atmosphere of expanding employment, it became more acceptable for women at all levels of society to work outside the home. This was followed by cautious acceptance of the participation of women in wider spheres of public life, such as politics.

Changes in social attitudes towards women brought about by the war appear to have contributed to the election of the first two women to the federal Parliament in 1943. While only eight women in total nominated for election to the Senate between 1903 and 1943, five women nominated in 1943 alone. Where previously the maximum number of women to nominate at any election for the House of Representatives had been four (in 1934), nineteen women nominated in 1943.

In August 1943 Dorothy Tangney, the first woman to gain endorsement for the Senate by the Australian Labor Party, managed to gather enough preferences to fill an extra vacancy caused by the death of a Western Australian senator. At the same election, Enid Lyons, well-known as the widow of former Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, won one of the five House of Representatives seats for Tasmania for the Liberal Party. In New South Wales, Jessie Street won the highest number of primary votes for the seat of Wentworth, but was defeated on preferences.

### **Two steps forward and one step back**

Ten women stood for the Senate election of December 1949, and two were elected. This was the first election in which a system of proportional representation voting was implemented for Senate elections. This system requires that multiple candidates obtain a proportion of the votes cast, rather than a majority.<sup>4</sup> Proportional representation is

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<sup>3</sup> *Womens Sphere*, 10 July 1903.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on proportional representation see 'Electing Australia's Senators', *Senate Brief No. 1*, Senate Research Section, Canberra, 1998.

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thought to be more favourable than other systems to the election of women partly because of the 'ticket' voting system and partly because it encourages the election of members of small parties and minority groups, which women have often sought to represent.<sup>5</sup>

Any benefit was slow to be felt, however, as the proportion of women in the Senate did not improve, and even regressed, over the next 25 years. While more women were being nominated for election to the Senate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the major parties continued to withhold their support, in the belief that women would not poll well in federal elections. Women were endorsed by the major parties, but invariably for elections for difficult or even unwinnable seats. In July 1971, there were still only two women senators, and only seven women in total had served in the Senate since Federation. During much of this period there were no women in the House of Representatives.

While improvement in their parliamentary representation was slow to eventuate, Australian women made important gains in political, civil and economic rights during this period. In the 1960s, the ban on married women in the Commonwealth Public Service was lifted, women were granted equal pay for equal work, and increasing numbers of young women gained access to university studies. Reforms such as this gathered into a tide of feminism, which was fuelled by the foundation of the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972. In the 1970s and 80s the Commonwealth Parliament enacted a number of laws to promote the status of women, provide them with equal opportunities and prevent discrimination against them, and ultimately, to implement affirmative action to remove barriers to equality.

Women senators played an important role in creating these increased opportunities for women to participate in Australian society on an equal footing with men. The introduction by Senator Susan Ryan in 1981 of a private senator's bill on sex discrimination was particularly significant. Although this bill did not proceed, Senator Ryan introduced an amended version in 1983 when she was Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women. The bill was passed and became the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. Other acts resulting from Senator Ryan's original 1981 bill were the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986*, the *Public Service Reform Act 1984* and the *Equal Employment Opportunity (Commonwealth Authorities) Act 1987*.

Women began to seek political office more actively, and the political parties at last began to recognise the value and justice of encouraging female candidates. In 1981 Australian Labor Party adopted an affirmative action program that set quotas to be achieved in the endorsement of female candidates for parliamentary elections.<sup>6</sup> The Liberal Party used women's networks within the party to recruit, mentor and train women to stand and campaign for election. The Australian Democrats, founded in 1977

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<sup>5</sup> See Arend Lijphart, 'Australian democracy: modifying majoritarianism?' in Marian Sawer and Sarah Miskin (eds), *Representation and Institutional Change*, Canberra, Department of the Senate, 1999 (*Papers on Parliament* no. 34.)

<sup>6</sup> In 2002, the ALP adopted a '40 40 20' model, which aims to ensure that by 2012, Labor women will stand for at least 40 per cent of winnable seats, as will men.



without the traditional structure and allegiances of the older parties, from the outset was a party which subscribed to gender equity. A majority of Australian Greens and Greens (WA) senators have been women.

During the 1980s and 1990s the number of women in parliaments Australia-wide increased steadily. By July 1991, there were 18 women senators, and by July 1996 there were 23, or a little over 30 per cent of Senate membership.

It is no longer considered that voters discriminate against female candidates; in fact in Senate elections, there is some evidence that women voters prefer to vote for women, and seek them out on the ticket.

### **Perceptions of women in politics**

Women senators have made an immense contribution to changing public perceptions of the role of women in politics. Condescending attitudes from within the Senate sometimes encountered by early women senators<sup>7</sup> were apparently gone by the time Kathy Martin arrived there in 1974. She recalled:

The male senators had long become used to working with women and had few preconceptions about any of their new colleagues, whether men or women. The workload in the Senate was very heavy, particularly with its committee responsibilities. All that was expected of any senator was that he or she approached the job as part of the team and carried a fair load.<sup>8</sup>

There was an expectation that female senators would be active in areas traditionally associated with women's interests, sometimes seen as the 'soft options' in politics, such as health care, education, the arts and family and community matters. In the last fifty years, such issues have assumed more status and political significance. The first female minister was allocated the Housing portfolio (Annabelle Rankin, in 1966), and the first Senate Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committee to have a female Chair (in 1970) was the Health and Welfare Committee. Currently, a female senator holds the portfolio for Family and Community Services (Kay Patterson).

Women senators make it clear that they are willing and able to deal with all matters before the Senate. Senator Helen Coonan is the Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer, Senator Amanda Vanstone is the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, and Senator Judith Troeth is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. It would be difficult to detect a bias in the subject matter of the wide range of Senate committees on which women serve.

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<sup>7</sup> Senator Annabelle Rankin was given the unofficial title of Senate 'mother' despite the fact that at one period she was one of only three members of the Opposition in the Senate, thus speaking on a wide range of policy issues. On her retirement, in 1971, one senator said he was sorry to see her go because 'as Government Whip [she] always provided midnight suppers for honourable senators whose tempers were frayed.'

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Martin Sullivan, 'Women in Parliament—Yes! But what's it really like?' *Papers on Parliament* no. 22, February 1994.

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Women have assumed other leadership roles in the Senate. In 1986, Senator Janine Haines became the first woman in Australia to lead a political party when she took over the leadership of the Australian Democrats. Four subsequent Democrat leaders have been women, and as leaders of a party that frequently holds the balance of power in the Senate, all have played a central role in negotiations for the amendment and passage of important legislation.

Senator Margaret Reid was elected President of the Senate in August 1996, and presided over business in the Senate for six years. In this prestigious position she was to many the public face of the Senate, who acted as its representative in dealings with the executive government and persons outside Parliament.

### **Still not quite equal**

While women are no longer at the margins of federal politics, as they were for so many years, they are still not represented in Parliament in the same proportion as they are in the community, and there are still few of them in cabinet.

One hundred years after Vida Goldstein and others faced a hostile public, press and Parliament, women have overcome the social conditioning which excluded them from the political sphere, but some obstacles remain. Failure to gain endorsement continues to be a barrier to the equal representation of women. In the general election of October 2001, of 285 nominations for election to the Senate, 93 were for women.<sup>9</sup>

The long hours, heavy workloads and constant travelling which parliamentary service entails continue to create particular difficulties for some women. Current female senators had an average age of 40 at time of election. A number of senators are mothers of young children. Without adequate child-care facilities within Parliament House, it is difficult for women with children to match the long hours which many other senators devote to parliamentary work.

Speaking at the Women's Constitutional Convention in June 2002, Senator Amanda Vanstone said:

One hundred years ago, women got the right to vote and to stand for Parliament ... These rights having been fought for by women and men are meant to be used and used not in part but in full. We cannot say that has happened until we have something like 50 per cent representation in federal Parliament. And when we have 50 per cent of the Parliament, we should be aiming for 50 per cent of the Ministry and Shadow Ministry and 50 per cent of the Cabinet.

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<sup>9</sup> AEC *Electoral Newsfile* No. 101, October 2001.

**Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments  
November 2003**

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Lower House Women</i>	<i>Lower House Total</i>	<i>Upper House Women</i>	<i>Upper House Total</i>
Commonwealth	38	150	22	76
New South Wales	23	93	13	42
Victoria	27	88	13	44
Queensland	34	89	–	–
South Australia	16	47	6	22
Tasmania	6	25	4	15
Western Australia	13	57	10	34
Northern Territory	8	25	–	–
Australian Capital Territory	7	17	–	–

**Women's Political Rights in Australia**

<i>States</i>	<i>Right to Vote</i>	<i>Right to Sit</i>	<i>First Woman Elected</i>
South Australia	1895	1895	1959
Western Australia	1899	1920	1921
New South Wales	1902	1918	1925
Tasmania	1903	1921	1948
Queensland	1905	1918	1929
Victoria	1908	1923	1933

## Political Rights for Women—Selected National Legislatures

*Multiple dates against one country indicate that full female suffrage was introduced in stages*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Right to Vote</i>	<i>Right to Sit</i>	<i>First Woman Elected</i>
New Zealand	1893	1919	1933
Australia	1902 <sup>a</sup> /1962 <sup>b</sup>	1902 <sup>a</sup> /1962 <sup>b</sup>	1943
Finland	1906	1906	1907
Norway	1907/1913	1907/1913	1936
Denmark	1915	1915	1918
United Kingdom	1918/1928	1918	1918
Germany	1918	1918	1919
Czechoslovakia	1918	1918	1920
Austria	1919	1919	1919
Canada	1919	1919	1921
Netherlands	1919	1917	1918
United States of America	1920	*	1917

- a** Women from the states of South Australia and Western Australia voted at the first federal election held in 1901 because it was conducted under the electoral laws of the six states. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* provided for uniform franchise for all persons from the age of twenty-one. Section 4 provided for disqualification of coloured races, unless they were already entitled to vote under state law.
- b** Aboriginal women and men were not enfranchised on a national basis until 1962.
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- The 19th Amendment to the American Constitution gave women the right to vote in every state. In many states, women had been voting and participating in government for years before the passage of the Amendment in 1920, and there was nothing to prevent women from entering Congress before then. Jeanette Rankin entered the House of Representatives in 1917 as the first female member of Congress.

## Women in the Australian Senate

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Period of Service</i>
<b>Tangney</b> , Dorothy Margaret	ALP	Western Australia	1943–68
<b>Rankin</b> , the Hon. Annabelle Jane Mary	LP	Queensland	1947–71
<b>Robertson</b> , Agnes Robertson	LP; CP	Western Australia	1950–55; 1955–62
<b>Wedgwood</b> , Ivy Evelyn	LP	Victoria	1950–71
<b>Buttfield</b> , Nancy Eileen	LP	South Australia	1955–65; 1968–74
<b>Breen</b> , Marie Freda	LP	Victoria	1962–68
<b>Guilfoyle</b> , the Hon. Margaret Georgina Constance	LP	Victoria	1971–87
<b>Coleman</b> , Ruth Nancy	ALP	Western Australia	1974–87
<b>Martin</b> (later <b>Sullivan</b> ), Kathryn Jean*	LP	Queensland	1974–84
<b>Melzer</b> , Jean Isabel	ALP	Victoria	1974–81
<b>Ryan</b> , the Hon. Susan Maree	ALP	Australian Capital Territory	1975–88
<b>Walters</b> , (Mary) Shirley	LP	Tasmania	1975–93
<b>Haines</b> , Janine	AD	South Australia	1977–78; 1981–90
<b>Hearn</b> , Jean Margaret	ALP	Tasmania	1980–85
<b>Bjelke-Petersen</b> , Florence Isabel	NCP; NPA	Queensland	1981–93
<b>Giles</b> , Patricia Jessie	ALP	Western Australia	1981–93
<b>Reid</b> , the Hon. Margaret Elizabeth	LP	Australian Capital Territory	1981–2003
<b>Crowley</b> , the Hon. Rosemary Anne	ALP	South Australia	1983–2002
<b>Reynolds</b> , the Hon. Margaret	ALP	Queensland	1983–99
<b>Zakharov</b> , (Alice) Olive	ALP	Victoria	1983–95
<b>Knowles</b> , Susan Christine	LP	Western Australia	from 1984
<b>Vanstone</b> , the Hon. Amanda Eloise	LP	South Australia	from 1984
<b>Vallentine</b> , Josephine	IND; GWA	Western Australia	1985–90; 1990–92
<b>Newman</b> , the Hon. Jocelyn Margaret	LP	Tasmania	1986–2002
<b>Powell</b> , Janet Frances	AD; IND	Victoria	1986–92; 1992–93
<b>Bishop</b> , the Hon. Bronwyn Kathleen*	LP	New South Wales	1987–94
<b>Jenkins</b> , Jean Alice	AD	Western Australia	1987–90
<b>Patterson</b> , the Hon. Kay Christine Lesley	LP	Victoria	from 1987
<b>West</b> , Suzanne Margaret	ALP	New South Wales	1987 and 1990–2002
<b>Dunn</b> , Patricia Irene (Irina)	NDP; IND	New South Wales	1988; 1988–90
<b>Bourne</b> , Vicki Worrall	AD	New South Wales	1990–2002
<b>Kernot</b> , Cheryl*	AD	Queensland	1990–97

\* Member of the House of Representatives after resigning from the Senate

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<b>Lees, Meg Heather</b>	AD; APA	South Australia	from 1990
<b>Sowada, Karin Nicole</b>	AD	New South Wales	1991–93
<b>Chamarette, Christabel Marguerite Alain</b>	GWA	Western Australia	1992–96
<b>Margetts, Diane Elizabeth (Dee)</b>	GWA	Western Australia	1993–99
<b>Troeth, the Hon. Judith Mary</b>	LP	Victoria	from 1993
<b>Denman, Kay Janet</b>	ALP	Tasmania	from 1993
<b>Neal, Belinda Jane</b>	ALP	New South Wales	1994–98
<b>Collins, Jacinta Mary Ann</b>	ALP	Victoria	from 1995
<b>Stott-Despoja, Natasha</b>	AD	South Australia	from 1995
<b>Mackay, Sue</b>	ALP	Tasmania	from 1996
<b>Lundy, Kate</b>	ALP	Australian Capital Territory	from 1996
<b>Allison, Lyn</b>	AD	Victoria	from 1996
<b>Coonan, the Hon. Helen</b>	LP	New South Wales	from 1996
<b>Ferris, Jeannie</b>	LP	South Australia	from 1996
<b>Gibbs, Brenda</b>	ALP	Queensland	1996–2002
<b>Payne, Marise</b>	LP	New South Wales	from 1997
<b>Synon, Karen</b>	LP	Victoria	1997–99
<b>Crossin, Trish</b>	ALP	Northern Territory	from 1998
<b>McLucas, Jan Elizabeth</b>	ALP	Queensland	from 1999
<b>Kirk, Linda</b>	ALP	South Australia	from 2002
<b>Moore, Claire</b>	ALP	Queensland	from 2002
<b>Nettle, Kerry</b>	AG	New South Wales	from 2002
<b>Stephens, Ursula</b>	CL	New South Wales	from 2002
<b>Webber, Ruth</b>	ALP	Western Australia	from 2002
<b>Wong, Penny</b>	ALP	South Australia	from 2002

AD—Australian Democrats  
AG—Australian Greens  
ALP—Australian Labor Party  
APA—Australian Progressive Alliance  
CL—Country Labor  
CP—Country Party  
GWA—The Greens (WA)  
IND—Independent  
IND LAB—Independent Labor  
LP—Liberal Party of Australia  
NCP—National Country Party  
NDP—Nuclear Disarmament Party  
NPA—National Party of Australia.

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