

Women, Pre-selection and Merit: Who Decides?

Senator the Hon. Margaret Reynolds

Many Australian women would assume that the greatest barrier to women's participation in parliament is attracting sufficient votes to be elected. However, such reasoning ignores the reality of party political systems and the degree to which pre-selection of candidates is carefully controlled by the party power brokers, usually men.

Pre-selection methods vary between and within parties, but the situation for women as candidates is comparable, in that the first hurdle to political representation is actually within the Australian party structure, where a dominant male culture still prevails, regardless of the fundamental and political ideology.

The hurdles for women to gain election to legislative positions in Australia are mainly those that take place within 'the secret garden of politics'—within party selectorate hierarchies...[which] tolerate the continuing advantages of incumbency for men.¹

In 1977, a Labor candidate in New South Wales, Ann Conlon, described the landscape of political parties as that of tribal territory. She said: 'Inside it the ruling group resides and rules, occasionally permitting certain outsiders the pleasure.'²

¹ I. McAllister, *Political Behaviour: Citizens, Parties and Elites in Australia*, Longman, Melbourne, 1992, p.225.

² A. Conlon, "'Women in Politics', A Personal Viewpoint', *The Australian Quarterly*, September, 1977, vol.49, no.3, p.14.

Certainly, the present gender imbalance in Australia's federal and state parliamentary representation—since Australia led the way in women's electoral reform—would seem to reinforce this view of women as 'outsiders' with no major political party having an enviable record in endorsing women candidates. It could be said that it is only the minority parties, the Democrats, the Greens and independent candidates where you tend to see more equitable numbers of women and perhaps that tells us something.

Between 1943 and 1975, the Australian Labor Party endorsed twenty-one women candidates for the House of Representatives, and just one, Joan Child, the Member for Henty, was elected in 1974. In the same period, nine women were endorsed as Senate candidates and just four elected, Dorothy Tangney (1943–68), Jean Melzer (1974–81), Ruth Coleman (1974–87) and Susan Ryan (1975–88).³

There is a similar pattern to women's participation in state parliaments, although the precedent was established much earlier in the states when May Holman was elected to the Western Australian Parliament in 1925. In New South Wales between 1931 and 1975, ten women were elected—Catherine Green, Ellen Webster, Mary Quirk, Lilian Fowler (Lang Labor), Gertrude Melville, Edna Roper, Anne Press, Amelia Rygate, Evelyn Barron and Kathleen Anderson. In Victoria between 1938 and 1975 just one woman, Fanny Brownbill (1938–48), was elected. In Western Australia between 1925 and 1975 four women were elected: May Holman (1925–39), Ruby Hutchison (1954–71), Lyla Elliott (1971–86) and Grace Vaughan (1974–80). In Queensland between 1966 and 1975, just one woman, Vi Jordan (1966–74), was elected. In South Australia, between 1965 and 1975 two women were elected: Molly Byrne (1965–79) and Anne Levy (1975–). In Tasmania between 1951 and 1975, three women were elected: Lucy Grounds (1951–58), Phyllis Benjamin (1952–76) and Lynda Heaven (1962–64). Women were not elected to the Territory parliaments until 1977 in the Northern Territory and 1989 in the Australian Capital Territory.⁴

Federally the recognition of Labor women began to improve between 1975 and 1980 when thirty-seven women were actually endorsed for the House of Representatives, but only three were elected, indicating the category of seat for which women were endorsed.⁵ In Queensland between 1960 and 1992 forty-three Labor women were endorsed for state seats, but only ten were elected as the remainder had been endorsed for predominantly unwinnable seats.

It is quite clear that within the political system that has prevailed in Australia women have been considered to be in the background. They have not even been in the back rooms. I think it does highlight the barriers that women have faced in the past in relation to pre-selection. Women have varying experience of pre-selection and some have paid tribute to male mentors. Sue Neacy, who was a candidate for the Western Australian unwinnable seat of Curtin in 1972, has quite fond memories of the support she received from men in 1972. She says:

³ M. Reynolds and J. Willoughby (eds), 'Herstory, Australian Labor Women in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments 1925–1994', Townsville, July 1994, pp.143–4.

⁴ *ibid.*, pp.145–9.

⁵ R. McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891–1991*, South Melbourne, 1991, p.176.

The old Trades Hall, downstairs, Room 23, one cold night. I always remember Room 23 for being cold. State Executive was sitting for its highest functions—the selection of a candidate. Nervous in front of my mostly (male) audience, who sat patiently listening on those cramped uncomfortable benches, I bungled my speech. Urged by Joe Chamberlain, I muddled through. The goodwill expressed toward me that night and the help was fantastic.⁶

However, other women were less complimentary about the motives of certain male party members. Pat Giles, Senator for Western Australia, 1981–93, recalls standing for pre-selection for the Senate in 1979:

... initially expecting to be unopposed for the third place on a ticket which carried two sitting Senators. At the last minute the second place became vacant with the unexpected retirement of John Weeldon, and the large field of comrades ganged up to keep me out of this precious second position.

Having been perfectly acceptable for the third place, I was now totally inappropriate for the following reasons:

there were too many women in the Senate;
we were preselecting too many damn[ed] academics;
women's issues were not federal issues.⁷

Cheryl Davenport, Member of the Legislative Council for South Metropolitan Province, Western Australia, regards the pre-selection process as a major deterrent for women candidates. She writes:

It has been my personal view that if you are successful in the pre-selection process ballot within the Party, the State or Federal Election which follows seems easy in comparison. Having observed many women coping with the brutality of the pre-selection process it is not surprising that our numbers are still low in the parliaments throughout the Nation. This process is a major deterrent to women trying again for pre-selection.

The argument constantly put that parliamentary representatives must be pre-selected on merit rather than by affirmative action programs or quota systems assumes a level playing field exists. Women are well aware of the systematic barriers. Until those barriers are recognised by ALL in the political process and removed, selection on merit is a myth!⁸

⁶ S. Neacy, 'Where were you in '72?', in R. Joyce, *Social Images 1891–1991*, ACT Branch ALP, Canberra, 1991, p.125.

⁷ P. Giles, personal contribution to *The Last Bastion*, Business and Professional Publishing, Sydney 1995.

⁸ C. Davenport, *ibid.*

And when it comes to women's experience of pre-selection, I am afraid some people are fairly unkind about their experiences. For instance, Diana Warnock, a member of the Legislative Assembly in Perth, in her assessment of the pre-selection process has described her experience of pre-selection as:

an 'open' contest—with a speech to several hundred delegates and some savage and protracted number crunching. You make your speech then are obliged to leave the room whilst your opponent, or opponents make theirs.

In my case another woman—indeed a friend and former colleague—was my opponent. We took nervous turns, she and I, locked outside the meeting room, listening to the relative levels of applause coming from inside the room crowded with delegates; the spectators at the Colosseum.

It is a combat sport invented by men, and the rules won't change until there are many more women in there to change them.⁹

Three Labor women who pioneered representation of their party in parliament were actually demoted by the pre-selection process at a time when there was little recognition of the importance of gender and equity in the democratic process.

Dorothy Tangney, as the first Labor woman elected to Federal Parliament in 1943, headed the Western Australian Senate ticket in 1946, 1951, 1955 and 1961. However, in 1967, when Tangney was aged 55, the pre-selection processes were changed and her position was downgraded by the then male-dominated Western Australian state executive. The electoral backlash to this decision was reflected in a large number of informal votes as supporters of the senior Senator expressed anger at her demotion and consequently voted only for Dorothy Tangney. When she left parliament, she refused to criticise directly the party as she said 'she wanted to go out clean but she was sorry for the women in the party who never got pre-selection or only for the hopeless seats'.¹⁰

A strong critic of male attitudes in the Queensland branch, Vi Jordan, ran unsuccessfully in a plebiscite for the safe seat of Ipswich in 1962. However, it was her second attempt in 1964 which raised the ire of sections of the ALP when she contested the plebiscite against six male

contenders. As Tom Burns, now Deputy Premier of Queensland, recalled in his condolence motion:

I saw Vi Jordan take on a male dominated organisation in the toughest plebiscite I have ever seen in Ipswich.

⁹ D. Warnock, *ibid.*

¹⁰ M. Sawyer and M. Simms, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p.121.

After the result had been thrown out, I was sent there to re-run it. She suffered abuse from people who came out of hotels, but she stood her ground. She took on people such as Jack Egerton and won.¹¹

But after eight years in parliament, Vi Jordan was to experience a similar fate to that of Dorothy Tangney when pre-selection was centralised. On that occasion Jordan won a local plebiscite following a redistribution, but she was not renominated by the all-male electoral executive committee and she left parliament aged 61.

More recently, the second Labor woman to be elected to the Senate, Jean Melzer (Victoria, 1974–81), was unable to withstand the pressure of a factional power struggle when in 1980, aged 55, she was relegated as a sitting senator to the unwinnable number three position, allowing yet another male to take the safe number two position at the next election.¹² Women saw Melzer as an important symbol in their determination to bring about social reform in what was then a male dominated party. One positive outcome was that: ‘Melzer’s fate convinced Labor women that the party needed affirmative action more than ever.’¹³

It is interesting to observe that these older women were not treated with the respect normally offered experienced senior parliamentarians, men in their fifties or even their sixties, who are seen as being eminently suitable and indeed at the peak of their careers. That has changed a little in recent years as we focus much more democratically on encouraging young people to come into parliament.

Between 1980 and 1995, twelve Labor women have been elected to the House of Representatives, but the pattern of membership in marginal seats and voluntary retirement has limited the number of Labor women at any one time. In 1980 Ros Kelly and Elaine Darling, followed Joan Child; and Wendy Fatin, Helen Mayer and Jeanette McHugh entered parliament after the 1983 election. The 1984 election saw the number of Labor women rise to seven, with all women maintaining their positions and Carolyn Jakobsen, joining the parliamentary ranks.

However in 1987 Helen Mayer was defeated in her marginal seat but the total reached eight with the election of Mary Crawford, the Member for Forde, and Elizabeth Harvey, the Member for Hawker. By 1990 Joan Child had retired and Elizabeth Harvey had not been re-elected after a very difficult redistribution, but Janice Crosio, the Member for Prospect, maintained the total at seven.

Between 1993 and 1994, five additional women were elected, Maggie Deahm, Mary Easson, Marjorie Henzell, Silvia Smith and Carmen Lawrence, establishing a record number of ten women members. But not long after that record was established, Ros Kelly retired. Since

¹¹ T. J. Burns, *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, Motion of Condolence, 4 August 1982, p.20.

¹² McMullin, *op.cit.*, p.398.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.399.

1974, only fifteen Labor women have been elected to the House of Representatives and of these, three have since retired and three have been defeated at the polls.

In 1983 there were seven Labor women senators, but by 1987 it remained the same with the retirement of Jean Hearn and the addition of Sue West. But by 1990 two senators, Ruth Coleman and Susan Ryan, had retired, leaving a total of five Labor women senators with the subsequent return of Sue West to a safe position on the New South Wales ticket.

In 1993 Pat Giles retired and Kay Denman from Tasmania was appointed to replace former Senator Michael Tate. Two recent appointments—Belinda Neal from New South Wales and Jacinta Collins from Victoria, who replaced Senator Olive Zakharov after her tragic death—have filled Senate vacancies restoring the numbers of Labor women in the Upper House to six. This is just one short of the position which existed in 1983 to 1987.

There have been steady increases in Labor women's representation in state and territory parliaments since 1983. Western Australia has elected fourteen new women, Queensland ten, Victoria ten, New South Wales thirteen, South Australia six, Tasmania two, the Australian Capital Territory four and the Northern Territory two.

Yet these statistics, when placed in perspective of male participation, demonstrate the entrenched resistance to power sharing in regard to political decision-making. And could I say that, while I am likely to know more about my own party, that resistance exists within both major parties and I believe it is something that is part of the inheritance we have within the culture of Australia in regard to other institutions. There is resistance to more women in senior levels of decision-making in business, in the law and, indeed, even in the federal public service. The total number of all elected members in state, federal, upper and lower houses of parliament is 841. As of July 1995, there were 136 women members and 705 male members. So about 16 per cent of our decision makers in Australian parliaments are women.

Therefore, the debate about equity and democracy continues with many women disputing whether Australia has really embraced complete democratic principles if our representation is so skewed. Could it be argued that we have effectively adopted a gender 'gerrymander', where **49 per cent** of the population actually constitutes **84 per cent** of the nation's parliamentary positions?

Since the ALP introduced its 35 per cent quota rule to guarantee that women will be pre-selected in one-third of winnable seats, the focus has shifted to merit. When it is suggested that women take a share of power, sections of the community doubt their ability to do so and this has particularly been stated by some prominent people, where it was said, 'Well, of course, we would love to endorse more women. We'd love to have more women candidates, but where are they? We'd have to train them first.'

On this question of merit—when was 'merit' ever used to pre-select candidates for political office? And how will we define merit? Do we really want our democracy to become, effectively, a meritocracy? Would we say that everyone has to have an economics degree, a law degree or an IQ of a particular level? So what do we mean by merit and have we defined it? Is there an open advertisement listing the qualifications and experience necessary? Are structured job interview procedures adopted? Are panels of interviewers independently

appointed to select the best person for the vacancy? I think we need to think of these questions and the obvious answers to them when the criticism about selecting on merit comes forward.

Politicians' positions have never been determined on merit. Of course, there are many people who have merit who come into parliament and that is a mix of the ability and the commitment to what they believe in from their particular political ideology. But we have never been able, in any country that I know of, to actually list these particular criteria for determining who will make a good political representative. Politicians' positions are determined by their ability to win support from a narrow section of a political party or trade union, by their knowledge and their experience within that structure and their ability to attract the numbers in pre-selection ballots.

'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 to suit them for parliamentary life. Dale Spender's assessment of the merit argument suggests that: 'Men can't or won't see that their definitions of merit, expectation and experiences are nothing more than rules they've made up to protect their own positions.'¹⁴

And Carmen Lawrence considers that:

Politicians, mostly men, have no special training, no intellectual superiority, no particular moral superiority and no particular skills of communications. Those who have come up through the ranks, serve time, do deals and devote themselves to political careers make least effective members.¹⁵

She is referring to whether or not members have links with their communities.

Women's qualifications and life experiences are not so readily assessed as being suitable for a parliamentary career. Yet an analysis of Labor women's educational and professional backgrounds demonstrates the diversity of skills and knowledge offered by the women who have become political representatives.

A majority of women had tertiary qualifications and had worked as teachers, nurses, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, librarians, social workers and journalists. A number of women came to politics from business, from the trade union movement and from public service backgrounds. An urban planner, a scientist, a radiographer, as well as an artist, a writer, a singer and two women graziers represented some of the professions. A considerable number of women parliamentarians have experience as electorate officers and as elected local government representatives. Janice Crosio enjoys the distinction of being the only woman to have served in local, state and federal areas.

As Australians approach the centenary of federation in the year 2001, there is ongoing debate about future constitutional structures; the republic, the relationship between federal and state

¹⁴ D. Spender, article in *Courier Mail*, August 1991.

¹⁵ C. Lawrence, speech to Labor Women's Conference, Adelaide, April 1994.

governments and self-government in indigenous communities. But less discussed is the role of women in the new century—the general community rarely hears of feminist advocacy for a bill of rights to enshrine equality for women within the Constitution.

Justice Elizabeth Evatt has argued for consideration of equality of rights to guarantee recognition of women's status, indicating that Australia could adopt either the United States model of an 'equal protection clause' or adopt something similar to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.¹⁶ The Canadian model is the most comprehensive affirmation of equality under the law, but also specifies that this does not preclude laws or programs designed to address disadvantaged groups in the community.

There was recognition of inequality in women's status when in 1910 Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association asked the Australian delegates to the Imperial Conference in London to put the issue of the loss of citizenship rights upon marriage on the agenda for consideration of all countries in the British Empire. However, the Acting Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, refused arguing that these were merely domestic matters and not the concern of self-governing dominions. The Women's Political Association disagreed, arguing that on the contrary they were questions of human rights and liberties.¹⁷ I suppose every time we think that we are the first to be debating some of these issues, we really need to read our history.

Just this week, I was reminded of the fact when I went to the exhibition about Jessie Street, who was so integrally involved in the establishment of the United Nations. I found the speech she made from San Francisco in a radio transcript absolutely eerie because I was listening to that speech just days after returning from the Beijing Women's Conference. She was using the same language: the same advocacy and the same commitment was coming through in the tone of her voice. I thought fifty years on we are still having to make the same arguments that were made so long ago and in this case we could be approaching 100 years and we are still making the same arguments.

It has often been assumed that women had no involvement in the debate leading to federation just because photos of our founding fathers show men exclusively. But there were founding mothers. Historians such as Helen Irving are rediscovering long forgotten women's political

organisations that were very active. She points out:

The most significant activity of women was around the referendum campaigns of 1898–99 and in Western Australia in 1900, particularly in colonies where popular opinion in the Constitution was sharply divided. Women were divided on the issue. Rose Scott, a prominent member of the NSW Womanhood Suffrage League was opposed to Federation and argued publicly that the proposed senate was undemocratic. Federation would also

¹⁶ E. Evatt, *Final Report of the Constitutional Commission*, vol.1, AGPS, Canberra, 1988, p.541.

¹⁷ See Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old Worlds and New: Feminist Citizenship, Nation and Race, the Destabilisation of Identity' in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, C. Daley and M. Nolan (eds), Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1994, p.281.

be a financial disaster, she said, unless the Federal Treasurer was a woman.¹⁸

A century later we are still debating the need to incorporate women into the upper echelons of national decision-making. Dorian Wild, the journalist, summed up the current situation a short time ago:

Here we are, in the closing years of the 20th century, after 205 years of European settlement, 92 years of federation and 25 years of assertive feminism, and to all intents and purposes the Parliaments of Australia are awash with testosterone.¹⁹

Indeed, prior to and on my return from Beijing, I spoke publicly of the need to work towards fifty-fifty representation, not just in our parliaments but at local government level, on our boards and statutory authorities and in the private sector to ensure that there is an equity about decision-making. When I advocated this I thought it was a fairly low key reasonable statement to make. After all, my party has committed itself to 35 per cent representation by the year 2002 and I think with further effort we can improve on that. Certainly I am sure we can improve in the next few years within the Labor Party. So what was so special about advocating 50 per cent? A prominent radio commentator thought such a suggestion was weird. 'Fifty-fifty representation? I ask you!' It sounds pretty reasonable, pretty low key and commonsense to me.

The question of women's representation in parliament was under the international spotlight at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing just recently. The United Nations has studied the situation for women in politics and decision-making in the late twentieth century and has concluded: 'The presence of women in national parliaments is one of the clearest indicators of women's participation in the political process.'²⁰

A recent Inter-Parliamentary Union survey revealed that the proportion of women in the world's houses of parliament has dropped significantly in the last five years from 14.6 per cent to 10 per cent with women from post-communist countries particularly affected. The decline internationally is particularly evident in countries that have gone from a single to a multi-party system or from an electoral system with a mechanism or quota for the representation of various groups in a country to a system of free competition among parties.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union looked at the composition of the single or lower chamber of the parliament of each country. State or provincial parliaments or upper houses of parliament were not taken into account and that is important to note in terms of the rates for the Australian Parliament. Thus, Australia for example appears to have a lower representation than was achieved after the March 1993 election, that is, 13.45 per cent.

¹⁸ J. Conley, 'Federation and the Mothers of Invention', the *Age*, November 1994.

¹⁹ D. Wild, 'No Job For a Woman', *Ita*, vol.5, no.7, September 1994.

²⁰ 'The Advancement of Women', Department of Public Information, United Nations, NY, 1995, p.iv.

The ten leading countries for women's participation were:

the Seychelles	45.8%
Finland	39.0%
Norway	35.8%
Sweden	35.8%
Denmark	33.0%
the Netherlands	29.3%
Iceland	23.8%
Cuba	22.8%
Austria	21.3%
China	21.0%

So you can see why many of us believe that this is an issue about which we have to continually advocate a more realistic approach to women in decision-making in Australia. It is not just for me to advocate within my political party. We must advocate across political parties. We must advocate across the decision-making spectrum, because important decisions are being taken on a minute-by-minute basis around this country and the majority of the decisions that affect you and me and our families and all Australians are being taken by a narrower sector of the society than is necessary.

Now that does not mean that they are bad decisions. That does not mean that we want to change the position of decision-making so that women take over and we have a lopsided position in regard to decision-making in the future. Women expect to be able to power share with men. We believe we have the knowledge, the experience and the expertise to make good decisions. In fact, we know we have and we believe that if you can get some of the entrenched structures to change attitude we will have more effective decision-making.

Next week the Australian Labor Party approaches the first anniversary of our historic quota policy decision. I know there will be sections of the media, and I am not one to criticise the media, saying, 'First birthday of this historic rule change and what has been achieved? There aren't 35 per cent of Labor women in every parliament in Australia'. Of course there are not and it was always known that it would take time to change the culture and change some of the practices, but we have a policy. We are the only party with a policy and we are implementing it.

Progress has been made in the nation's upper houses, and in the lower chambers of Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, New South Wales as well as the Northern Territory and the ACT. The following figures reveal that the quota has already been achieved in some areas, or is within reach, given that this is 1995 and we do have that time frame. That is why I am quite happy to say, 'Let's not settle for 35 per cent; let's work towards the 50 per cent'. However, pre-selections in Queensland, Victoria and for the House of Representatives do need to be opened up if these arenas are to reach our target. The statistics for both lower and upper houses are:

	Lower House	Upper House
Tasmania	27.3%	— —

Western Australia	26.1%	14.3%
South Australia	33.3%	33.3%
New South Wales	18.0%	41.2%
Victoria	12.3%	28.6%
Queensland	13.3%	— —
the ACT	33.3%	— —
the Northern Territory	25.0%	— —
the Commonwealth	13.4%	20.7%

Clearly it is easier for women to gain the endorsement of their parties for pre-selection for upper houses where a listing system is adopted and it is easier to argue for power sharing. Whereas, when there is only the one position there is considerable competition.

I want to answer briefly the question that I know will still be put, ‘What about women and merit?’ and why is it that we need to have this particular policy in the Labor Party? I think in the Labor Party we were realistic. We tried affirmative action. We had had affirmative action for over ten years. It was not working as fast as many of us believed it should. Changes were being made and we had seen that increase of women coming into parliaments for the Labor Party, certainly from 1980 onwards. But we felt that if we did not take particular action that rate of progress would be fairly steady and not particularly dramatic.

In conclusion, let me say that it is quite obvious that, given the changes in Australian society over the last ten, fifteen or twenty years, young women are not going to accept it, and indeed many older women do not accept it. We have educated young people to expect that they are equal. We have changed legislation. We have adopted affirmative action policies. We have introduced a whole range of programs to recognise the needs of women in our society. So it is ironic that one of the last bastions is going to be the Parliament where so many of these policies have emanated.

But we do see, quite clearly, that women will not accept the blocking out of their opportunities to enter decision-making. Women will no longer accept that they are outsiders in the democratic process and they will be demanding that ‘the secret garden of politics’ must be opened up to 50 per cent of the population. Voters will no longer accept the old style machinations of politics, factional politics, deals within deals and people pulling strings and having particular approaches in determining the choice of candidates.

Pre-selection procedures must adapt and adopt a much more sophisticated and professional approach to choosing candidates of diversity who will ultimately represent the whole community.

Questioner — I am actually a Liberal candidate for the seat of Fraser in the upcoming election. I am interested in your point about the way the political process of the parties has excluded women. In the recent ACT government elections, where the actual voters had the opportunity to select the candidates, the political process of the parties was effectively excluded. In fact, we lost a woman in our parliament. We went from six women to five. The actual voters decided on less women in parliament. Can you comment on that at all?

Senator Reynolds — Without wanting to get into political debates in what is a general forum, it is clear that it has been demonstrated that women candidates are very popular with the electorate. In fact, when the Labor party announced its quota rule and there was some criticism of it, we found that a majority of both men and women endorsed the concept of quotas to ensure that our political party was moving in endorsing more women.

Obviously, there are other factors at a particular election and, once you are in an election climate, many of those other elements will take over. I have based my comments on ensuring that we actually get more women to that stage, because, once you are out there in a political climate, the debates of the day take over and voters will decide, as voters do decide, on a whole variety of issues. But I think it is the structures that we have to change and, when the major political parties have continued to endorse predominantly men, it is those structures that we have to scrutinise and change as we are now committed to changing.

Questioner — The research that I have been conducting on the three major parties in Australia over the last couple of years reaffirms the perspectives of both speakers so far, Margaret Reynolds from the Labor Party and the local Liberal Party candidate. What it suggests is that in Australia we have entrenched systems of different party cultures.

In my research I included a question about attitudes towards the role of women. I came across some very interesting differences by party and also by state. If we were going to give the parties scores out of ten for their attitudes towards women by party and state, the most progressive party and state was in fact the Victorian Labor Party in which about 90 per cent of men and women all agreed with the need for quotas. This was before the decision last year at the national conference. There was widespread agreement on the need for equality. In fact, the least progressive state was Queensland, where 11 per cent of the National Party agreed with the need for quotas. Within the Liberal Party there were state differences as well.

Unfortunately, parties throughout Australia agreed on the need for more training for women, which I see in effect as a belief in remedial systems. But clearly there are differences. The Labor Party is a more rule based party and believes in achieving change through rules. The Liberal Party believes in incrementalism and the National Party, by its record and its attitudes in the survey, did not seem to believe in the need for women really at all in parliament. This suggests that change has to be achieved within the parties differentially, according to their cultures and also according to the different states. The most progressive Liberal Party division was actually South Australia.

Questioner — I was wondering whether you had any ideas on how the ALP and any other Australian parties, if they chose to follow the quota line, will avoid the pitfalls that the British Labour Party has become mired in, where they have designated some seats as constitutively pre-selections for women only and disgruntled men have taken them to court?

Senator Reynolds — I certainly hope that we avoid that, as I believe we will, in the Australian situation. The quota rule is like so many rules or, indeed, legislation in a parliamentary sense. It is often there to assist a change in attitudes. For example, sex discrimination legislation has impacted more dramatically in terms of changed attitudes in Australia than in the actual and specific implementation of the points of the legislation. I think that is similar with the quota rule.

I do not want to see a situation where party members sit down and say, 'Well, that seat will be a woman's seat and that one will be for a man and this will be for him and this will be for her'. Quotas provide opportunities to make parties aware that, in considering their choice of candidates, they have to keep an eye on how many women are coming through and are being considered. In the case of my own party, there has been enormous improvement in the last fifteen years, but there can be further improvement. I hope that we can achieve change in an informal sense. I think it is easier in the Senate than in the upper houses of the states, but of course that is not really where we have a major problem, certainly not in some of the state legislatures; and even in the federal Senate we are up to 20 per cent.

It is a rule that impacts on attitudes as much as a rule that involves a very rigid process. From all that I have heard coming out of the different state branches, we are strenuously avoiding a rigid process approach, but rather encouraging women candidates. In Queensland, for instance, I am developing a register of potential women candidates. I do not mind if they are sixteen or sixty. I want to know the names, qualifications and interests of women who might, at some stage in the future, consider running for local, state or federal parliament for the Labor Party. These less formal mechanisms are far more appropriate. Perhaps if the British Labour Party had moved that way, they would not have got into the situation that they have. There is a lack of generosity of spirit in the British Labour Party. I will go on record as saying that I am confident that there is an abundance of generosity of spirit in the Australian Labor Party.

Questioner — How do we encourage women to join political parties so that they may participate in a new process? The other part of that question is, given that in the Australian Labor Party we have a well defined factional relationship, we have to make sure that we do not allow the factional manipulations to demerit the process of bringing women into positions for pre-selection.

Senator Reynolds — It is certainly true that women have been influenced as much by the culture and cultural expectations of political parties, and I will talk specifically of our own party. There has not been the expectation, until the last fifteen years, that women would move into those positions. Work has been done by Marian Simms showing how many women initially came into the Parliament because of a husband or father dying. They took the place when the party felt it was important that the name be used. Once they got into Parliament, I am sure they did make an enormous contribution in their own right, but originally they came via that male culture.

Women are now seeing that that male culture is lessening in impact. It is changing; it is adapting; it is adjusting. Some of that might be a little painful on both sides, but that change of emphasis has been going on out there for some time in terms of the numbers of women who have been seeing themselves as potential candidates. Now with a rule change, it does offer us an opportunity to say to many more women, 'Please come and join us because we now have a very specific process'. Some of those hurdles for women no longer exist in the same way that they have done in the past.

Questioner — I enjoyed your suggestion that within Australian culture ‘merit is a mate’. Given that that might be operating, is there a willingness for the ALP women’s caucus to work across party with women from other political parties within the Parliament? Can you give examples of where that might have been demonstrated to work on these issues? Is it a case that ideology comes before gender and could you comment on the recently established women’s political party?

Senator Reynolds — I love ‘merit is a mate’. That is great. Your first question related to whether we can work across the political spectrum within the Parliament. Yes and no, a typical political reply. It is true that within parliaments there is such a hothouse atmosphere of ‘I know what I believe in and the other side must be wrong’. I think that many women do work better across party lines and are better able to try to reduce that sort of combative approach. It is one of the reasons I would argue that we need to change some of the parliamentary structures.

You will notice that some women, and indeed some men, do manage to try to adopt a more low-key, reasonable approach such as, ‘Well, I respect your point of view even though I do not agree with it’, whereas others have to get into a verbal scrum almost to get their point of view across. We do have cross party lunches at least twice a year. We raise and debate issues that affect us specifically as women parliamentarians. There are occasions when we have talked across party lines and certainly in our electorates we work more across party lines. We do that between men and women on Queensland issues or Western Australian issues specifically.

Some of that is happening, but I take your point that there could be more of it if the Parliament were not run in the way that it is, so dependent on that sort of combative, aggressive element that you see, particularly in relation to question time. I always say to people who are critical of what they see in question time that they should come and listen to some of the debates, or that they should come and listen to our work in committees where you get very reasoned debate and people working together.

I will take your third question next, which related to the Australian Women’s Party. The Australian Women’s Party, which was established in my own state, has been established partly because of disenchantment with the slow rate of progress in that state in regard to the implementation of the quota in a particularly bitter pre-selection battle. There I am using words of conflict, but that is what it was. A number of women did, in fact, become disenchanted, particularly with some policy issues as well in that state. I always say it is better to work and change within than to go outside.

As a feminist I do not like to say that I do not think that approach will work. Certainly, from my political and philosophical perspective it will not, but I do not even think from a feminist perspective it will work. Because you really have to work within the mainstream of where the power is and the power is with the major parties. We can be very complimentary about the minority parties and the fact that they have more equitable numbers, but they do not have the power. I guess it sounds a horribly pragmatic answer, but I would always advocate that people work within the mainstream to change wherever they felt comfortable from within.

However, I should just comment briefly on an initiative that we took from Beijing. We had a workshop on women in decision-making. This concept was endorsed by about 300 women attending the Womenspeak. This was not the specific workshop but the Australian forum for Australian women held every evening for networking and debating the issues. It was sponsored by Westpac. We set up a network loosely called the Australian all-party women's cabinet which was a bit cheeky, but cabinets traditionally of course have been male, hierarchical and elitist and you have to go through all sorts of structures to get there. The Australian all-party women's cabinet is simply any woman, wherever she lives and works in Australia, who believes that we should be advocating for more women in decision-making, be it at the local tennis club, the local parents and citizens association, local government, federal parliament, the Westpac board of directors or wherever. It is a very loose network.

We are going to do some work on constitutional reform, a specific group of us, but to be a member of this network, you simply have to believe that women's voices should be heard in decision-making and work towards that in your own community. Ultimately, I would like to see it enshrined in the Constitution.

At a personal level, I find it difficult to consider anything other than as a feminist, but, as a member of my chosen political party, on occasions I have to adapt my feminism to what is happening within my political party. I guess that would be the most honest answer I could give. There are conflicts between political ideology and feminism. I try to juggle each of them in the best way that I can. But at a very personal level, I have absolute commitment as a feminist, but at a public level, I have absolute commitment as an elected Labor Party senator.

Questioner — I was wondering if you had any views on constructive ideas for progress at lower levels down to the grassroots of political parties? Related to that, you have touched on the style of politics—antagonism, conflict and so on. I think that is also evident at very humble levels in political parties. Do you think that drives women away and do you think that that style might change? Finally, once women have been pre-selected and are in Parliament, do you have any views on how you get more representation of women at the ministerial level?

Senator Reynolds — I will answer the last question first: how do we get more women in ministries? Partly we get more women into the Parliament. I pulled out some statistics just recently. The Labor Party has had, over the last fifteen years, some thirty-five women ministers, that is across Australia of course, which, particularly as you look at it for such a short period of time, indicates that there is no question about merit. Women, when they come into the Parliament, do make an impression, do move on and move into ministerial positions. That is demonstrated by those figures.

In regard to what extent do women make a difference in changing the style, I think there has been some change. Those of you who are avid watchers of question time in both the Senate and House of Representatives may doubt that, but that is a particular sort of theatre of the Parliament. It is one of those situations where if people are not forceful, the media would suggest that they had lost it; that they were weak; that they could not cope. I suppose that is a dilemma that women face, and some men. There is such an expectation of being forceful and aggressive in politics that until quite recently, with certain women being more prominent, that

lower key approach of some men has been disregarded as a sign of weakness. In actual fact it may well be, in many instances, a sign of strength.

So men and women can suffer because of the stereotyping and the expectation of what constitutes a strong, competent elected representative. I would argue that women have already changed quite dramatically the way this place functions. For instance, I remember in Old Parliament House, women staff members coming to Olive Zakharov, Pat Giles and me to complain about sexual harassment of a type that today would make headlines. You just do not hear that in this place all these years later because the processes are there; the attitudes have changed. I am not saying we have eliminated sexual harassment, but there is now a law; there are procedures; there are changes of attitudes. Of course, the whole range of legislation that has been introduced over the last ten to twelve years very much relates to gender related issues. It has come very much as a result of women at the policy development level.

Questioner — How do you change the pre-selection processes?

Senator Reynolds — Knowing the way it has been for so long, I do find it difficult to suggest practical reforms because I know there is a tradition about the way pre-selections have been done. I do think we should be looking at a different approach. Certainly in Queensland, and I can only speak from a Queensland point of view in this regard, the form that you fill in as a potential candidate probably would not get you a job in any other sort of senior area. Political parties, and it is not just my political party, are very much a numbers game.

I well remember my own experience of pre-selection in 1980 because I put so much effort into my speech. It was written and rewritten, checked and double-checked and I even had the pages all in order. I got up there and looked out at a sea of male faces, most of them reading the Sunday newspapers. There were a few of my women and men supporters at the back, but there was just this solid block of men. Even before I started I thought, 'What am I doing? I haven't got a hope here. It's all been decided'. Now, it was not that I expected to win, it was my first attempt and I did not at all expect to win, but I did expect to be listened to. It is better now, but I think some of that culture still lingers, and we really need to make our pre-selection processes much more sophisticated and professional. We do pre-select good people, but it is more good luck than good management.

Questioner — Possibly one problem is the overall economic system. If we had a different economic system it might affect the number of women in Parliament. The education system could change and develop political candidates at a much earlier age. The whole education system could change and women of aptitude could be selected at a very early age.

Senator Reynolds — I was focusing very much on those women who would like to come into Parliament, who are ready to come into Parliament and who do not regard that they have particular barriers. But, of course, I did not even touch on the barriers that have existed and continue to exist in education and educational opportunities in the past; economics, as you have suggested; conditioning; and, of course, the traditional role of women as it has been perceived in the past. My best answer to much of what you have said is to draw your attention to our most recent Labor woman senator, Jacinta Collins, who is in the Parliament with her

three-week-old son. We are hoping that young James Michael is going to make quite an impact on the Parliament, particularly with regard to the provision of the child care within these walls. So you are absolutely right in highlighting many of those issues.

Questioner — Do you believe the ALP will make the 35 per cent quota target by 2002?

Senator Reynolds — Yes, I do. As I said in my speech when I quoted those figures, I think we are going to have to monitor Queensland, Victoria and the House of Representatives pre-selections very closely, because they are the ones that are still down at the level of 12 per cent and 13 per cent. But when you look at the percentages in the upper houses of state arenas, New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia are all up there in the 20s, some of them are in the 30s and some are close to it or have already passed it. I think the quota rule has been important in reinforcing the need to ensure that we maintain the momentum that was developed from about 1980 onwards, but also to ensure that there is no slipping back.

For instance, Barbara Wiese in South Australia has recently retired. I am not sure if her successor has been named, but I understand that a man was going to take that position. So the 40 per cent that South Australia has attained is going to slip a little. That is what we have to monitor in all states, but I am particularly concerned about the three areas I mentioned. That is where the focus has to be.

Questioner — Could you comment on how you personally would take the election of a woman whose social philosophy was inherently anti-feminist?

Senator Reynolds — I would take it as I take the election of men and women whose philosophy is different to mine. It is a democracy and there will be feminists elected across the political spectrum who agree with me on many issues; there will be women across the political spectrum who will disagree with aspects of my philosophy. But, it is a democracy. It is not a question of only electing people who agree with Margaret Reynolds. It is a question of electing more women, more young people and more people from different ethnic backgrounds to reflect better the total Australian society.