

Women in Parliament: Attaining the Ideal

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Abstract

For reasons of equity it would seem desirable for parliamentary representation to comprise 50% women and 50% men.¹ No Australian parliament will achieve this goal in the foreseeable future, however, despite gender quotas having been introduced by the Australian Labor Party specifically to increase female parliamentary representation. The Liberal Party has taken a different approach and relies on merit to achieve the same purpose.

In terms of female parliamentary representation Australia seems unable to improve its world ranking above about 30th place.

This paper will explore the reasons why Australia has not done better — is it the parliament, is it the political parties, is it the electorate, is it the media, is it the women themselves? Perhaps (to quote Tony Blair) we should look to a third way.

Has Anything Changed over the Last Decade?

Between 1998 and 2008 Australia increased the percentage of women in the lower house of its parliament by 11%, which was just enough to maintain its world ranking of about 30th place, but not enough to improve its position. Over the same period, most other Anglo-Saxon countries only marginally increased their percentage of women MPs, and thus plunged in terms of their world rankings.

New Zealand's percentage increased from 29.2% in 1997 to 33.1% in 2007, but its world ranking declined from 6th to 14th place. Canada barely increased its number of women MPs from 20.6% to 21.3%, and its ranking fell from 17th to 50th. The UK increased from 18.2% to 19.5%, and its ranking fell from 20th to 60th, and the USA increased from 11.7% to 16.8%, and its ranking fell from 39th to 71st.

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¹ Of course, 50% women and 50% men may not be 'ideal'. A majority of women has yet to be tried.

Meanwhile many other countries increased their women MPs dramatically, including Rwanda 17.1% to 48.8%; Cuba 22.8% to 43.2%; Costa Rica 15.8% to 36.8%; Uganda 18.1% to 30.7%; Peru 10.8% to 29.2%; Macedonia 3.3% to 29.2%; Bulgaria 10.8% to 21.7%; Croatia 7.9% to 20.9%; Latvia 9.0% to 20.0%; and Estonia 10.9% to 20.0%. Even Turkey went from 2.4% to 9.1%, no doubt hoping this would improve its chances of joining the European Union.

The only consolation from Australia's point of view is that at least it has not gone backwards in the world rankings like many western countries including Britain, Canada and the United States. There are several factors which may have prevented Australia making headway including the media, the major political parties, the parliament, the women themselves.

Blame the Media

Although the media are minor players as far as blame is concerned, they are irritants inasmuch as they still have not completely come to terms with treating women MPs seriously, and are still obsessed by their clothes, their hairdos, their families, and trying to take unflattering photos of them, and seeks to justify its actions because:

By the journalists' rationale, news stories that trivialised or stereotyped women were not the sign of a superficial or image-obsessed press, but the outcome of vain, ambitious women who craved the spotlight and pretended to be better than the men.²

However, the media are guilty of molding public opinion about MPs portraying all of them as under-worked and overpaid, and regard serious parliamentary debate as secondary to the theatre and drama of the parliament. Some indeed are under-worked and overpaid, but the majority is extremely committed and most politicians are hard-working individuals. Most of the 66 women I interviewed worked at least 80 hours a week including weekends. Compared with workers in private enterprise and even the higher echelons of the 'Kevin 07' public service and the media, these women were overworked and underpaid.

Blame the Political Parties

Before 1981 there were very few women in Australian parliaments representing the Australian Labor Party (ALP); in that year, however, the party decided to adopt a ten-year affirmative action plan. The aim of the plan was to increase both the number of women members of parliament (MPs) and the number of women throughout its organisational structures. With that decision the ALP charted a completely different course to the conservative parties, and thereby seized the

² Julia Baird, *Media Tarts: How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004), 10.

initiative in terms of promoting women throughout its structures. Whereas previous ALP national conferences usually contained very few women delegates, the one held in 1982 saw women comprising 40% of the delegates which well exceeding the new constitutional requirement that 25% of each state's delegates be women.

As a result of this conference a section on women was inserted in the ALP's platform for the first time. No Australian political party had ever launched such a comprehensive women's policy. It prescribed that state branches apply affirmative action rules to increase the number of women on their policy-making bodies in proportion to their membership. Nevertheless, another decade passed before the ALP rules were also applied to the preselection of candidates for parliament.

The election of the Hawke Government in 1983 enabled the ALP to introduce innovative legislation designed specifically to improve the status of women, including the *Public Service Reform Act* 1984, the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1984 and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act* 1986. After some earlier reluctance, Paul Keating was especially attuned to the importance of the ALP appealing to a wider audience and sought to increase the number of ALP women in Australian parliaments. In fact Keating made women's issues a major focus of the 1993 election campaign, and on election night made a point of thanking the women of Australia.

At the 1993 Victorian ALP Women's conference, Keating with the assistance of ex-premier of Victoria Joan Kirner, and others, committed to draw up an action plan for increased ALP women parliamentary representation. This led to the historic decision at the ALP national conference the following year to aim to achieve 35% of women ALP MPs by 2002. This decision prescribed that 35% of candidates preselected for winnable federal parliamentary seats must be women, whether the ALP was in government or in opposition, by 2002. The conference also gave the national executive the power to intervene in preselections to ensure that the target was met. Keating later described the result as a defining moment in Australian politics, while Joan Kirner who had toiled assiduously for this outcome, described these changes as the high point of her career.³

Although the Queensland ALP State Council had given it support for the principles of the 35% by 2002 campaign in November 1993, the state made little progress because the premier at that time, Wayne Goss, was opposed to quotas. He spoke out against quotas, claiming there was no real evidence that under the current system talented women were being beaten by mediocre men.⁴

A sequence of events, however, was to swiftly push Queensland from having the fewest women in parliament to having the most. The Goss Government lost office in early 1996 and Peter Beattie became opposition leader and then premier at the

³ *Sunday Age*, 27 March 1994.

⁴ *Canberra Times*, 19 April 1994.

next election in 1998. Beattie was a much stronger and more vocal advocate for more women MPs than Goss, and set about ensuring the 35% by 2002 target was met and, in addition, began promoting women in the judiciary and throughout the public service.⁵

In the meantime the ALP state secretary, Mike Kaiser, resigned to enter parliament, and his successors, Cameron Milner, and later Milton, proved to be more enthusiastic exponents of the affirmative action principle. Around the same time the Queensland ALP elected its first female president, Shirley Mellor, who succeeded Don Brown, himself as supporter of more women in parliament. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU), which had been the tardiest Labor Party faction in coming to terms with affirmative action, was losing some of its dominance of the Queensland ALP and, from this point on, Labor women in Queensland began to make significant gains, as shown by the huge influx of women MPs at the 2001 election.

Nevertheless the ALP still had a poor record for preselecting women for federal parliamentary seats, and as late as 1996 it only preselected 24% women compared to the Liberal's 27% and the National's 8%.⁶ Nor did Kim Beazley, as opposition leader, take any leadership on this issue — as Keating had done before him — and the ALP really marked time with respect to affirmative action until Simon Crean replaced Beazley as leader in 2001. Crean, like Keating, could see the advantages of having more women in parliament and at his instigation Keating's 35% by 2002 target was raised to 40% by 2012.

These energetic attempts by Keating, Crean, Beattie, Kirner and others to persuade their party to adopt a raft of affirmative action policies has resulted in ALP women making enormous strides in improving their parliamentary representation in all of the legislatures around the country. For example, after the February 2004 Queensland state election, ALP women held 124 state and federal seats — more than twice as many as their coalition counterparts. In Queensland, South Australia and Victoria the 35% by 2002 target had already been met. It was not quite met at the federal level, however, and after the 2001 federal election only 33.7% of the ALP seats in the federal parliament were held by women.

The Coalition parties have consistently refused to adopt affirmative action measures, such as quotas designed to ensure that women win a given proportion of the seats won, and the Liberal Party (LPA) has invented such slogans such as: 'We want a fair go, not a free kick' in order to distance the LPA from Labor's approach. These slogans are too cute by half, however, and bear little resemblance to historical fact because, despite not embracing quotas for aspiring women MPs, the

⁵ Peter Beattie, (paper presented at the Women in Parliament Conference: 35 per cent by 2002 and All That Jazz, South Brisbane, 1996), 16.

⁶ Elizabeth van Acker, *Different Voices: Gender and Politics in Australia* (South Melbourne: Macmillan Education, 1999), 100.

LPA neglects to point out that their women members have benefited in the organisational structures of the party as a result of stronger affirmative action methods than any other Australian political party.⁷

When Robert Menzies founded the LPA in 1944 he made a valuable concession to women, and the rules of the party in Victoria state that women and men had equal power at all levels of the party from the branches up to the state council, the committees and the preselection panels. Each branch had a male and a female vice-president and equal gender representation on the state executive. Although few women were elected to the parliaments, women had a prominence within the party which was unprecedented in a major party in any western democracy. In fact the LPA has always had a stronger tradition of gender equity and has been more attentive to women's issues than has the ALP, until the latter changed this situation in the 1980s.⁸

There are differences among the various state divisions of the LPA, but all have structures to ensure considerable gender equity within the party. In most states the president of the women's section is usually an *ex officio* member of the state executive. The women's sections of each division hold an annual conference. Each division is represented on the Federal Women's Committee, and this committee is represented on the LPA's federal executive and on the advisory policy on federal policy.

Thus, unlike the Labor Party, the LPA from its inauguration built in measures which tended to give women a much smoother path within their party organisations than that enjoyed by Labor women. Furthermore, the fact that women comprise approximately half of the LPA membership, means the LPA is better placed structurally than the ALP whose female membership is only about 30%. Nevertheless, this historical tradition of facilitating the role of women within the LPA organisation does not extend to helping them more than men to win parliamentary seats, which in the true tradition of liberalism has always been left to the individual.

While baulking at any formal policy to increase its female parliamentary representation, the LPA is disingenuous in the extreme by continuing to avow that the principle of merit is the only criterion it uses for preselecting parliamentary candidates. No political party ever defined merit, and tended to use it in the accepted sense, only when it suited them. Former leader of the Australian Democrats, Janine Haines, eloquently defined the situation:

⁷ Andrew Parkin, John Summers, and Dennis Woodward, *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 7th edn (Frenchs Forest, N.S.W.: Longman/Pearson Education Australia, 2002), 289.

⁸ Geoffrey Blainey, *A History of Victoria*, 3rd edn (New York; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 231, Parkin, Summers, and Woodward, *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 288.

Nobody worries whether the blokes are the right blokes. Some of the biggest male dorks are hanging about, not just on the back benches but the front benches too. There are blokes who couldn't get up without somebody else having written a speech for them. I'm not joking. But nobody says anything about that. They've got there because of their faction, or they're an old unionist or a businessman or a farmer. Where there is real perceived power, they're not going to let women in without a fight or without the law being changed.⁹

In order to improve its parliamentary representation, the LPA has tended to rely on such strategies as mentoring, networking programs, and seminars designed to improve the skills of aspiring women in readiness for the preselection process. While useful, these strategies have enjoyed fairly modest success; despite the LPA's disinclination to promote women in the political sphere over recent years, history reveals however, that it was non-Labor women who were the trailblazers in Australian parliaments.¹⁰

The 1983 and 1984 federal elections saw the LPA preselect an increased number of women candidates which resulted in the number of its women increasing. Whether or not this was done to counter the ALP, which had achieved some success with its increased preselection of women candidates in the 1970s and early 1980s, is a moot point.¹¹ The LPA did set up a committee of review when it lost the 1983 election, just as the ALP had done in 1977 and, like the ALP, found that a key component in its defeat was a loss of support among women. The committee recommended the party seek out prominent career and business women as future candidates to help address this problem. In 1993 the LPA Women's Forum was established with the objective:

To raise the profile of women candidates as serious choices in preselection; to encourage women to join and be active in the Liberal Party, and to assist them in establishing credibility and build winning campaigns for preselection in both safe Liberal and winnable marginal seats.¹²

John Howard boasted about the record number of LPA women elected at the 1996 federal election, but neglected to point out that most of them were in marginal seats

⁹ Susan Mitchell, *The Scent of Power* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996), 221.

¹⁰ The first woman MP in each of the six states was from the Liberal party or one of its predecessors, as was the first women in the House of Representatives. The LPA can also claim the first three women ministers — Enid Lyons, Annabelle Rankin and Margaret Guilfoyle. The ALP can only claim one first — Dorothy Tangay was the first woman senator. Until the mid-1970s, most women who entered the Federal Parliament were women, and during the period 1947–71 six LPA women were elected to the Senate and only one from the ALP; in the same period two LPA women were elected to the House of Representatives where no ALP women would sit until 1974.

¹¹ Marian Simms, 'Affirmative Action and the Australian Party System in the Early 1990s', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration* 76 (1994): 26–27.

¹² Liberal Party of Australia, 'Liberal Women's Forum', (2008), http://www.nsw.liberal.org.au/women/liberal_forum.cfm.

that they were not expected to win. Indeed he was always reticent in appointing women to positions of power, and his government had a dismal record in supporting women and women's issues and dismantled many of the Hawke and Keating government initiatives, including the withdrawal of support from various women's organisations including the Women's Electoral Lobby, and reduced funding to the Office of the Status of Women and women's health programs. In addition, its changes to industrial relations legislation were particularly female-unfriendly, and it refused to introduce paid maternity leave.

Despite the Howard Government's (1996–2007) attempts to turn the clock back on the status of women accomplishments of the Hawke/Keating years (1983–96), almost no public protest was made by the Liberal women parliamentarians who, unlike their ALP counterparts, did not even form a women's caucus inside the federal parliament. In fact, the federal LPA women appear to have been less proactive during the Howard years in supporting legislation designed to benefit women than have their male colleagues, which contrasts with their activity in earlier years. For example, this was in marked contrast to the period between 1984–86 when most Liberals supported the Hawke Government's affirmative action legislation, mainly owing to the considerable efforts of their senators, Margaret Guilfoyle and Kathy Sullivan and the then shadow minister for the status of women, Ian McPhee, who provided great assistance to them in the House of Representatives.

There seems to have been a gradual hardening of attitudes after John Howard became opposition leader in late 1985, and when the ALP introduced the *Equal Employment (Commonwealth Authorities) Bill* 1987, it was stridently opposed by the Coalition. In fact, it caused an enormous furor in the House of Representatives, and when it reached the Senate a very bizarre scenario unfolded. It was not an earth-shattering bill, and merely sought to extend the provisions of the *Public Service Reform Act* 1984, the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1984, and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act* 1986 to included Commonwealth statutory authorities.

One can but wonder whether some of the Liberal MPs had actually read the bill when Australia's first female speaker, the Hon Joan Childs, called the member for Fisher (Peter Slipper-LPA), who regaled the House of Representatives with:

This bill is ideological gibberish. It is an attempt by the ALP to play up to extremist left-wing groups, including some women's groups in our society. We are sad that the ALP chooses to denigrate the woman who chooses to stay at home, the woman who wishes to raise her family, the woman who wishes to be a housewife. There is nothing wrong with being a housewife.¹³

¹³ Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives, *Parliamentary debates (Hansard)* (1996). 1615–16.

Peter Baume resigned as shadow minister for the status of women over the refusal of the LPA to support the bill and Steele Hall (LPA-Boothby) crossed the floor in the House of Representatives to vote for the bill, and in the Senate seven LPA senators crossed the floor and one abstained. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of this was that all the LPA senators who crossed the floor to support the bill were men, while all six Liberal women senators — Margaret Guilfoyle, Susan Knowles, Jocelyn Newman, Margaret Reid, Amanda Vanstone and Shirley Walters — actually voted against the bill. No wonder there are so few of them in parliament!

We therefore face a perplexing contrast when we recognise that in the ALP it was the women who fought tooth and nail for more women MPs, helped by a few supportive men. In the LPA it was mostly men who took action to increase the number of women MPs. There are a few Liberal women, however, who have openly admired the ALP affirmative action policy, but apart women including Beryl Beaurepaire, Jennifer Cashmore, Virginia Chadwick, Margaret Guilfoyle, Diana Laidlaw, Kathy Sullivan, Trish Worth, and a few others, it has been the Liberal men like Peter Baume, Jim Charlton, Nick Greiner and Ian McPhee who have been most outspoken on the issue.¹⁴

The Queensland division of the LPA has the worst record in Australia for promoting its women members into either federal or state parliament, and yet it has produced some of the most remarkable women MPs to sit in any Australian parliament — Annabelle Rankin and Kathy Sullivan at the federal, and Joan Sheldon and Rosemary Kyburz at the state level — spring readily to mind. Only five Liberal women have ever been elected to the Queensland Parliament and seven to the federal parliament,¹⁵ compared with the ALP's 39 and 12 respectively. Even the Nationals have elected nine women to the Queensland and two in the Federal Parliament.¹⁶

Regarding the National Party, one is hopeful that the views about women expressed by the meritorious, former member for Maranoa, Ian Cameron — later charged with assault, obstructing police and breaches of domestic violence orders — have been subsequently reviewed:

Women should be encouraged to stay at home and look after their families. That is what the NPA is all about; we are on about supporting the family and giving women incentives to stay at home and look after the family and bring up young

¹⁴ This raises another issue, which requires further research, that many women don't represent women's issues, and men many men have done it better. For these women, equity may be nothing more than the 'look' of the room.

¹⁵ State: Rosemary Kyburz, Beryce Nelson, Joan Sheldon, Lyn Warwick, Jann Stuckey. Federal: Annabelle Rankin, Kay Elson, Teresa Gambaro, Elizabeth Grace, Margaret May, Andrea West, Sue Boyce.

¹⁶ State: Vicky Kippin, Beryce Nelson, Yvonne Chapman, Leisha Harvey, Di McCauley, Judy Gamin, Fiona Simpson, Naomi Wilson, Rosemary Menkens. Federal: Florence Bjelke-Petersen, De-Anne Kelly.

Australians as they ought to be brought up, not in some socialised, ratbag, Russianised-type child-minding centre set up at the factory door...I have never seen such a wank of a bill in all my life.¹⁷

Blame the Parliament

Australian parliaments with their two-party Westminster systems are inherently adversarial because the chamber seating arrangements provide for rival teams to directly face each other. Those MPs with the loudest voices probably do best in such an environment, and this usually precludes women whose voices tend to be less powerful than those of men. They are more likely to find such an arrangement intimidating and, as Sawyer argues, simply rearranging the seating within parliaments might go some way towards promoting a less aggressive style of politics, as has been the case overseas.¹⁸

Other alternatives include MPs being seated by region, as in Sweden, or by lot as in Iceland, or horseshoe-shaped seating arrangements as in Scotland and some of the other European parliaments.

Needless to say there would be enormous difficulty in changing the seating arrangements in old-style buildings such as the Queensland Parliament. Perhaps a few simple measures would improve the parliamentary environment, however, all of them having precedents elsewhere: installing a creche for both MPs and staff on a subsidised basis; abolishing late sitting hours; ensuring there is a gender balance on all committees; and expecting the same standard of behaviour and dress for both women and men MPs

Although it is a relatively simple task to amend *Standing Orders* to make parliaments more female-friendly, most Australian parliaments have been very tardy in this regard. Nevertheless, the Tasmanian government has tackled the problem of late-night sittings, and now rises no later than 6pm. The Keating government also restricted late sittings in 1994, though this reform tended to fall by the wayside under the Howard government after 1996. It is much easier with new parliaments, however, such as the Welsh and Scottish legislatures, as a family-friendly environment can be built in from the start, and this, of course, is much less of a problem than any attempt at retrofitting.

The Scottish Parliament, for example, which was to re-formed in 1999, provides childcare facilities and has adopted family-friendly hours (2.30pm–5.30pm Mondays, 9.30am–5.30pm Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and 9.30–12.30pm Friday) and less confrontational seating arrangements. Furthermore, the Scottish parliament has established an Equal Opportunities Committee ‘to consider and

¹⁷ Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives, *CPD* 10 Apr.1986, 2045.

¹⁸ Marian Sawyer, ‘A Matter of Simple Justice? Women and Parliamentary Representation’ *Speaking for the People*, M Sawyer and G Zappalla, eds (Melbourne: UP, 2001), 182.

report on matters relating to equal opportunities and upon the observance of equal opportunities within the parliament'.¹⁹ These reforms have had considerable success in attracting women to a parliamentary career in Scotland.²⁰ These reforms are not exceptional as most European parliaments with a relatively high proportion of women MPs have instituted similar measures.²¹

Many women who may otherwise have competed for preselection often view sitting hours as an insurmountable impediment. Although the Beattie government attempted to restrict late sittings the measures were half-hearted and soon lapsed. Almost twice as many ALP women as men wanted fewer late-night sitting hours.²² Opponents of fewer late-night sittings argue that they shorten the parliamentary week and allow members to return to their families, perhaps 2000 kilometres away, however, this supposed benefit clearly does not apply to the majority of Queensland MPs, who mostly live between Noosa and Coolangatta and west to Toowoomba, nor to their political staff or the staff of the parliament. In conjunction with the abolition of late sitting hours, the travel entitlements for MPs and their families should be reviewed so that the families of country MPs have more opportunities to travel to Brisbane to be with their spouse or parent.

With respect to the standard of behaviour and dress of MPs, there is an underlying expectation that women will tend to conduct themselves in a more genteel and consensual manner than the men. Indeed there is some evidence that as women MPs have reached a critical mass in Australian parliaments, there has been an amelioration in the general behaviour of MPs. This has not happened regarding the underlying expectations of dress standards, however, and newly elected women have to outlay considerable expenditure for a new wardrobe, because they are still expected to wear a wider range of appropriate — usually expensive — clothing, and a different outfit every day. They do not enjoy the luxury of male MPs who can (and do) get away with continually wearing the same dark suit, day in and day out.

An example from my own experience, albeit extreme, serves to illustrate the problems a slightly adventurous woman MP might encounter. While I was a research officer in the Queensland Parliamentary Library (1983–95), a senior woman MP asked me to find out whether any western parliaments forbade women from wearing pants suits into the chamber because she wished to do so and the speaker had refused to allow her. My research turned up nothing, and she relayed this to the speaker who still refused. She asked him why, and was told:

¹⁹ Marian Sawer, 'Women and Government in Australia', in *2001 Year Book Australia* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), 75.

²⁰ Nicole Busby, and Calum McLeod, 'Maintaining a Balance: The Retention of Women MPs in Scotland', in *Women, Politics and Change*, Karen Ross, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 32–33.

²¹ Sawer, 'Women and Government in Australia', 75.

²² Simms, 'Affirmative Action and the Australian Party System in the Early 1990s', 26.

'Because I haven't got time to keep checking your crotch to make sure your pants aren't too tight'.²³

Despite the impediment of late-night sittings and lack of child care facilities, however, parliamentary reform cannot solve the main issue for many women — family commitments — which is especially intractable because it depends on the women themselves taking the initiative. In fact, it is up to women MPs to not only initiate and become involved in parliamentary reform but also to promote more consensual and inclusive forms of political behaviour.

Blame the Women Themselves

The women themselves have to bear some of the responsibility in that they tend to be more reticent about committing to a parliamentary career than men. Many women simply cannot find the 'right time' to take the plunge. This is well illustrated by the experience of the current Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, when she was embarking on her own political career and at the same time encouraging other women to do the same. After approaching a few women to suggest they might think about a political career, she was nonplussed to discover that they thought it was never the right time for them. They assumed it would be better for them to wait until their children were a certain age — that others would not race to fill the breach!

The notion that you can wait for a time that suits you and those people who are dependent on you (and if you do not, you may be accused of neglecting your family) is much more of an impediment to aspiring women MPs than it is to men, who are much more likely to seize an opportunity irrespective of other considerations.

I was sitting down working through the number of people who have knocked me back in the last couple of weeks and I've had this extraordinary experience when I've put it all together. The answer from every single person really came down to one thing. For them it wasn't the right time. One woman who I approached claimed — she was in her late 20s — she was too young and lacked the experience and believed she didn't have what it takes to win a plebiscite, and she would run for a plebiscite for the next round of state conference and get that experience under her belt. Then she would have the necessary experience sometime down the track. The next woman said she had a child who was under 5, the child was too young, and she'd wait till it was older and wasn't so dependent on her. Another woman I approached in North Queensland had 2 children 13 and 15 who said teenagers are very vulnerable and need parental supervision, and it's not the right time, and so when they are older she'll do it. Then I spoke to woman the other day about

²³ Di McCauley, *Diving Off the Ironing Board* (Rockhampton, Qld.: Central Queensland University Press, 2004), 57.

running for a state seat in 3 years time when somebody may be standing down. This woman said: 'No, I'll be 50 by then and that will be too old'.²⁴

This raises another interesting aspect regarding the different attitudes of women and men when considering a parliamentary career. The support of family and friends is, of course, important to both genders, but the UK study found many female MPs see this support as vital. In their interviews, women tended to talk about their personal life in conjunction with their political career, whereas men appeared to regard their political career as quite separate from their personal life.²⁵

Moreover, parliaments have tended to be men's clubs where the interaction, discourse, agenda and timetables are set by men, and where male egos can flourish. Women tend generally to be less egocentric and have less hunger for success than men, so parliaments are rarely women-friendly environments.²⁶ The way in which parliamentary proceedings are conducted is distasteful to many women (and many men for that matter) because many parliaments have tended to be forums (the word used in the Queensland Parliament is 'bear pit') where an enormous amount of time is wasted in seeing who can shout the loudest or hurl the worst abuse.

This is not to imply that women never engage in these tactics, but usually it is men who show greater enthusiasm for them. In addition to the aggressive, uncouth and overtly masculine culture that dominates, the travel involved, plus the late sitting hours, combine to make politics a less attractive career option for women.

Blame the Electorate

I think it is quite safe to say that the electorate is completely blameless, for there is little evidence to suggest that an electorate is less likely to vote for a woman than for a man political candidate in the first instance. In fact, there may be evidence to suggest that women may be more likely than men to increase their winning margins at future elections. This is purported to be because of women's greater empathy with their constituents, but more research is required in this area.

Merit

'Merit' may imply a range of possibilities. Therefore, should a search for the person richest in 'merit' seek the contestant who proves themselves to be the most intelligent, the hardest working, the most articulate, the most honest, or the one with

²⁴ Anna Bligh, 'Sex and Politics', in *Women in Parliament Conference: The Glass Ceiling* (South Brisbane: Indooroopilly Branch of the Labor Party, 1997), 60–61.

²⁵ J Elgood, L Vinter and R Williams, *Man Enough for the Job? A Study of Parliamentary Candidates* (Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002), ix.

²⁶ Australia. Office of the Status of Women., *Every Woman's Guide to Getting into Politics* (Canberra: AGPS, 1995), 22.

the most experience? Clearly, if the major parties had defined the term this way, many male parliamentarians across Australia would be there under false pretences, and men would conceivably be outnumbered by women! Anne Henderson sums it up nicely:

There is more than merit at work — cronyism, pedigree, wealth, faction, pecking order, favourites of the leader. Non-threatening women may benefit, but not in senior portfolios. Nor is the public fooled if the present cynicism with politicians is any guide.²⁷

The Coalition parties are highly critical of Labor's successful affirmative action policy, claiming that it undermines the principle of merit. These parties proudly boast that they are entirely committed to promoting aspirant parliamentary candidates purely on merit. If, indeed, the principle of merit is upheld by the Coalition parties, in view of the fact that they have had limited success in drawing more women into parliaments around Australia, the Coalition men who were preselected were presumably more richly endowed with merit than the parties' aspirant women. This seems a highly unlikely scenario and so bolsters the plausibility of Reynolds' suggestion that the Coalition parties, like Labor in the past, have defined 'merit' in their own masculine image:

Merit is in the eye of the beholder and, traditionally, Australian mateship has perpetuated the assumption that men will be more likely to have the appropriate mix of qualities necessary for parliamentary life.²⁸

Judy Spence defends affirmative action and points out that preselections were never anything to do with merit:

The quota does not address questions of merit, of performance, of politics. It simply states a required outcome and a timetable for its achievement. I reject criticisms that the Labor Party will now have to abandon merit and substitute gender discrimination — a criticism that implies that preselections in the Labor Party have been a matter purely of the search for excellence up until the point of the rule change. If it's been a meritocracy and we are so overwhelmingly male dominated, why are we in such a mess.²⁹

We find that preselections for parliamentary positions are almost always determined by the candidate's ability to win support from a narrow section of a political party or trade union, using their knowledge, and experience and personal connections within that structure to secure the numbers for preselection. For example, one cannot but wonder about the 'merit' of NPA, Michael Cobb MP — later charged

²⁷ Anne Henderson, *Getting Even: Women Mp's Talk About Life, Power and Politics* (Pymble, N.S.W.: HarperCollins, 1999), 254.

²⁸ Margaret Reynolds, *The Last Bastion: Labor Women Working Towards Equality in the Parliaments of Australia* (Sydney, N.S.W.: Business & Professional Publishing, 1995), 131.

²⁹ Judy Spence (paper presented at the Women in Parliament Conference: 35 per cent by 2002 and All That Jazz, South Brisbane, 1996), 19.

with defrauding the Commonwealth by lying on 102 counts of claiming hotel expenses while sleeping in his car — whose contribution to the 1987 debate in the House of Representatives on the ALP's *Equal Employment (Commonwealth Authorities) Bill* included:

This Bill is typical of the wimpish, trendy nonsense that has pervaded Western society generally and this country particularly in recent years...Next we will see that so many homosexuals will have to be employed in schools, or Indians from Outer Mongolia, or one-legged, left-handed lesbians or whatever.³⁰

Possible Third Ways

The constitution could be changed to require 50% of seats for females and 50% for males. In Australia changing the constitution requires a referendum which rarely carry unless backed by both of the major political parties.

A new voting system could be implemented perhaps something along the lines of the New Zealand system. However such a system is not necessarily in the interest of the major political parties as it makes it easier for small parties and independents to win seats.

Perhaps the number of electorates could be halved, with the requirement that each be represented by both a female and a male, thus preserving the same number of MPs, and seems not to have any constitutional ramifications. This would certainly be the easiest of the three to implement, but might not be attractive to the public who may very well think: 'What if our two MPs were Belinda Neal and John Della Bosca!' ▲

³⁰ 1556.

*Some Statistics***Percentage of women Australian parliaments in 2008**

Parliament	Both Houses	Lower House	ALP Both	ALP Lower	ALP Upper
Commonwealth	31.70	26.70	41.25	32.50	50.00
NSW	29.50	28.00	33.10	34.60	31.60
Victoria	29.75	29.50	31.35	36.40	26.30
Queensland	-	34.80	-	42.40	-
WA	30.50	22.80	39.50	29.00	25.00
SA	31.75	36.20	35.70	46.40	50.00
Tasmania	28.00	28.00	37.85	35.70	40.00
ACT	-	35.30	-	36.80	-
NT	-	36.80	-	33.30	-

Current ranking of Australia on the world stage in 1998–2008 in terms of the percentage of women in the lower house of its national parliament

Year	Election	Women	Ranking	Top	Women
1998	1996	15.5%	31 st	Sweden	40.4%
1999	1998	22.4%	15 th	Sweden	42.7%
2000	1998	23.0%	21 st	Sweden	42.7%
2002	2001	25.3%	22 nd	Sweden	45.0%
2003	2001	25.3%	24 th	Rwanda	48.8%
2004	2004	24.7%	23 rd	Rwanda	48.8%
2005	2004	24.7%	29 th	Rwanda	48.8%
2006	2004	24.7%	33 rd	Rwanda	48.8%
2007	2007	26.7%	30 th	Rwanda	48.8%
2008	2007	26.7%	29 th	Rwanda	48.8%