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REPORT

PRESENCE AND THE PRICE

Women and the 2007 Australian Federal Election

Marian Sawer

In the excitement of a change of government, a singular feature of the 2007 election went largely unnoticed. Despite the increased presence of Labor women, and the defeat of the Prime Minister in his own seat by Maxine McKew's 'purple army', it was the first time for more than 20 years that the ALP had gone to the polls without a women's policy. Campaign strategists seemed to have decided that any mention of women must be suppressed, in case the famous heartland voters being wooed back to Labor by the anti-WorkChoices campaign took fright. The women's movement itself was no longer seen as a significant political constituency. As a consequence, any good policies to undo the damage to women's equality of the Howard years were well concealed behind campaign shrubbery. Feminists had to take it on trust that the diverse array of Labor women on the front bench would result in renewed progress towards woman-friendly policy. The lack of connection between women contestants and explicit women's policy, at least as far as the major parties were concerned, raised important issues concerning the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation.

Campaign Policies: The Elusive Search for Women

In 2004, pollster Rod Cameron, in what seems to have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, described Labor's women's policy as 'The last gasp of the ageing femocrats who still delight in having a women's policy. It's being done for form only, to keep the Joan Kirners and Anne Summerses happy. It doesn't cut any ice in the wider electorate' (Burgmann and Andrews 2007, 135). Labor strategists had been trying to disentangle the party from commitments to women's equality since at least the 2001 election, when the ominous-sounding 'Kim Beazley's Plan for Australian Women' was released only two days before the election. In response to outrage by women within the party over this incident, a women's policy was duly prepared for the 2004 election but then launched well before the actual campaign so as not to interfere with Labor's family theme.

As in 2004, the word 'women' did not actually pass the Labor Leader's lips during the 2007 campaign launch. The mums and dads of 2004 were, however, replaced by the strange construct of 'working families'. There was considerable debate over what this might mean, there being agreement that all families involved work. The intent seemed to have been to neutralise the term 'family values', which had been used by the Coalition to attract blue-collar voters and to dog whistle to a Christian fundamentalist constituency. 'Working families' at least had the connotation that women might be in the paid

workforce, without being too explicit about it. Despite the focus on the unfairness of WorkChoices and its impact on 'working families', there was no mention of its impact on the gender wage gap. There was to be an Office for Work and Family in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet but there was no corresponding commitment to the restoration of an Equal Pay Unit.

In the absence of an overall plan on how to address gender inequalities, Labor had some good policies tucked away inconspicuously on its website. For example, there was a promise (released as a media statement by Shadow Health Minister Nicola Roxon) to develop a new national women's health policy in consultation with consumers, providers and advocacy groups, breaking the drought of the Howard years. There was also the promise of a new national plan on violence against women, which would bring women's services back into policy development rather than freezing them out, as in the Howard period. This plan (released by Shadow Minister Tanya Plibersek) could be found under the portfolio offerings on 'Youth, Women, Children, Seniors and Volunteers'. It was a discreet indication of a less welcoming environment for the men's rights groups that had successfully undermined much domestic violence policy work in the Howard decade.

Hidden in Chapter 13 of Labor's 2007 National Platform, linked to the party's website (<http://www.alp.org.au>), one could also find a number of commitments not mentioned during the campaign. These included strengthening the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act and signing up to the Optional Protocol of the UN Women's Convention (CEDAW), which Australia had helped draft but the Howard government had shunned. There was also a somewhat cryptic commitment to making the taxation system fairer, presumably by removing the bias against secondary earners introduced by Howard's family tax measures. Finally, there was a commitment to strengthening the 'Office of the Status of Women', but without moving it back to Prime Minister and Cabinet.

As in 2004, the Liberals did not launch a women's policy but instead released one onto its website late in the day (two days before the election). It had the standard cover, featuring male politicians, and was entitled *Australian Women: Security and Choice*. It included the Coalition's commitment to the up-front payment of the childcare tax rebate through childcare centres but not the 'nanny aid' mentioned by Dr Sharman Stone during the campaign (see below). The emphasis on respecting women's choices and the need for family-friendly working arrangements was somewhat undermined by front-page treatment in the press of the ACT Liberals' attack on the Labor Health Minister for bringing her baby to work on her return from six weeks' maternity leave (Alexander 2007).

Nervousness about owning a women's policy extended to participation in a women's policy debate at the National Press Club. This was organised after a great deal of negotiation by the indefatigable Marie Coleman of the National Foundation for Australian Women and took place on 24 October 2007. While the Australian Democrats were keen, the Liberal Party was much less so and the ALP reluctant to participate without the Liberals. The Cabinet Minister and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues, Julie Bishop, was not available. Eventually Shadow Minister Tanya Plibersek (Human Services, Housing, Youth and Women) and Dr Sharman Stone (Minister for Workforce Participation) participated. Senator Stott Despoja's invitation was withdrawn, apparently at the request of the major parties. Stone won the predictable headline 'Coalition Supports Nanny Aid' (2007) for misguidedly floating the possibility of tax rebates for nannies, a gift for those accustomed to jeering at elites and middle-class welfare.

What should have been a major issue was paid maternity leave, with 76 per cent support in the community according to a June 2007 Newspoll survey commissioned by the National Foundation for Australian Women. Senator Natasha Stott Despoja of the Australian Democrats had been campaigning hard on the issue since 2001 and had introduced two private senator's bills on the subject. Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward started her own campaign from 2002. By 2007, even *Mother & Baby* and *Marie Claire* magazines were backing it. In June, Green Senator Kerry Nettle moved, on behalf of herself and Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja, a motion that the Senate congratulate *Marie Claire* on its campaign and call for the government to legislate for government-funded paid maternity leave. Only the seven Democrats and Greens voted for the motion; Labor and Family First joined the government in opposing it.

Australia is one of only two Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries that do not provide paid maternity leave for women workers and is said to be one of only five countries worldwide not to do so—the others being Lesotho, Swaziland, Papua New Guinea and the United States. Australia has not ratified any of the three successive International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on maternity protection. In fact, the Howard government distinguished itself in 1999 by sending an all-male delegation to Geneva to the ILO conference reviewing the existing convention (a spokesman explained that you did not need to be a woman to present a policy position). Both the ILO and the European Union now uphold 14 weeks of paid maternity leave as a standard employment condition.

There was a ripple of excitement when the *Sun-Herald* splashed a story the day before the Liberal campaign launch, suggesting that Howard was about to announce a paid maternity leave scheme (Walsh and Bennis 2007). This story was sourced to 'senior Liberal women' and was received with amazement. Was the Prime Minister about to announce that his previous attitudes had been an artefact of the time in which he had grown up, as he had said in relation to reconciliation with Indigenous Australians? Howard had been on record since at least 1986 for his opposition to paid maternity leave (Grutzner 1986) and indeed it proved a bridge too far in 2007.

Labor promised that the Productivity Commission would undertake an inquiry into the best way to provide financial support to 'parents with new-born children'. While childcare discourse had long dropped any reference to women's rights, the removal of women from the discourse of paid maternity leave was still somewhat startling. The reference to the Productivity Commission had come as a proposal from the National Foundation for Australian Women, endorsed by national women's organisations. While it meant that paid maternity leave was at least back on Labor's agenda, it hardly signalled much progress for a party that had been considering universal paid maternity leave since the introduction, as a first step, of paid maternity leave for federal public servants in 1973. It was part of Accord Mark VII,¹ negotiated 20 years later, but it received little support from then Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Martin Ferguson. At that time, the Office of the Status of Women undertook research on funding options. It is slightly more complicated in Australia than elsewhere because of the non-contributory nature of social security, but New Zealand has managed to solve this problem with a government-funded scheme.

While Labor was circumspect on paid maternity leave, Labor, the Democrats and the Greens were all able to make much of research showing the deleterious effects of WorkChoices on low-paid women workers. Women were suffering in terms both of pay

and conditions, with loss of control over hours making it more difficult to deal with family responsibilities. A less high-profile issue was the effect of Welfare to Work provisions on sole parents; the increasingly coercive approach to getting them back into the paid workforce once their youngest child had turned six. Sole parents were subject to the new draconian breaching regime: denial of income support for eight weeks if recipients were found not to have complied with requirements such as attending an interview or taking a job deemed suitable. Moreover, greater restrictions were now applied to sole parents seeking to obtain or upgrade qualifications. They were no longer eligible for the JET (Jobs, Education and Training) childcare subsidy if the course was more than 12 months in duration. Where childcare might have cost \$10–15 per week with the JET subsidy, it might now cost \$107, as detailed in one of the many stories posted on Green Senator Rachel Siewert's excellent workers' rights website (<http://www.workrights.org.au>).

Journalist George Megalogenis highlighted that the marginal seats being contested so hotly tended to be among those with the highest proportion of sole parents experiencing the combined impact of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work. Eight of the ten Coalition seats with a proportion over 13 per cent of sole parents in the electorate swung to Labor. After the election, 18 of the 20 electorates with most sole parents were held by Labor. One of the seats with a large number of sole parents that changed hands was Solomon, where the incumbent had been reported as saying in a previous election that while the Country Liberal Party was family focused, Labor was 'focused on women who have six kids to six different fathers' (Sawer 2002, 254). Despite such accusations, Labor was careful not to pitch any appeals directly to sole parents, a group believed to be unpopular among heartland (blue-collar) voters.

Both the Democrats and Greens had self-standing women's policies, of which the Democrats' offering (*Women's Policy Audit, Election '07*) was particularly well developed, reflecting the policy expertise of Senator Natasha Stott Despoja in this area. Unlike the major parties, both the Greens and the Democrats were committed to the return of the Office of the Status of Women to a central co-ordinating role in Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Women Contenders

In terms of nominations, the Greens again fielded the largest number of women among its candidates (39 per cent), while the ALP maintained its lead over the Coalition (30 to 23 per cent). A small all-women party called What Women Want (WWW) was formed in mid-year, to the consternation of the National Foundation for Australian Women, which had used this name for a consultation report on the impact on women of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work legislation shortly before. WWW ran four women for the House of Representatives and 14 for the Senate with notable lack of success, as with previous women's parties in Australia, although it did do much better than the Non-custodial Parents Party. WWW's stated aims were to draw attention to issues such as paid maternity leave, access to quality childcare and support for carers but could not match the policy sophistication of another party unsuccessful in this election, the Australian Democrats.

Were women candidates subjected to sexist media portrayals or political attacks? There was considerable furore both in Australia and overseas over comments made by government Senator Bill Heffernan (repeating remarks he had made the previous year), when he suggested in a *Bulletin* interview (2 May 2007) that Labor Deputy Leader Julia

Gillard was unsuitable to lead the nation because she was 'deliberately barren'. He elaborated that to understand the community one needed to understand the relationship between mum, dad and a bucket of nappies. While this remark received almost universal condemnation and the Prime Minister required the senator to apologise, some saw it as dog whistling to the Christian fundamentalist constituency about women's roles. Gillard had previously been subject to endless media commentary for having an 'unnaturally spotless' kitchen with no fruit in the fruit bowl—an image that originally appeared in the *Sun-Herald*, on 23 January 2005. (According to a staffer, Gillard had just returned from overseas and had not even unpacked.) The metaphor of the empty fruit bowl proved irresistible to many commentators, even more than the absence of the nappy bucket. The attacks appeared to reinforce support among women for Gillard, like the 'Iron my shirt' protest against Hillary Clinton during the New Hampshire primary.

Liberal women MPs responding to a Crikey.com survey (2007) in the wake of Senator Heffernan's remarks were divided over whether childbearing made them better representatives. The arguments for more women in parliament had often included the suggestion that women's experience as mothers would broaden the perspectives represented in parliament and so improve the quality of policy making. While Kay Elson, member for Forde, claimed her eight children had greatly strengthened her understanding of the world, Sharman Stone commented that although her children had given her significant insights, she was able to make a valuable contribution to policy without personally having had a range of other experiences, such as being a war veteran, Indigenous or disabled.

In December 2007, when Julia Gillard was Acting Prime Minister, the first time Australia had had a woman acting in this capacity, there was another media storm over a depiction of a woman politician. This time the issue was a front-page picture in the *Canberra Times* (13 December 2007) looking up the skirt of new Labor MP Maxine McKew at the declaration of the poll in Bennelong. One could conclude that despite the fact that one 'barren' woman (Gillard) was acting as Prime Minister and another (McKew) had defeated the former Prime Minister in his own seat, sexism was not dead (see also Drabsch 2007).

During the 2007 election, women's groups were relatively muted. Of the two feminist websites archived in the National Library's Pandora holdings on the federal election, Women's Electoral Lobby was relatively inactive, although it offered its traditional form guide, rating party policies, as well as some press releases. EMILY's List (EL), an independent but Labor-aligned fundraising and mentoring organisation, focused on its endorsed candidates. EL supports Labor women candidates who have made commitments to work for 'choice, childcare and equal pay'. Of the Labor women elected to the House of Representatives, 19 out of 27 were EL-endorsed candidates, as were three of the four new Labor women Cabinet members. Websites not archived in Pandora included a new feminist election web offering from Women's Health Goulburn North East. It highlighted issues such as paid maternity leave, childcare, equal pay and superannuation, as well as health, and directed attention to party policies. The National Foundation for Australian Women also provided some election coverage, including press releases welcoming the Democrats' women's policy and criticising the lack of commitment to paid maternity leave in the Coalition's industrial relations policy.

The swing to Labor that brought an increase from 20 to 27 in the number of Labor women in the House of Representatives meant that the overall number of women in the House rose to 40 (26.7 per cent). This will slightly improve Australia's position on the Inter-

parliamentary Union's scoreboard for representation of women in national parliaments, at least for the time being. The spread of electoral quotas for women is bringing about rapid increases in different parts of the world. Immediately before the election, Australia had sunk to 33rd place on the IPU scoreboard, its lowest ranking to date. Australia has fallen a long way back since its pioneering role in giving women the right to stand for the national parliament in 1902. Finland was the second country to give women the right to stand for its parliament and now has 12 women in its Cabinet of 20, compared with 4 out of 20 in Australia.

The number of Liberal women in the House fell to 12 and one of the two National women (De-Anne Kelly) was defeated. The number of women in the Senate was set to remain the same at 27, or 35.5 per cent, when the new senators took their seats in July 2008. Three of the four Green senators will be women, as well as 44 per cent of Labor and 28 per cent of Coalition senators. While there will continue to be 'critical mass', the demise of the Australian Democrats will mean a loss of some 'critical actors'. Senator Stott Despoja, for example, had played an agenda-setting role with her private senator's bills on paid maternity leave and truth in advertising in pregnancy counselling. Pro-life pregnancy counselling services, which received generous subsidies from the Howard government, concealed the fact that they did not provide information on all available options. On RU486 (mifepristone), Senator Lyn Allison's parliamentary tactics played a vital role in the eventual success of the historic cross-party bill co-sponsored by four women senators (Democrat, Labor, Liberal and National), which in 2006 removed the ministerial veto over release of the drug. The lack of availability of medical abortion in Australia during the Howard era, due to the horse trading of male party leaders wishing to secure the partial privatisation of Telstra, particularly disadvantaged women in rural areas, where surgical abortion was not readily available.

The cross-party work by women senators on the RU486 bill illustrated the way in which the presence of women can make a difference in parliament, given a range of enabling factors. In this case such factors included the stage in the electoral cycle ('critical juncture', to borrow a term from Jennifer Curtin), as well as the role of professionalised non-government organisations and the granting of a conscience vote. In addition to those co-sponsoring the bill, women senators were overwhelmingly in support (24 votes to 3), as compared with male senators (21 in favour, 25 against). There was an attempt to transfer the momentum built up by this successful cross-party work to the related area of pregnancy counselling, building on the private senator's bill introduced by Senator Stott Despoja in 2005. Liberal Senator Judith Troeth was keen for another cross-party bill but the moment had passed. The approach of the federal election made it impossible for Labor women senators to obtain support from their party room.

The first Rudd Cabinet included a record four women (out of 20), including Julia Gillard, the new Deputy Prime Minister, and Penny Wong, the first Asian-Australian and openly gay woman to be a federal Cabinet minister. In the ministry as a whole there were 7 women out of 30 members. While the numbers of women on the Opposition front bench were slightly less (two in the shadow Cabinet and six in the shadow ministry), Julie Bishop—another 'barren' woman—was now Deputy Opposition Leader. In January 2007, Prime Minister Howard had scoffed at those commenting on the drop in the number of women in his Cabinet following the sacking of Senator Amanda Vanstone, saying that to bother about the sums was 'patronising' and 'old-fashioned' (Schubert 2007). For others, though, the new presence and diversity of women on the front bench, and even a Prime

Minister's wife who had not felt obliged to give up her own name, were important signs of a new and more inclusive era. While the lack of a coherent plan for addressing women's inequality might be a handicap, considerable hope was invested in the women now in government. What was most needed was renewed pressure from outside to deliver on these hopes and expectations.

NOTE

1. The Accord was an agreement regularly renegotiated between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, whereby social wage elements such as childcare, Medicare and occupational superannuation were offered by government in return for wage restraint.

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