

## POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY IN SA

### ISSUE POLITICS: WOMEN IN POLITICS

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I understand the rationale for this conference is to celebrate 150 years of democracy in SA. I may not be the first to point out that this is incorrect, and that in fact the most basic tenet of a democracy, which is a universal adult franchise, was not achieved in SA till 1894, a mere 113 years ago. It is true that an adult **male** franchise was implemented in 1857, 150 years ago, and this is probably worth celebrating, but the majority of the population, the female members of society, were not able to vote until **female** adult suffrage was legislated for in 1894.

I won't detail the slow evolution of women in politics in this State, except to say that although Catherine Helen Spence stood unsuccessfully for election to the Constitutional Convention in 1896, and many other women stood unsuccessfully for election to our Parliament, it took 65 years after female suffrage before Joyce Steele and Jessie Cooper were the first women to sit in Parliament after the 1959 election. Molly Byrne joined them in 1965. I was first elected in 1975, only 32 years ago, and was shocked to find I was the only fourth woman ever to become an elected member! Moreover, I was the first ever ALP female member of the Legislative Council.

The situation today is greatly improved. Women today makeup 36% of our Lower House, and 27% of the Upper House, giving an overall 33% of all members. The situation is similar in other States and Territories: in NSW women are 27% of members, in Victoria 30%, in Queensland 34%, in WA 30%, in Tasmania 32%, in the ACT 35% and in the NT 40%. The Federal Parliament has 28% female members, and putting all Australian Parliaments together we have 30% of elected members being female.

How has this change come about? I am convinced the feminist revolution in the 1970s and 1980s raised awareness of the discrimination which was occurring, and women in the political parties began agitating for a greater share of preselections for winnable seats. In the 1990s the number of women elected increased markedly, though a ceiling seems to have been reached in the last few years, and there has been little progress in recent times towards the 50% which would indicate a complete absence of gender bias.

In the ALP we women managed to have the rules changed to incorporate at least 35% women standing in winnable seats, later increased to 40%, to be achieved by 2012. The fight was a long and difficult one, helped considerably by women in the party getting together regularly at National Labor Women's Conferences to discuss tactics and plan strategies. I am a firm believer in having such changes incorporated into laws, or rules, so

that the eternal vigilance mentioned by the RSL as the price of freedom doesn't have to occur, and women can get on with other pressing political issues.

You are probably aware that the Liberal Party does not have a quota system for female candidates, and so women in the party need to constantly fight for representation as candidates in winnable seats. They were spectacularly unsuccessful in their recent S.A. preselections for the next Federal elections, where not one woman was preselected. This, I think, illustrates the value of having rules which have to be followed or penalties will be applied. The Liberals, of course, deny discrimination and say selection is on merit. I fail to see why political merit is determined by anatomy! And while I endorse merit as a principle for preselection, I think it should apply for both males and females, which a cursory examination of male political figures would indicate does not always occur for them.

The value of the quota system is further illustrated when we look at the figures for the political parties. In the SA Parliament women make up 46% of the ALP members in the Assembly, but only 20% of the Liberals in that chamber. In the Legislative Council 25% of each major party is female, which put together means 42% of our ALP parliamentarians are female, while only 22% of our Liberal Parliamentarians are female. And the same picture emerges in the other Parliaments in the country: in NSW, 32% of the ALP members are female, while only 26% of the Liberals are female; in Victoria the figures are 33% of the ALP and 26% of Liberals; in Queensland 41% of the ALP versus 14% of the Coalition parties; in W A 36% of the ALP versus 21% of the Liberals; in Tasmania 37% of the ALP against 14% of the Liberals; in the ACT 33% of the ALP against 29% of the Liberals. The NT is the exception that proves the rule, in that 37% of the ALP are female, while 50% of the CLP are female, but there are only a total of 4 CLP in that Parliament, and the standard error of such a percentage figure would be enormous.

In the Federal Parliament women make up 38% of the ALP members, but only 27% of the Coalition members. I should add that right across the country the gender ratio for minor parties like the Democrats, Greens, and various independents and one-person parties like One Nation is generally not very different from equal numbers of the two genders.

The existence of Emily's List may partly explain the better figures of the ALP compared to the Coalition. For those who do not know of Emily's List, it is a national organization formed to help get more progressive women into Parliament. It has no role in preselections, but assists candidates once chosen with money, campaign advice, and mentoring, after they have been interviewed and are willing to adhere to the basic principles of the organization. (These are being pro-choice, supporting equal pay, equal opportunity, better childcare, and cultural diversity). Formed in 1996 by Joan Kirner, Emily's List has had great success in assisting a total of 113 women into Australian Parliaments over ten years, and doubtless these statistics will be increased after the NSW elections in a fortnight's time. Interestingly, of the over 2000 members of Emily's List

around Australia, about 40% are NOT members of the ALP, but all are women who care deeply about getting more good women into positions of responsibility in our Parliaments, in the hope that this will make a difference!.

Which brings us to the question of whether more women in Parliament does make a difference, and if so, to what? This can be examined in two categories, namely, specific "women's issues", and more generally.

Looking at "women's issues", such as abortion, availability of RU-486, and domestic violence, there can be no doubt that more women members has had an effect. Firstly, in getting such matters onto the agenda in the first place, as they would be low in priority for many male members. Then secondly, women have worked across party lines to achieve reform. In recent times we all read how women from the ALP, Liberals, Democrats and Nationals openly campaigned together to influence the federal vote on RU-486. In earlier times, Diana Laidlaw of the Liberal Party and I met in the Ladies' Loo at Parliament House to discuss tactics and progress in defeating the Ritson Bill to restrict access to abortion in this state.

However, one or two women will not be able to have much influence, and only when a critical number has been reached is it harder to ignore their presence. If I can reminisce a little, I recall an occasion in the early 1980s when there were only two women in our ALP Caucus. I raised the question of childcare, and the urgent necessity of improving it. I was backed up by Barbara Weise. But then one of the old-timers, who shall remain anonymous, chimed in, saying: "I've heard what you said, but REAL women don't share those views!" Obviously, women who went into Parliament were not real women! I doubt if many would share his views today, or perhaps not be game to express them! The critical mass for women to be taken seriously and not ignored is sometimes said to be 35 %, and many Liberal and all ALP Caucuses have reached this magical figure. While this is short of the 50% that would mean equality (on real merit, of course), it suggests that great improvements have occurred in recent years.

On the other matter, of whether women make a difference across the board, I'm inclined to think they do. Every woman is different, of course, as is every man, but the rowdiness of Question Time rarely involves women, and most female Ministers are referred to with appreciation for their consideration and kindness. The same cannot be said for all male Ministers.

While mentioning Ministers, I should point out that women are not Cabinet members in proportion to their numbers in the Parliament, nor to their proportion in the Government members in the Parliament. They also tend to rank low in the Cabinet hierarchy. In our State Parliament women make up only 33 % of the Cabinet, despite being 42 % of the ALP members. By contrast, the Shadow Ministry here has 20% female members. In NSW they form 21 % of the

Cabinet, despite being 32% of Government members. In Victoria they are 20% of the Cabinet, compared to 33% of ALP members, and in Queensland they are 28% of the Ministers from a party which is 41 % female. In Tasmania women form 33% of the Cabinet, from a Caucus which is 37% female. Only in W A is the situation different, for as of today the Cabinet is 53 % female, but there have been so many comings and goings to that Cabinet in recent days that perhaps a temporary shortage of non-corrupt males accounts for this figure!

In the Federal Parliament women make up only 11 % of the Coalition Cabinet, or if we count the Outer Ministry as well, they form 13 % of all Ministers. By contrast the Shadow Ministry has 23 % of female members. Both figures are well below the proportion of female members in the parties from which Ministers are selected, namely 27% and 38 %.

Overall we can see that women are better represented in ALP Caucuses than in Coalition party rooms, and that except for W A their representation in Cabinets and Ministries is well below their proportion in the Parliamentary party rooms, regardless of which party is in Government. It is the situation so familiar to many women, that, to quote Lewis Carroll; "the higher, the fewer". This , of course, is not limited to Parliament, and the discrepancies are even more pronounced in business and professional circles of our society.

The main reason for considering women in the context of this conference is the relationship of their political representation to democracy in our society. While there are many arguments as to what constitutes a democracy, an ability to participate and contribute regardless of gender must be high on the list of desirable attributes. As the majority of the population is female, women are not an "issue", but are mainstream participants in all aspects of life. It may be a value judgment to claim "fair go " for women, but I have no hesitation in doing so.