

Women and mothers in Parliament: Again!

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Australia's Federal Parliament is caught in a cycle of sexism which has proved, and unfortunately is likely to continue to prove, very difficult to break. The actual structure of parliamentary business is anti-family and the aggression with which that business is conducted is unattractive to many women but highly rewarding to the majority male participants. The structure means that much day-to-day incidental sexism by individuals is excused or hidden and their success within the system offers no incentive to change.

In my valedictory speech in June this year (Commonwealth of Australia 2014, p. 3307), I commented that Federal Parliament's sitting hours appear to be predicated on members having a support person, read spouse, to look after domestic matters in Canberra. On sitting days, it is normal to have meetings starting at 7.30am and to sit till 8.00pm or 11.00pm, with evening functions at Parliament House most nights.

I am not sure how other 'solo' Members of Parliament (MPs) did it, but I spent a lot of time shopping at 24-hour service stations and hoping that my washing machine was not disturbing the neighbours too much at midnight. When I asked one MP what he did about cleaning and such matters he told me that his Canberra unit did not get dirty although, he added, in a mystified way: "Mary (his wife and not her real name) comes down every few weeks" (2008, pers. comm. February).

In my valedictory speech, I also said that not all face-to-face meetings were necessary but that communication technology at Parliament House, such as videoconferencing, was, in my experience, completely inadequate and outdated. In many committee hearings, even basic teleconferencing with witnesses was of poor quality. I do not blame parliamentary staff for this so much as the apparent lack of interest from most MPs in demanding up-to-date and effective communication technology and using what is currently available to reduce the time they spend travelling.

The "endurance test", known as Senate Estimates hearings, takes up four weeks each year and the sitting hours are unreasonable with committees meeting from 9am until 11.00pm, generally with preceding 8.00am strategy meetings.

In my maiden speech (more appropriately known as a first speech) in 2007, (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p. 95) I suggested that there had to be better, more family-friendly ways of going about the business of Parliament. Apart from the fact that we flew into Canberra instead of arriving by train or horse, not much had changed since Federation.

But as I found, trying to effect change is very difficult. Every suggestion I put forward was met by a war story about the "old days" when the sittings of the Houses and Senate Estimates hearings frequently went all night. Apparently, it was not unusual for members to miss the funerals of family and friends because they could not get leave from parliament to attend. Members soldiered on no matter what their illness and sometimes mean pranks after a stint at the parliamentary bar (no longer in existence) were the stuff of tomorrow's House gossip.

During my attempts to affect change, I was often referred to reforms to sitting hours instigated in the 1990s after comments by then Senator John Herron (a surgeon) about the unhealthy working hours of MPs. It was as though no further reform needed contemplation. In 2012, Herron, who had been retired from the Senate for 10 years, continued to express his concerns about the enormously stressful environment for MPs created by the demands of travel, sitting hours and public scrutiny. As he said, “Politicians pay a huge human price” (Santow 2012).

My experiences and Herron’s comments led me to question whether the Australian Parliament needs to hold the number of face-to-face meetings for the hours that it does in order to deal with its legislative workload. Or does it need to meet for those long and often unproductive hours so the theatre of Party politics can be played out?

Many meetings in the House and in committees include a number of important, but unsensational, speeches, which, because of their bland nature, rarely receive media coverage. This is despite an often-intelligent level of debate leading to substantial improvement in proposed legislation. But many meetings also lead to hours and hours of motherhood statements, to repetitive and carping criticism of opposing parties, their policies and their record, and a sometimes bizarre imbalance between the times allocated for legislative debate with days of debate devoted to relatively minor legislation and just a few hours spent on important bills because it suits the tactics or timetable of one of the major Parties.

Winning the battle for dominance on the evening news, winning the battle for dominance in the Chamber takes precedence over anything else.

The assessment of whether a Minister or Shadow Minister has had a “good” Question Time is not about how much information the Minister gave or how searching the Opposition question was, it is almost entirely about trying to make the opponent look foolish or ignorant.

The aggression, the shouting, the rudeness which typifies most 10-second grabs of Parliament on television is one of many reasons that women cite for not wanting to be politicians. Yet MPs who are aggressive and appear to be dominant in debate, not with clever argument but by shouting loudest and making the most derogatory remarks, are likely to be rewarded with more speaking time and promotion.

The clichés, “party games” and “the rough and tumble of politics” have stayed in the lexicon for good reason.

In a parliamentary research paper, Dr Mark Rodrigues (2009, pp. 46–47) puts a number of suggestions to make the Parliament more family-friendly including “changing the current confrontational seating arrangements in the chambers”. He is quite right in his comments, but confrontation is exactly what our current parliamentary politics is primarily about and I do not see that it will change anytime soon.

Having said that, there have been some minor structural improvements such as the establishment of a child care centre. This was accomplished after more than a decade of debate, although it is only available for children up to three years of age and does not stay open to match parliamentary sitting hours. A small room near each chamber has been provided for breastfeeding women MPs, although I doubt most MPs know of their existence. The House of Representatives also made a decision to allow proxy voting by breastfeeding MPs.

I have spoken to parliamentary colleagues about the great difficulties faced by single mothers with school-age children, to be met with blank stares. Even five of the 20 Senate meeting weeks in 2014 have been scheduled during school holidays, despite there being 34 weeks between February and December when no State or Territory has holidays.

On one level we should not be surprised by the low numbers of women MPs and Ministers, especially young ones, because the figures mirror those in corporate Australia. However, no other workplace is quite so hypocritical in discussing, but not practising, work-family life balance and in ruling against, but not acting against, workplace bullying, harassment and sexism.

Any human resources manager would blanch at the questions and comments that Party members direct to candidates before and during the pre-selection process. I was asked repeatedly about the abilities of my daughter with Down syndrome during my own pre-selection as though this was something I had not considered. One woman candidate in another State was told that a male candidate should get her position because “he had a young family to support”. Former West Australian (WA) House of Representative member, Judi Moylan recounts being asked about her ability to represent the electorate given her status as a “divorced woman” (Winestock and Mather 2013, p. 78).

On June 18, 2009, Greens’ senator Sarah Hanson-Young caused a minor furore in the Senate by bringing her two-year-old daughter into a Senate division and was told to immediately take her out by the then President, Labor Senator John Hogg.

In all the analysis of this event (for example, see Harrison 2009), including the place of children in Parliament and whether it was a Greens’ stunt, there is no mention that it took place late on a Thursday afternoon. This is important in terms of parliamentary arrangements.

By unwritten convention, there are no divisions in the Senate after 4.30pm on Thursdays, the last sitting day of the week. This allows senators from WA and other far-flung parts of the nation to catch flights home that night, rather than waiting till Friday morning. It is one of the few concessions the Senate makes to the “other lives” that politicians lead.

On this occasion, with only one sitting week remaining before the mid-winter break, there had been agreement, on short notice, between the major parties--at the time a Labor Government and Liberal/National Party Opposition--that divisions might occur late in the day in an effort to get more legislation through.

However, I am confident that no one involved in making that decision thought: “I wonder how that will affect Senators’ baby-sitting arrangements?”

With reasonable notice, Senators can normally organise to be “paired” with a Senator from an opposing party but Senator Hanson-Young says she did not have time to organise this. (Harrison 2009). In my view, Senator Hanson-Young was entitled to think that, unless she was listed to speak (something within her control), she would not need to be in the Senate that afternoon.

This was one of the issues in my mind when I rose to support Greens’ leader Bob Brown’s motion of dissent from the President’s ruling that two-year-old Cora had to be immediately removed from the Chamber (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 3759). I pointed out that: “Children have come into this chamber in the past, and it is a situation that needs to be

debated so that people have a sense of what they can do and what they cannot do.” The only other senator to speak against the President’s ruling was the conservative Senator Steve Fielding from the Family First Party.

I was somewhat surprised that none of the many Labor women Senators present joined in speaking against the “eviction”. Presumably concern about breaching Party solidarity, in opposing the ruling of a Labor President, overcame their feminist principles.

Obviously, like most workplaces, the Senate is not set up for child-minding, but most workplaces will make an exception in an emergency. Half-a-dozen toddlers in the Senate would create problems but I doubt if the current women Senators have six toddlers between them. Of course, it is a different matter if male Senators are included. As Dr Mark Rodrigues noted in his 2009 parliamentary research paper: “Whilst it has been unremarkable for parliamentarians to have become fathers, it was not until 1983 that a female member [Ros Kelly] of the Commonwealth Parliament had a baby while in office.”

Since then, another 11 sitting women Federal MPs have had one or more children—a total of nine MHRs and three senators. Former Labor Senator Louise Pratt from WA would have been the fourth if she had not left the Senate in June this year after losing her seat in the 2013 election. In fact, up to February 28, 2014, less than one-thousandth of one per cent of Australia’s 1644 Federal MPs have become mothers whilst members of parliament (Lumb and Lundie 2014, p.8).

President Hogg later admitted that he could have handled the Hanson-Young matter better and referred the vexing issue to the Senate Procedure Committee which was asked to consider an amendment to Standing Order 175 that would have allowed the presence of “a senator caring for an infant briefly provided the business of the Senate is not disrupted”. The Committee opted for no change. In a report tabled in August 2009 (Commonwealth of Australia Senate Procedure Committee 2009, p. 7), the Committee Chair, Deputy President, Senator Alan Ferguson, wrote:

A majority of the committee believes that it would be undesirable to extend the existing exemption from the standing order... [I]t would create an undesirable inroad on the principle that the floor of the Senate is reserved for senators and officers in immediate attendance on the Senate, and would create uncertainty as to the scope of the proposed exemption.

I remain incredulous this is not the first, or even the second time, the issue of children in the Australian federal parliamentary chambers has arisen, yet no satisfactory solution has been found.

According to Dr Rodrigues (2009), four MHRs, Anna Burke, Mark Latham, Michelle Byrne and Catherine King have brought their baby or young child into the chamber on one or more occasions without incident. Four Senators, Senators Collins and Hanson-Young and Senators Winston Crane and Stott-Despoja (p. 13) did so. Senator Collins, now the Shadow Cabinet Secretary, was reported in 1995 to have “reached an understanding that the child could share her seat in an emergency”. None, except Hanson-Young, the youngest woman ever elected to the Senate, apparently caused concern.