

# **Gender Politics, Policy and the Labor Party: An Academic Perspective**

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*Paper to the National Labor Women's Conference 2002,*

I'd like to begin this paper by thanking the organisers for asking me to speak today. I'm aware that there are many women in this room who have done a great deal to improve the everyday lives of Australian women. I'm also well aware of the ALP's and Labor governments' proud record in this regard. So, as a political scientist who works on gender issues and has also written a lot on Labor governments, it really is a pleasure to talk to you.

I'd also like to begin by just reminding you of how far you have come before I discuss some issues to do with the future. A couple of days ago we celebrated Anzac day which reminded me of women's wartime contribution at home and abroad. It also made me remember that fear of women's employment during wartime led Labor Prime Minister Curtin to reassure male employees in 1943 that, not only would all women employed under war conditions be removed from employment when the men returned, but that that was what women would want. In Curtin's words: "I believe that in this country where there is no great numerical disparity between the sexes most women will ultimately be absorbed in the home ... I agree that the natural urge for motherhood, husband and home is the great motivating force in a woman's life."<sup>i</sup> The same year, Senator Cameron comforted male trade unionists concerned by female employment during wartime with the thought that an invasion of women into industry was preferable to a Japanese invasion: "To the unions who protest against employment of women's labour, I say I would far rather run the risk of additional women in industry than of allowing Japanese to land on our shore."<sup>ii</sup> In 1943,

incidentally, there was just one female MHR, Dame Enid Lyons UAP, and just one female Senator, Dorothy Tangney ALP.

Let us not forget how long attitudes such as Curtin's and Cameron's persisted and in what now seem extremely unlikely quarters. In his 1970 maiden speech (as they were still called then), Paul Keating deplored the fact that "husbands have been forced to send their wives to work in order to provide the necessaries of life." He asserted that "Family life is the very basis of our nationhood. In the past couple of years the government has boasted about the increasing number of women in the workforce. Rather than something to be proud of, I feel it is something of which we should be ashamed."<sup>iii</sup>

But times were already changing, as the advent of both so-called second-wave feminism and the election of the Whitlam Labor government showed. In a speech to the YWCA convention in August 1973, thirty years after Curtin's speech, Gough Whitlam confessed to being "very conscious of the shortcoming of my Party....It is, I frankly confess, a male dominated Party in a male dominated Parliament in a male dominated Society."<sup>iv</sup> Male dominated was a tactful understatement. There were just two women in the two houses of federal parliament in 1973, both Liberals. In August 1975 Whitlam opened the Women and Politics Conference with a speech that I think should be remembered as being equivalent in importance to Keating's famous Redfern Speech on Aboriginal issues. Whitlam said:

For most of this country's history women have lived without visible political power; they have been excluded from almost all levels of government in our society. The momentous decisions which affect how all people live have been made by a minority of individuals who

happen to be born white and male... We all live in this man-made, man-defined and man-controlled world.<sup>v</sup>

I've quoted such historical speeches to remind you of how much things have changed although perhaps, at some darker moments in your political life, the speeches may also remind you of how much some things have remained the same.

But, let's concentrate on the positive things for the moment.... Let's remember that within a few months of gaining office, the Whitlam Labor government had reopened the equal pay case to try to extend the Commission's 1969 judgement to women working in predominantly female industries and had introduced paid maternity leave for female government employees. (Don't some of these issues sound familiar?). They went on to establish a supporting mother's benefit and appoint Elizabeth Reid as the Prime Minister's Women's Affairs adviser. They also went on to introduce new child care and women's health policies. In short, the Whitlam government was implementing a proud Labor tradition of introducing policies that aimed to improve the position of women in Australian society.<sup>vi</sup>

I can't mention all the Labor state government initiatives here but, as a South Australian, I would also like to remind you of all the social initiatives brought in by the Dunstan Labor government – initiatives which sometimes seem to be mysteriously forgotten in the Eastern states, even when they were later introduced elsewhere.

It is a proud Labor tradition of supporting women's rights that was carried on by the Hawke and Keating governments in various affirmative action, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity measures which I'm sure you

remember, so I won't list them all here. But, as a sign of how much things have changed, I will remind you that 23 years on that same Paul Keating, who in 1970 was decrying the role of women in the workforce, included a substantial section on increasing childcare places in one of his government's major economic policy statements, *Investing in the Nation*. And he argued that he'd done that because his government believed that childcare was no longer a welfare matter but rather a major economic issue for the nation as a whole since women's increasing participation in the workforce was essential if women were to contribute to developing Australia's competitive advantage. (At that time, there were around 29 women from various parties in the federal parliament).

And, of course just as ALP governments have introduced policies designed to ensure gender equity, so has the Party. I refer to well-known measures such as the 1981 affirmative action principles regarding representation in decision-making structures and the 1994 affirmative action rules regarding parliamentary preselection. Now, I'm not saying that everything is perfect about these measures, and obviously it is hard to fully assess their efficacy anyway when the ALP has lost federal elections. 35% also isn't 50% and, despite figures of above 35% success in states such as Qld, SA and Victoria, I know that Joan Kirner has recently raised issues about female parliamentary representation in NSW – even raising the issue of possible sanctions. However, compared with the sort of figures I was mentioning previously, current figures on women in parliament are still a major advance.

So, to reiterate, one of the reasons I was happy to talk to you today was because, as a political scientist who works on gender issues, it is a pleasure to talk to members of a party that has played such a significant role in transforming the lives of Australian women.

We should also never forget how far we have to go. What are some of the issues you will face in the future? All I can do in the remaining time is talk in very broad terms

Some of the issues about increasing women's representation in parties and parliaments I've already referred to. Incidentally, if you want to explore some of these issues further I'd thoroughly recommend Marian Sawer's summary chapter in her co-edited book *Speaking for the People: Representation in Australian Politics*, which neatly summarises both the issues and some of the measures used in other countries. There is also, of course, the issue of whether, once women are in parliament, they are adequately used. I'm sure Sunday's forum on Women in the Corridors of Power will be addressing some of these issues. Let me just say that, as a political scientist working in South Australia, it was interesting to note the prominence of Labor women parliamentarians in the recent state election campaign compared with their relative lack of visibility in the Federal campaign. However, the elevation of a significant number of additional very capable women, whose skills have been somewhat under-utilised previously, to the federal shadow ministry is a very good sign as is the selection of a female deputy leader.

Another issue is one that you have been tackling from the period of the Whitlam Labor government, when early moves away from Keynesian economic policy already began to see cuts to women's policy initiatives. It is the issue of how to meld economic and social policy, particularly in a period when various forms of neo-liberalism, more commonly called economic rationalism in Australia, are still so influential. So issues from childcare to paid maternity leave (maybe even parental leave?) and trying to get equal/higher pay in female dominated areas of employment will all have to

be negotiated within this economic context, as will issues regarding the social wage. Remember that, at the time the Accord was being negotiated many feminists complained that women's perspectives weren't being adequately included in the social wage negotiations. The increasing number of female MPs, Labor Party activists and leaders in the ACTU can play a key role in ensuring that that doesn't happen again. It is also important to ensure that experts on women and taxation are consulted to ensure that women benefit fully from any tax credit proposals.

So, some issues are quite long-standing ones. Some are relatively new developments. One new issue is the influence of particular overseas developments in social democracy. I'll briefly mention here just the Blair government's Third Way approach. Blair Labour learned a lot from Australian Labor, a legacy which Blair himself is happy to acknowledge although many other British commentators don't. However, despite the efforts of some key British women, one of the things the Blair government never learned enough about from Australian Labor was the treatment of women's issues. The Blair government's view of social inclusion does not include women in the way that Keating's view of social inclusion did. I recently spent five months in Britain studying the Blair government and I can assure you that it is rare to find women's issues highlighted in mainstream policy statements to anything like the extent one did during the last Labor governments here. The Blair government's view of community tends to be somewhat undifferentiated by gender, race or ethnicity. Their view of social inclusion tends to be based simply around getting people into the workforce without adequately marrying that to a broader vision of social disadvantage.<sup>vii</sup> So, be warned, given the increasing influence of Blairite perspectives here.

There are also new developments in technology. The Liberal Government has largely ignored the gender issues raised by the Women in Science, Engineering and Technology Advisory group report on female inequality in information technology areas, arguing the report's outlook was more relevant to that of a Labor government.<sup>viii</sup> Yet, the issues raised in the report have important implications for women's participation in the new information economy. The potential issues of female inequality raised by technologies of genetic engineering are possibly going to be even more substantial. These won't just involve issues of women's bodies, but also global issues of women's position in a new form of economy. Many analysts are arguing that private sector patenting of animal and plant genes constitutes the single most important economic change since the 1700's Enclosures (which privatised previously publicly used lands, causing great suffering and starvation).<sup>ix</sup> Where will women be situated in regard to such economic and social changes? So, I'm glad to see that one of the most thoughtful parliamentary speeches on genetic engineering issues was made by Carmen Lawrence and that this conference includes a workshop which raises issues about genetic engineering.<sup>x</sup>

Above all, one of the issues you will have to negotiate are issues of the current political and cultural context. Because, as I know you are all only too aware, these are very difficult times for raising issues about women's participation or about women's policy.

The reason is that we have now had six years of an extremely socially conservative Liberal government. And, since I'm here as a political scientist, I would point out that there is no inherent reason why a Liberal government has to be this socially conservative. After all, many of the key Whitlam Labor government reforms survived the Fraser Liberal government. Above

all, the Fraser government acknowledged that Australian women were in a disadvantaged position and that government had a role to play in improving that position. That is not the case under the Howard government which is far more socially conservative than many Liberal members and some MPs (and Ministers) would like. For Howard, the only disadvantaged women are women who wanted to stay in the home who he argues, totally incorrectly in my view, were discriminated against by a Keating government that had been captured by feminist special interests.<sup>xi</sup> (Presumably these were the very same feminists who fought so hard for women's domestic labour to be included in national accounts).

So, if Labour gets elected at the next federal election, you will face government in a situation in which the femocracy has been almost totally dismantled, where feminist organisations have been defunded and where there hasn't been any perceived need for policy advice that specifically analyses the impact of policies upon women. For, there is no recognition that general government economic policies can impact differently upon women and men because of their different positioning in the workplace, home and social security systems. So, for example, Howard asserts that "the way in which the economy operates, the way in which policies impact upon the community generally are of the same concern and of the same relevance to women as they are to men".<sup>xii</sup> There are of course women and men in the Liberal government who have very different views on this and other issues affecting women (including at ministerial level), but such views are in a minority in the current government. Howard's view is also totally different to that of the Labor Party and I was very heartened to see a media release put out by Carmen Lawrence on 27 August 2001 which set out the forms of policy evaluation, from the point of view of policy impact on women, that would have been undertaken by a Beazley government as well as



assurances regarding the funding of women's organisations that could give policy input. The challenge will be to ensure that, if Labor does win office at the next election, such evaluations and inputs are given a high priority.

I'm sure I don't need to outline Howard's socially conservative views on gender in depth to this audience. The ALP has produced various documents outlining them and you'll know them from your own political experience. Political scientists such as myself and Marian Sawer have also spent a great deal of time analysing and documenting them. If you are interested in knowing my own analysis in more depth, have a look at the sections in my book *Governing Change: From Keating to Howard*, particularly my chapter on "John Howard and the Revenge of the Mainstream" and my chapter on gender. As I say, I don't have to outline Howard's politics in detail for you, my main point is basically the obvious, that you'll have your work really cut out for you in terms of re-building policy infrastructure and services for women if Labor gains government at the next election.

However, the more immediate problem you face is the issues and dilemmas posed by the electoral climate of social conservatism. I include here the climate within the ALP. Because it is no secret that a few of your federal colleagues believe that Labor lost the 1996 election because the Keating government had forgotten the so-called "mainstream" and had been too close to special interests, including feminist ones. Despite the fact that feminism is far better represented in the trade union movement than at private sector Board level, such colleagues see anything which smacks in the slightest of feminism as culturally elitist. Personally, I think this endorsement of Howard's views is both a completely inaccurate view of what happened under Keating and a very strange political strategy, but it is a view which appears to have currency in some sections of the ALP and

which has led to cautious approaches being taken on a range of social issues.

Even if a watered-down version of Howard's views isn't endorsed, there are still all the dilemmas involved in how best to manage Howard's successful electoral mobilisation of social conservatism. Obviously, the most controversial way those dilemmas came up for the ALP in the 2001 election campaign was over asylum seekers. However, those dilemmas of managing wedge politics and the mobilisation of social conservatism, and the cautious responses they engender, can also be seen over women's issues.

As a political scientist working in the area of gender politics, I was pleased to see how much more substantial Labor's 2001 election women's policy was compared with the one released at the 1998 election, even if the 2001 policy did seem to be released rather late in the day and with some strangely timed and fairly minimal publicity. Nonetheless, cautious approaches to some women's issues are still evident. Think of the current debate over access to assisted reproductive technology and the caution, in terms of negotiating electoral attitudes and internal party debate, with which some key members of the ALP leadership approach (or don't explicitly approach) controversial issues such as lesbian mothering and lesbian access to safe donor sperm that has been screened for diseases such as HIV, Hepatitis and genetic diseases. There are very honourable exceptions (mainly sitting in this room) but it is noticeable that some key members of the Labor leadership have managed to avoid even mentioning the word "lesbian" when discussing Howard's proposed amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act. (Incidentally, Marion Maddox has pointed out that the Coalition's religiously conservative Lyons Forum had 'pushed a proposal to modify the Sex Discrimination Act to exclude single women and lesbians from access to

fertility services' as long ago as 1997).<sup>xiii</sup> Nonetheless, however convolutedly and cautiously worded some Labor responses have been on these issues, it is very important that Labor has opposed the Howard Government's policy as discriminatory.

How Labor deals with different groups of women, particularly minority ones, is therefore a major issue for you. Given the Howard government's mobilisation of racial issues in past elections, it is important to note Carmen Lawrence's emphasis on improving the position of indigenous women that has been facilitated by her joint responsibilities as Shadow Minister for the Status of Women and Shadow Minister for Reconciliation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

However, of course it isn't just gender issues pertaining to women that pose problems for the ALP. Howard also mobilises particular constructions of masculinity. The gendered sub-text of strong, macho leadership was evident in the 2001 campaign and posed particular problems for Beazley. Beazley had run in the 1998 election on a somewhat avuncular, warm and caring image. He'd proudly proclaimed that he didn't mind being tagged a softie: "I'll remain a big cuddly bear... My personality, insofar as it has any impact at all in terms of the voting process, produced the biggest swing to an opposition ever in an election immediately after an election defeat."<sup>xiv</sup> In 2001, the Coalition's targetting of "flip-flop" Beazley, based on issues such as Beazley's refusal to support the Government's particularly draconian original border protection bill but supporting its passage after amendments, questioned his masculinity. The implication was that he was weak, not a "real" man and therefore wouldn't be a strong leader who could "protect" Australia. Here as elsewhere, I want to make it clear that gender issues are not a minor add-on for the Howard government. Mobilising social

conservatism, including on gender issues, is a central part of his electoral strategy.

That is one reason why I think those colleagues of yours within the ALP who still argue that issues such as gender inequality, or inequality on the basis of race, ethnicity or sexuality, are distractions from the main game are wrong. It is why I think that those colleagues who argue that if you provide people with economic security they'll forget about issues such as gender or race are wrong. Economic security is incredibly important and is rightly a key priority for the ALP. However, the lack of it doesn't adequately explain the causes of sexism, racism or homophobia. Once again, issues such as gender are not marginal to Howard's electoral strategy, they are a central part of it. Speaking as a political scientist who studies elections, I'd have thought that is why it would be important for the ALP to undermine Howard's strategy by standing up for women's rights and working to win the electorate over to alternative views on gender issues. Being overly cautious yourselves on gender issues, as some of your more conservative colleagues may suggest, doesn't neutralise Howard's election strategy, it reinforces it. It makes Howard's electoral strategy even more effective. This is not the time to go back to 1940's Labor views. I've argued in this speech that you have an impressive Labor tradition and track-record on which to build in continuing to fight for women's rights.

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Notes

- i John Curtin, *Australian Women's Weekly*, 14 August 1943
- ii *Digest of Decisions and Announcements* no. 12, December 1943.
- iii Keating, Maiden Speech, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Second Session of the Twenty-Seventh Parliament, 1970, pp. 514-515.
- iv *Australian Government Digest*, 24 August 1973, pp. 1152-3
- v Gough Whitlam, Opening Address Women and Politics Conference, August 1975, p. 1, Australian Archives (NSW) CRS M165, folder 3.
- vi See further the discussion of Labor governments' policy in Carol Johnson, "The Fragility of Democratic Reform: New Challenges to Australian Women's Citizenship" in Shirin Rai (ed.), *International Perspectives on Gender and*

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- Democratisation* (Macmillan, London/ St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000), pp. 182-201.
- vii See Ruth Levitas, *The inclusive society? Social exclusion and New Labour* (Macmillan, London, 1998); Carol Johnson and Fran Tonkiss, "The Third Influence: The Blair Government and Australian Labor", *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (2002), pp. 5-18.
- viii See Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: From Keating to Howard* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2000) , p. 132.
- ix See e.g. Mitchel Cohen "Biotechnology and the New World Order" in Brian Tokar ed., *Redesigning Life? The Worldwide Challenge to Genetic Engineering* (Zed books, London and Scribe, Victoria, 2001) and Vandana Shiva et al eds, *Biopolitics: a feminist and ecological reader on biotechnology* (Zed Books, London, 1995).
- x See *House of Representatives Hansard*, 29 August 2000.
- xi See further Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: From Keating to Howard* , particularly chapter five.
- xii John Howard, Transcript of Launch of Women's Policy, Stamford Hotel, Adelaide, 15 September 1998.
- xiii Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics* (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2001), p. 232.
- xiv *The Advertiser*, 18 March 1999.