

Women and South Australian Democracy

SA History Trust

The Politics of Democracy in SA, March 2007

“If Peter Costello genuinely thought about it, could he be the mother of three children, have been treasurer for more than a decade and be the next in line to be prime minister? Could John Howard have been a mother to his children, as opposed to a father, and be in the position he is in today? The frank answer is no”. Julia Gillard, *The Bulletin*, 23 January 2007

I'll return to the above to reflect a bit on what the terms “mother” and “father” mean – not to Julia but to prospective members of parliament, and how those definitions might influence their choices. I will be suggesting that these views are incompatible with a real democracy – that we are still on a journey towards a democracy that embraces all of us.

As this conference is about democracy in South Australia, this session provides the opportunity to test how democratic our parliamentary institution is. And by democratic I mean the simplest form of democracy – one vote one value, everyone counting equally. How well a particular segment of society is reflected in parliament is one measure of how democratic and open our institutions are.

What is democracy? A government of the people, for the people, by the people. How can a government of men, for men, by men, be a democracy? Are women not part of the people?

Mary Lee, Secretary, Women's Suffrage League, 1893

There are, of course, other tests of democracy that should be applied. But how women fare in parliament is a good one for several reasons. Women are half the population, so we are not dealing with a minority. Education outcomes for women are around equal, if not slightly advanced, to those of men. Work is still an unequal field – not in the amount worked but the

amount earned, but there is a spread of women in nearly all professions and across all pay scales.

So I would suggest it is a fair question of parliament, how many women are in it, how many women make it to the top, and, more pressingly, why.

There are two reasons the test is worth doing. First – how democratic our institutions are is important in an absolute sense. We should never presume that giving everyone the vote is sufficient to ensure a functioning democracy. Second – in a practical sense the more parliament reflects the society for which it creates laws, the more likely those laws will reflect the needs, aspirations and pressures of that society.

A quick tour of our history is merited before turning to the questions I raised above: how many women are in parliament, where they sit in the hierarchy, and why.

It will be well known to all in the audience that South Australia was the first to extend both the right to vote and the right to stand for parliament to women – in 1894. It is interesting to me that Victoria took the strange path of giving us the right to vote in 1908 but not the right to stand until 1923.

What is disturbing is that it was not until 1921 that the first Australian woman won a seat to parliament, in Western Australia, and that South Australia, having led the way, did not enjoy a female representative until 1959, the last jurisdiction.

How have we gone since then? We have an all time high proportion of women in parliament now.

- Overall a third of SA parliamentarians are women.

- 27% of lower house MPs are women and 36% of MLCs are women.
- 41% of Labor members of parliament are women
- 21% of Liberal members of parliament are women
- The highest proportion of women is in the ALP in the lower house – 45%

So although the ALP in this State is now very close to equal in the lower house, overall women still languish around the 33% representation level. It is also the case that on the Labor side only one woman holds a seat with a margin of more than 20% - 9 men do.

Only one third of Cabinet members are female and four of them are grouped in the bottom five in the order of precedence. Minister Lomax-Smith is the highest ranked female minister, number 8 in the list.

More generally in Australia, female politicians are still much more likely to hold portfolios relating to childcare, health care, the environment and education than Treasury, Finance, Industrial Relations, Justice, Infrastructure, Trade and Economic Development or Foreign Affairs.

Why still not equal.

So much progress – but still quite some distance to travel. What I would like to spend a short time doing is asking why we are still seeing a gender-based divide in our democracy.

Perhaps it is best to start with my list of characteristics that get you into parliament, and then we can add a layer of gender analysis.

1. being known in the electorate or having the right profile for a particular electorate – works particularly for marginal seats

2. being prepared and free to put in many hours of campaigning – particularly for marginal seats
3. being personally close and loyal to a factional leader
4. being very confident and determined
5. bringing votes to the faction or party – either through a union or controlling several sub branch votes

The very best have most or all of these characteristics, but one or two can be enough with some luck.

How does this sit with having half our members of parliament being women? These characteristics boil down to three –

- having personal confidence and determination – conviction that you belong in politics; and
- being recognised and mentored by people who already have power; and
- having an established public life, that is, life outside the home and non-political work – either in the electorate or leading a union that delivers numbers or time to work on politics, building numbers and doing the voluntary work that gets recognition and reward.

And frankly, for all three it is still easier to be male. I think there are three explanations for this.

First, women are still less likely to be possessed of the self-confidence and career focus required to make you a survivor in politics – although there are many examples of women with exactly these attributes. Women's socialisation is still too much to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves about our shortcomings, we still too often lower our sights, and for too long we

haven't had enough role models to show the way so that we can recognise ourselves in our political leadership.

Second, even if we exempt political power brokers from being overtly or consciously sexist in their selection of people they wish to promote, it is a human truth that on the whole we like and support people who are like ourselves. This biases political pre-selections to be conservative – like selecting like.

One way of dealing with this bias is to establish quotas or targets. The ALP has done this, stating that by 2012 a minimum of 40% of candidates for winnable seats will be from each sex. The Liberals have refused to bring in a similar rule. Quotas are controversial. There are two arguments used against quotas: that they make merit a secondary consideration, and that they put a question mark over the women who get in using this method. In response, proponents point out that if merit were the only consideration, at least 40% of seats would already be held by women. Putting a rule in simply focuses the minds of those in power on looking for good women as well. What about the second point, which is sometimes put by women in the position of appearing to be in parliament because of the gender rather than their abilities. The response is that at the end of the day, we are all part of collectives, and sometimes we have an obligation to our fellow members. One might wish that we were in a world where women did not have to act as representatives of their sex, but that is the reality. If we agree that quotas are a necessary step to making the people in power look to good women, then those women who are successful need to accept that there is a price they pay.

The good news is that these two issues – role models for women and who controls pre-selections – are likely to be changed irrevocably within the Labor Party in this State by the very high number of lower house MPs in the current parliament. Women demonstrating that they can do it, and as time goes on playing a role in selecting future members, is likely to deliver a lasting culture change.

This is not, however, the end of the story – and hardly touches the non-Labor side of the house.

The third issue, however, strikes at the heart of what our democracy looks like. Women are still more burdened by expectations to spend time raising children and the view that this is incompatible with being a useful and productive politician.

And here we can pick up Julia Gillard’s comments that I opened this talk with. What does Julia mean by saying that John Howard couldn’t have been a mother and Prime Minister, as opposed to a father and Prime Minister?

She means what many people see as the reality in our society (if not the desired state) that one person takes on the primary parenting role in a family, and that this is so much more likely to be the mother that it is called “mothering” by Julia and others, and indeed any male trying to take that role is called “Mr Mum”. And she means that being an active and involved parent is not compatible with politics as it is currently practiced.

While I could take some time, as the worker in my family with a male partner who is at home with the kids during office hours, taking offence at Julia’s shorthand which would appear to have me being a “father” and hence

a second order parent, it is probably more useful to see that Julia's comments speak to a truth that many in Australia recognise.

I have to accept that many women who are choosing to have children see this as incompatible with aspiring to a demanding career like politics, at least while the children are young.

This takes out many women in their 30s, and puts a serious dent in a woman's capacity to get sufficiently involved in politics to make it into parliament later.

Of equal concern in my view is that it also perpetuates the view that males and particularly males who represent our democracy, don't really belong in the home at all, or as full participants in their children's lives. This has to be problematic for the children's upbringing and the shaping of their views of what is possible in their futures.

It also limits the democratic nature of our parliament. If women see a choice between politics and motherhood, that is limiting because either public office loses good talent, or women face a decision not to have children that is constrained by external perceptions of roles of each parent. Equally, if men think they can be in politics only by being an uninvolved parent, that is also limiting.

What it means is that people who make it through to representing all of us, in fact are not taking with them the perspective of people who lead full rounded lives, they are people who believe that being in politics means cutting out the private sphere and living only in the public.

I don't mean to trivialise or ignore the real practical issues of spending time doing a serious job and how hard it is to do that when you have a young family. It is very hard to create a high public life profile when you spend a substantial amount of time out of the public world and in the private. But I think we need to do more than tut tut over this. Being a politician isn't just being a business leader. It is being someone who is the face of our democracy, and we need to ask if we have a different expectation of who they are and what life experience and skills they take with them.

What this means is a conscious revision of what we inside political parties look for in candidates, how we measure people's merit and the constraints on people in their political activism. We as voters need to consider what characteristics our representatives have.

If we as a society don't get smarter at interweaving family with work then we will miss out on women who could be contributing to our public good, we will narrow our children's understanding of what the different sexes can do, and we will continue to relegate males to the public sphere, granting them only second class roles in parenting.

None of that can be good for the future of our democracy.