

## Historic moment, but barriers remain for half the population

**ANNE SUMMERS**

Sydney Morning Herald, June 25, 2010

Julia Gillard may have played down the significance of her sex when she became Australia's first female prime minister yesterday, saying she "did not set out to crash my head against any glass ceilings" and pointing out that she was also the first redhead to lead the country. But there is no denying this moment of history.

Nor that it has taken Australia an inordinately long time to achieve it. Alone of the democracies in our region, our political leadership remained conspicuously male-dominated. India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea and, of course, New Zealand have all had at least one woman head of government.

What was normal practice in these countries seemed politically unattainable in Australia. Even as the numbers of women in federal parliament swelled to the present 30.1 per cent, no recent government managed to include more than three or four women in cabinet, keeping the pool of potential leaders statistically too small to confidently predict there was any chance of Australia putting a woman into the top job any time soon.

From being just the second country in the world, after NZ, to give women not just the vote but also the right to stand for parliament in 1901, we (and the ALP in particular) have been extraordinarily tardy in exercising these entitlements. It took over 40 years before the first women were elected to Parliament, Labor's Senator Dorothy Tangney in 1943 (the same year Enid Lyons was elected as a conservative MP) and another 40 years before Senator Susan Ryan became Labor's first cabinet minister in 1983.

Since then, things have speeded up a bit: it only took 18 years for Labor to elect Jenny Macklin as its first female deputy leader, which paved the way for Gillard to become deputy prime minister just six years later in 2007.

Three years later, finally, Australia has a woman prime minister.

The face we now put forward to the world is strong, confident, articulate, passionate - and female. It is a significant step towards counteracting - and, hopefully, ending - the unrelenting blokishness of the leadership of Australia's key institutions.

Gillard has a strong record in working to improve women's equality, and the policies needed to achieve this still elusive goal. Paid parental leave was politically dead in the water until she used her position as deputy prime minister to revive it through a reference to the Productivity Commission. She has thrown the government's support behind the bid for large pay increases for workers in the community sector (such as women's refuges), most of whom are women, and she has indicated her

keenness to develop policies that would increase women's workforce participation rates (which are low by OECD standards, especially for women of childbearing age).

Gillard was a founding member of Emily's List, the group that raises money to help pro-choice Labor women get elected, and was herself a beneficiary of Labor's affirmative action policies (requiring women to be preselected for at least 35 per cent of winnable seats) in her third attempt to enter federal parliament in 1998. She understands the need for special measures to create a level playing field to ensure equal opportunities for women and other disadvantaged groups.

So she is being super careful about embracing the mantle of history, not wanting to appear a token or to be categorised, along with Joan Kirner, Carmen Lawrence and Kristina Keneally, as having been installed by a bunch of backroom blokes as a political housewife to clean up the mess created by the men.

In fact, the comparison lacks validity. It overlooks the considerable amount of time that Gillard has acted as prime minister and accrued experience, credibility and respect for the way she tackles the job. (She is renowned in the bureaucracy for the speed with which she moves paper, something her predecessor had problems doing.) Nor is this a tired old long-term government with little hope of re-election. It is true this was a factional coup but one where she had the upper hand because she already had the numbers; she had to be asked - on some accounts, begged - to undertake the challenge.

Her decision to not move in to The Lodge unless she is popularly elected in her own right is, however, an admission that her legitimacy is contingent. We can expect Gillard to work very hard to stake her claim to the job in the eyes of the electorate - and it is very likely that she will persuade the country to back her.

She has moved quickly to assert her authority. "I have taken control," she said yesterday in question time, echoing a remark at her press conference when she said, "I was not going to sit idly by" as the government "lost its way".

"We made different life choices," Gillard said to Tony Abbott across the chamber yesterday as she faced him for the first time in her new role. The contest between the "deliberately barren" Gillard and the "mad monk" Tony Abbott is going to be a fiery and fascinating one.

The symbolism yesterday was potent: Australia's first woman governor-general swearing in our first female prime minister. You could be forgiven for thinking that women were finally assuming their rightful share of leadership positions in this country.

You would be wrong. Just look at the upper echelons of business, the military, the churches and the federal public service, and you will see that women are as rare in these arenas as female prime ministers once were. Now this barrier is broken, perhaps it is time to address the others.

<http://www.annesummers.com.au>