

A POUND OF FLESH -WOMEN, POLITICS AND POWER IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM.

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Fundamental to patriarchy is the invisibility of women, the unreal nature of women's experience, the absence of women as a force to be reckoned with. (Spender: 13)

INTRODUCTION

In this lecture I will raise more questions than I can answer now. I intend to examine what makes a woman a successful politician. We have not found ways of measuring what makes politically active women 'good' politicians in terms of achieving what women want. Do 'women' want the same things? Are women politicians better politicians?

In these profoundly individualistic times, where 'choice' is a virtue, the idea of collective interests is as unusual as talk about the common good. In a hundred years of women's suffrage, I suggest, women have claimed but have failed to convert institutional, political power to women's different and particular social, emotional and philosophical needs. What I suggest is that women who are active in their communities tend to 'do politics' better, because they take their social capital and invest it in formal political structures - men don't do it that way. They can integrate their public lives with a strong sense of femininity, while taking the confidence and authority of public success, once thought of as 'feminine', into the private realm of relationships, family and the home.

Women voters consistently express their concerns as health, housing and education, all 'private' life concerns, shaped by public decision-making. The vote is a clumsy way of influencing those decisions. While women remain on the outer, theirs will always be 'sectional interests'.

I will suggest that the women who make a difference do not have to, and in fact are prevented from using power adequately, if have acquired that power

through masculine structures or patronage and if they think they can play by 'boys' rules'.

Women do not necessarily use power differently from men. The style that they bring to political work influences what they can achieve, and how long it will last. Those women who have 'done it differently' have thought about their values, valued friendship, shared power and acknowledged how deeply their satisfaction lies in 'community' results. They have a sense of history and, often, a powerful sense of the ridiculous and a habit of pricking pomposity (The Age reported that Kirner left a very personal memento for incoming Premier Kennett in the Premier's personal washroom).

Women in politics are doing it hard. Women political leaders are targets. This year we have seen the public humiliation of Cheryl Kernot – but not her erstwhile lover, Gareth Evans; the successive overwhelming of her successors, Meg Lees, who sought pragmatic credentials through her GST 'deal' with the Coalition, and Natasha Stott-Despoya, once the media's darling but with leadership, its derision; the scavenging over Carmen Lawrence's political career, though she was acquitted by a jury in just ten minutes, after a Royal Commission process that should have put paid to the fantasy that they are fair and pronounce truth; and the propensity of male journalists and vixen columnists to lay the blame for Australia's economic woes of the early 1990s upon Joan Kirner, a brave Premier.

As I speak today it even seems possible that the ALP could, through the grinding of its factional wheels, even seek to 'wind back' the ALP's highly successful affirmative action target for women in winnable seats. The historian Barbara Tuchman would call this 'wooden-headedness' – the pursuit of policies by a political entity contrary to its own interests. Grubbing to perpetuate short-term, factional power may cost that Party any reasonable prospect of national government, and its long-term chance of survival. I merely remark that every State government is, for now, a Labor government. Coincidentally, or not, as at April 2002, the ALP has 132 women in Parliaments across Australia. The Liberal/National Parties have 64, the

Greens have 6, the Democrats had 6 and Independents (including Meg Lees) have 13. The ALP 'score' has doubled since the quotas were introduced – along with its local success. Notwithstanding the perception that women might lack such merit as the factional system produced, such as former Queensland Senator Mal Colston, these women are clearly quality candidates, from Deputy Federal Opposition leader Jenny Macklin, to Clare Martin MLA who won government for her party and became the Northern Territory's first Chief Minister. Eight out of 18 Victorian ministers are women.

I offered this topic because I'm writing an authorised political biography of Joan Kirner, the first woman Premier of Victoria and, by the happenstance of tired men's resignations, just pipped at the post (by Western Australia's Carmen Lawrence) as the first woman head of State in Australia.

Joan entered Parliament in 1982, one of 17 women MPs during the Cain administration, of whom 5 were in Cabinet, one was Secretary of the parliamentary party and several held important positions in Caucus committees and Parliamentary committees. When she became Premier in 1990, I had just been appointed Victoria's Commissioner for Equal Opportunity. We became friends when we co-authored the Women's Power Handbook (Kirner and Rayner) in 1999 and travelled together around Australia. We share a lot, from our Protestant upbringing to our first public speaking experience at the age of 16, giving a sermon, to a certain kind of 'power physique'.

Joan's Ministries included Conservation, Forests and Lands, Education, Deputy Premier and during her premiership, Women's Affairs. She was Victoria's Opposition Leader from October 1992 until March 1993: the man who sought her removal resigned within weeks, having made whatever his point was about the purpose of leadership. Joan paid a price in terms of the superannuation entitlements, which were diminished by both her resignation from the front bench and retrospective legislation enacted by Jeff Kennett's administration when she retired from Parliament in May 1994. She also paid with her health.

My interest in writing Joan's political biography began with her remarkable community political achievements in public education. She started out as a teacher and became politically active when her child was expected to start school in a class of 54 children. 'Not my child', she is supposed to have said, and went on to work for decent resourcing of public education. She has said since that *'if you want to change the world for yourself and your own kids, you've got to change it for and with other people, particularly women.'* (ABC interview:2002; Kirner:12) She demanded representation of state school parents on the Commonwealth Schools Commission and became a member of the Commission herself from 1973 - 1978. In 1980 the Fraser Government awarded her an AM for her contribution to community services. She won preselection and entered Parliament in 1982, she insists, as a result of her naiveté about Victorian factions. If it were naiveté, it was inspired.

Joan brought her community values, supporters and feminism into her Parliamentary career. Yet what she would most like to be remembered for is the creation of Landcare. In 1986, as Minister for Conservation she developed with Heather Mitchell the now internationally acclaimed Landcare program, in Victoria. You will note that these women are not generally credited with establishing what is now a national successful program. The men who built on it, have been.

Joan is still a politician. Perhaps her greatest achievements may come to be seen as her work outside the Parliament, including establishing those ALP quotas, and EMILY's List: a political network to ensure that more progressive Labor women get into Parliament set up in 1996, that gives funding, mentoring and strategic support for members. It has helped 68 new women MPs into Australian Parliaments, including the first Aboriginal woman to be elected in any Australian Parliament (Carol Martin in Western Australia) and the first Labor First Minister of the Northern Territory. Nearly two thirds of EMILY's List supported candidates won in the November 2001 election. This is one claim to political success by women for women that cannot be denied – as most of women's other claims to success have been.

Joan Kirner is also regularly trotted out as having been personally responsible for the collapse of the Australian economy – not bad, for a woman who spent just two years in the Cain cabinet before she became Premier. She was heckled as a ‘silly woman’ by then Opposition leader Kennett, and cartooned as a fat, flapping, polka-dotted housewife - because as the cartoonist, Jeff Hook, admitted, he didn’t know how to draw a powerful woman. (Kirner:95)

What Joan Kirner and other women made in their political activism underlies much of this lecture. Because it is a work in progress, I present to you some working hypotheses, not conclusions, about how women contribute to the political process – and whether they do it differently, better, or made it easier for other women.

I’ve called it “a pound of flesh,” from Shylock’s bargain in The Merchant of Venice, to signify that, in my view, women who seek political office or engage in formal politics pay an extortionate fee for their bargain.

As a woman lawyer I always test a new pen or computer with Portia’s first plea: ‘The quality of mercy is not strained . . .’ Mercy is supposed to be a very womanly virtue, though women such as Golda Emir (Israel), Margaret Thatcher (UK), Mrs Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka), Boadicea (Britain) and Elizabeth 1 (UK) all launched wars. But was this ‘unwomanly’? Elizabeth 1 spoke to her troops of having ‘the body of a weak and feeble woman but the heart and stomach of a king.’ Mrs Meir would cook when she was unsure of her next tactical step.

My starting point is not that ‘women’ do use power differently, but that its exercise is very different for women. I start with a question: are there women with political power who use it in ‘womanly’ ways – and what are they? – and does this make a difference to women’s lives?

To explore it I asked five questions

1. Does a 'critical mass' of women – either in large numbers or particular proportions – make a difference to the way political decisions are made or power is used?
2. Do women politicians bring different values, styles or approaches to the political process and working with public servants, 'interest groups' (such as the business sector) and community groups?
3. If so, do these values and styles actually result in different – and from women's point of view, 'better' decisions?
4. What have our recent political women leaders left behind? And
5. What price do women pay for political power?

QUESTION 1. CRITICAL MASS?

Is it true that a 'critical mass' of women – either in large numbers or particular proportions – makes a difference to the way political decisions are made or political power is used?

One hundred years ago all white Australian women won not only the vote but also the right to stand for election (Franchise Act 1902). It was the beginning of women's formal political participation. Suffragists assumed that the vote would transform society, perceiving that women's citizenship was a 'collective resource' albeit one that endowed women with the status of individuality (Lake:141). But did it change society? *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. The triumphalist claim that women's votes were responsible for measures for the protection of married women, children and workers' safety, pensions, working conditions and even the opium trade is incapable of being substantiated. They were certainly not attributable to women MPs.

Norman MacKenzie (reproduced in Simms 2002:36-40) criticised the '*fuzzy-mindedness of some of the most active feminists*' of those early days, which

discouraged highly able, politically engaged women such as Catherine Spence from supporting the movement. ‘*Did the feminists know what they wanted to vote about?*’ MacKenzie asked – and indeed, there was no clear agenda among those women, and many deliberately eschewed ‘male politics’ or parties.

Similarly, and perhaps as simplistically, second wave feminists (post 1970) and post-feminists have asserted that a ‘critical mass’ of women in positions of power and authority would make a difference to how that authority is exercised. But as Eva Cox (Cox:35) and I (Rayner:2002) have pointed out, the evidence seems to be that it is not just raw numbers of women, nor even their proportionate representation in relation to the former power group, that changes a culture, but the qualities that women may (or may not) bring to the mix, and that women who succeed on men’s terms, lose their ethical edge and the desire to bring change about, becoming indistinguishable from the men they seek to supplant (Kirner:6).

As Cox remarks:

‘There is no guarantee that women with power will not misuse it . . . [A]s long as women leaders are few and usually selected by men, their input will be more limited than men’s, and their individual failures seen as emblematic of the failings of women in general. It is risky to assume that women will wield power differently, particularly in the long term. In the short term, because women’s life experience is different from men’s, we are more aware of aspects of living and caring that they often overlook.’

I agree with Chilla Bulbeck (Bulbeck:90) that,

‘[U]ltimately, corporate worlds – and political worlds and blue-collar worlds – will only change when enough women informed by feminist ideas [emphasis added] are there to challenge and shift the relationship between consensus and hard bargaining, community work and studio work, child-rearing and corporate raiding.’

How does a woman become a political leader? Not many do, partly because of the public/private divide – public and political and reasonable being ‘man’ and private nurturing and emotional, woman (Cox: 2002). When women political leaders are examined (including Aquino, Bandaranaike, Bhutto, Clark, Gandhi, Megawati Sukarno-Putri, Meir and Isabella Peron outside Australia, and Lawrence, Kirner and Martin within) it is evident that women ‘heads of state’ are more likely to become so in times of great social and political unrest, when the crown did not seem so attractive (Lawrence took her chalice after the collapse of ‘WA Inc’; Kirner, after Tricontinental, for example). Few rose on their own account, buoyed by crisis, and often the powerful influence of family men, often a father or husband (such as Megawati, Peron and Gandhi). Very few women (Meir and Clark and Kirner stand out) acquired political leadership without powerful family connections – even Mrs Thatcher had married well. Powerful women often borrowed their wings from men’s influence, money, and connections. Another word for it is patronage.

As Mary Gaudron, the first and perhaps only woman to be appointed as a Judge to Australia’s High Court recently pointed out:

“Patronage is about creating people in one’s own image, about perpetuating the status quo, securing conformity, protecting the prevailing ethos and stifling originality of thought. Patronage means that merit is not the sole criterion for success; it explains why, for some, mere incompetence is no handicap and, for others, outstanding ability is no guarantee against failure. Patronage is, thus, inequality; patronage is discrimination and, ultimately, patronage is contrary to the interests of justice. And if it works for women, it works only for those who are prepared to be moulded by their makers.”

Were these ‘heads of state’ ‘feminine’ leaders? If by that we mean nurturing, persuasive and empowering, well not necessarily. Indira Gandhi and Isabel Peron were reactionary and prone to policies detrimental to women and children. Mrs Thatcher was the Baba Yaga rather than the mother of her nation. But Gro Harlem Brundtland, Norwegian prime minister three times

between 1981 and 1996 was, promoting the political participation of women, appointing an unprecedented number of women to her cabinet (8 out of 18) and increasing the number of female judges. She was also a community environmental activist, committed to consultation. She and Joan Kirner shared these 'leadership' qualities.

Provisional hypothesis: politically active women do not necessarily become different kinds of political leaders than men. What makes them 'womanly' leaders depends on:

- How they got their position.
 - If it was as a result of family connections such women appear more likely to model the attitudes and practices of the dominant political paradigm. There may be a veneer of 'difference' – Megawati Sukarno-Putri's 'motherly' aura – but it is doubtful whether this is not reflected in any challenge to the norms of her political party.
 - There is a significant difference between well-married or related leaders and those who 'rose' from the community – PM of Norway, Joan Kirner – where they appear they modelled the strategies and tactics that those groups used, internally, to function including co-operation, respect for other's opinions and non-aggression.
- What they wished to achieve through their political power, and
- An agenda based on 'women's concerns' – which is to say, a set of values based on their life experience and commitment to women

What matters next, is the values and styles they bring to their political roles.

QUESTION 2: DOING IT DIFFERENTLY?

Do women politicians bring different values, styles or approaches to the political process and working with public servants, 'interest groups' (such as the business sector) and community groups?

I have half begun to answer this second question. Is there a difference between 'being a woman' (sympathetic, sensitive to others, nurturing" maternity and gentleness and weakness – and 'being a woman' which connotes power, assertiveness and professionalism? Does how the woman view this make a difference in the way a woman looks at herself, her view of intimate relationships and ability to combine in them, her perception of her colleagues and other women? More importantly, does it influence the changes she makes for other women in her field? What would a 'feminine values' politics look like? Are women overly concerned with the minutiae of women's lives - childcare and family friendly hours, holistic approaches – eschewing the 'real' issues, such as the economy? Women's priorities tend to be towards those whom they can least bear to disappoint, and this is very rarely themselves (Marshall: 1992)

I think that the 'difference' lies in the strength of women's friendships, but they are harder to transmute into successful endeavour, when they are more easily based on shared troubles. It is hard to maintain them, particularly when success changes relative status between the friends (Eichenbaum:89). It seems more 'feminine' to be supportive, 'masculine' to take control; more feminine to be a 'team player' and masculine to compete, especially with another woman – but the political process is predicated on competition rather than cooperation – at least, as it works now.

Women who wish to succeed in political life have to do something men do not. My working proposition is that women who are active in their communities tend to find more natural to 'do politics' better, because they take their friendships, trust and cooperation - their social capital - and invest it in formal political structures - men don't do it that way. They integrate into their public lives a strong sense of womanhood and, if they are lucky, take the confidence and authority of public success, once thought of as 'feminine', into the private realm of relationships, family and the home.

Joan Kirner is, I think, an example of this. She says, on the one hand:

I firmly believed in the principles of community development (as demonstrated in Landcare); respect and dignity for all people and the right to live a normal life (as demonstrated by integration into schools of children with disabilities and the closure of institutions), and the right of everyone to have a good education. And within the cabinet, I tried to imbue a sense that we all had a collective responsibility for our decisions. (O'Connor)

On the other, though she prioritised the people in her life – family, friends and staff – first (Kirner:73-76) she had to integrate her public and private activities, to the point that her ‘private time’ – time for herself – came to be the time between after midnight and her retiring time of 1 a.m. (ABC).

Women politicians who come from an activist background – on the ‘left’ by and large – and who have struggled for recognition seem to find it easier to express aspirational values, and a different political style from those with business or professional backgrounds or who have slipped into ‘safe’ seats. Women from community activist backgrounds understand the values of cooperation and respect for one another’s opinions and group support – perhaps, given the long standing practice of awarding ‘unwinnable seats’ to women, this is enhanced. Bronwyn Bishop, for example, has a very different approach from Kirner. She confidently told me and a roomful of Victorian women supporters on 8th March 1994 that she had never needed feminism or, indeed, other women to attain what then appeared to be a true course towards federal Coalition leadership. It wasn’t true.

Women political leaders are not and should not be expected to be ‘soft’ and approachable. ALP feminist Carmen Lawrence was criticised, as both WA Premier and federal Minister for Health, as being ‘cold’ (Sawer, 1995) and ‘aloof’ (Mitchell). Amanda Vanstone – a small businesswoman and a ‘Tory’ – is no ‘cuddler’, though she was affectionately regarded in her Customs Ministry because of her inclusive, warm personal style (not so evident today)(Weekend Australian Magazine June 1-2 2002)).

Community, consultation and participation: does it really provide better opportunities for participation by women, or better decisions? Women tend to assume that it does, and to value community involvement as a prerequisite to political candidacy (82% of EMILY'S List members in a 2001 survey). This is not the policy of either the ALP (today) or any party (other than, in the 1980s, the Democrats who chose Janine Haines and Janet Powell for precisely these reasons).

Joan Kirner (ABC; Kirner:6, 12) operated under the principle that, it was necessary to work for the betterment of others if you wanted to benefit yourself and your own children, and that as a community leader, it was necessary to work through issues, and take other people with her. She says (O'Connor) that the skills from that experience were then,

'translated . . . into the committee structures of parliament and the party . . . we were the ones who for years kept the parliamentary party and the community linked together ... [I think that] looking at every issue as it will affect women . . . was one of the reasons we as a group of women made a difference.'

Perhaps the consultative style favoured by 'liberal' women politicians is no more objectively effective than the early suffragists' belief that women's votes were responsible for the socially progressive legislation of the first two decades after women's suffrage, which may have been simply a manifestation of the spirit of the age and were certainly introduced by men.

But consultation with women, by women politicians does create loyalty between community activist women and 'their' women members. In the Cain years, the women MPs had and were seen, by women, to have particularly strong credentials in education and disability rights (Kirner, Caroline Hogg, Margaret Ray, Caroline Hirsh and Judy Dixon); women's refuges (Kay Setches), local government (Jane Hill and Caroline Hogg) and the experience of single parenthood and women's services (Caroline Hirsh), adoption and delinquency (Pauline Toner), ethnic women (Beth Gleeson) and child care and family service areas. Importantly, their experience had been fed into both

party committees and the community groups that had shaped the policies in the lead up to government. Once in government, they could implement them. They linked 'grassroots' women to the all-powerful Executive. But the 1980s were a unique time, when ALP 'heavies' unaccustomed to giving Party recognition to the traditional 'hack' work and community activities of women (nothing like the 'normal' Union based way that men did it, and still do) sought just such unusually qualified women, to squeeze into government after decades in the political cold.

Do women have a more consultative style? Maybe, if the candidates came from community movements seeking social change, as they did in Victoria in the 70s and 80s. It is not evident among those who model men's political career patterns.

That led to legitimate expectations of a different style of government, and in the 80s and 90s, women who were not afraid to tell their parliamentary representatives that they were accountable to them – and, as Summers:2000 notes, could turn upon them, as they Sydney feminists did upon Elizabeth Reid, first women's adviser to Gough Whitlam, when she did not support their thrust for funding for domestic violence and refuge services.

I return to that theme of political women's friendships. Most of the political women I have so far studied emphasise as a crucial factor to their personal survival in the political zoo, their women friends: Joan has said:

"It was bloody hard for the first few months...if it hadn't been for Caroline I think I would have turned turtle...I've never operated by myself; I've often operated up-front, but never by myself.... I don't know how Susan Ryan did it, (because) they just pick you off...(O'Connor)

Crucial, too, was the critical and exacting – and, at times, hypercritical - scrutiny of women's political work by other women. We are hard on our sisters: too hard, I think, at times. Women work within 'hostile' or masculinist bureaucracies and need the support of other women. The women's liberation

movement's failure to support Elizabeth Reid (Summers:360) and the rift between them and their shining star, led to her resignation. Susan Ryan often speaks with feeling of the unfairness and criticism of women activists as she fought for sex discrimination legislation.

The Victorian example, in the 1982-1992 period, of coalitions among feminist networks, political parties and women's groups and the executive created real influence. But only for a time.

My working hypothesis is that the 'style' women bring to their political activity directly affects their effectiveness. It is powerfully influence by women's perceptions of any need to be supported by other women, rather than powerful men or dynastic systems. Those women who deliberately sought networks of community are sensitive to 'women's issues' because they are constantly reinforced.

QUESTION 3 DOING IT BETTER?

If women do bring 'feminine' or 'womanly' or just different values and styles into their political life, do they really result in different – and from women's point of view - 'better' decisions?

Mary Gaudron:1997 pointed out that the first Australian women lawyers to succeed did so at enormous cost: they adopted masculine career models and renunciation, practising Law no differently than their male colleagues, selling both themselves and the development of the Law short.

As a woman lawyer of that era, I believe that playing by 'boy's rules' will never effect cultural change. This is only managed by getting power and using it. One approach – a very masculine one – was expressed by Edgar Schein in a recent media interview (BOSS magazine)

“Corporate culture can be changed. A new charismatic leader, for example, can sometimes come in with a message that changes the

culture very quickly. But major cultural change usually takes a long time - - an imposed cultural change either needs to start with whole new populations of people who already hold the desired new assumptions or it will require painful periods of coercive persuasion.'

Another, as Joan Kirner and I agreed, writing the Women's Power Handbook, is for women to claim power in order to share it. But the getting of power is as important as the getting of wisdom and a crucial lesson for women who want to change the lives of themselves and those they care about. Being satisfied with 'influence' is to hand over power to others. An incremental approach to cultural change does not work when the culture is inimical to women's priorities. At the very least, women need to be ginger groups. A 'critical mass' of powerful, cautious women can readily become a mass of women sharing a masculine world-view and individualistic, self-oriented competitive values.

The big question is whether or not women have to play 'by the men's rules' until there are enough of us at the top so that we can change them. There are two views. Eva Cox (Williams, 1995, 22) would say to go for the big challenges:

'We want to change the world, not get the men to do half the bloody housework.'

But as Chilla Bulbeck:202 remarks

'Many women would settle for half the housework as a good start.'

My working hypothesis is that women will never change the political culture in which they struggle, nor influence political decisions, unless they are so closely linked with the executive that they cannot be sidelined; but without a living pipeline to the community of interests of women, and keeping the 'ethical edge' that makes them different, they are no more worthy of support than male politicians. That 'ethical edge' is too easily sand-papered away as they climb.

QUESTION 4: THE LEGACY?

What have Australian political women leaders left behind them? Is there any evidence that the women who follow them have foundations to build on?

I think that, arguably, the greatest legacy of women politicians is in their example of structural innovation; their courage and persistence, and the roles that they model. Individual successes may encourage others to follow. Women who want to create, must be aware that they need to bring other women along with them.

It is probably appropriate to look now at the achievements of Joan Kirner, who would not approve of being portrayed as someone who did it alone, and the Victorian politicians of the Cain and Kirner years. Much more work needs to be done in developing measures of women's political achievements for women.

The Victorian women and their electorate assistants and friends explained each issue through woman's perspective to their male colleagues and persuaded them that equality demanded dismantling old privilege – removing symbolic obstacles, such as the 'men-only' zones at the racecourse and the MCG.

They took their community interests – children, integrated education, access to quality integrated education for children with disabilities, abolition of corporal punishment, affirmative action in public employment and equal opportunity resources – and changed the attitudes and perceptions of the possible of a generation of girls, and boys.

"Private" issues became mainstream policy. The men were persuaded, at least (like the curate's egg) in parts. The Police Minister marched against rape; for childcare, volunteer and community activities were government-funded; and most importantly, women were accepted as legitimate sources of advice for the Executive.

Having a woman's perspective does not mean simply championing women's causes. I have already identified Joan's justified pride in the LandCare program as that for which she would most like to be remembered. (Kirner:49). It was her personal values that drove it:

LandCare reflected one of my first principles of politics, which is community development, that politics ought to be a process which strengthens community . . . If you've got power, you ought to use it to empower other people, which is not always a comfortable view of politics, I might say, because it takes longer. But in the long term it's a better solution (O'Connor)

As with the Rural Women's Network, Joan built LandCare on existing community links and broadened them, as a model for change. If – as she believed - power is meant to be claimed, to be shared and used for more than individual benefit, then what it is used to attain is highly likely to survive the natural fall of all governments. Another lasting monument to the Cain/Kirner era women's politics is the Victorian Women's trust, built with the support of women of every political persuasion. Building links among women without regard for Party political differences, leads to the kind of 'one voice' among Victorian women that, at symbolically important times, can make a very great difference. It stymied the Kennett government's plans to close down women's prisons and locate the inmates in Pentridge men's prison in 1993 (Kirner:70).

QUESTION 5: THE POUND OF FLESH?

What price do women pay for political engagement? Must it be a pound of women's flesh?

This is a more subtle question than it looks. The price women politicians pay is very high, but the 'pound of flesh' is an extortionate price that women should not have to pay and that, in The Merchant of Venice, Portia ensures is not paid. Justice carries a two-edged sword.

One huge price is women's curiosity value to the media. Women politicians tend to believe that journalists are their friends and are bitterly surprised, every time, when they are turned on. There can be no friends among journalists. Consider the overnight destruction of Bronwyn Bishop's charge for the top job – one slip, one silly photo with a football, and Humpty is Dumpty; the savagery with which Natasha Stott-Despoya was turned upon once she left her 30s and gained 'the leadership' of the Democrats; Cheryl Kernot's unstoppable credibility, until she left the protective culture of the Democrats, scowled at intruding cameras at her home, and offended Laurie Oakes in her misjudged biography; and Carmen Lawrence, once the future Prime Minister of Australia, then the Wicked Witch of the West.

Women are much more scrutinised in terms of appearance, relationships and feelings – which is why, as Carmen Lawrence has said, it is necessary to change the rules so women are not seen as interlopers or criticised (in her case) as 'aloof' and 'cold' (Mitchell:132, 142) – in other words, unmotherly.

The 'price' is often very high – broken marriages, alienated children, loneliness (Joan Kirner's misery at selling her beloved State Bank is a case in point (ABC 2002)). The Parliamentary culture is brutalising, with public humiliation and rowdiness in the 'bear pit' of Parliament reducing some competent, confident women – such as Victoria's Margaret Ray - to distressed silence. It was seen at the time, and rightly, as

'hurting all women members: in using violence against Margaret it meant that in fact you were using it on the other women to make them afraid to speak' (Kay Setches, in O'Connor)

and it infuriated the Labor women in the Victorian Parliament of the 1980s that their own male colleagues joined in the game.

There is a tremendous pressure to toughen up – sometimes to good effect, as when Amanda Vanstone retorted to a Labor bully who called her 'fatty' that it was *'better to be broad in the beam than to have bullshit for brains.'*

(Kirner:269). But not all women, or men, can take it, nor should they be expected to. In some cases there is real, physical bullying. Joan Kirner remembers (O'Connor) how one woman backbencher:

. . . had leg trouble and was a bit unsure of herself... (a Liberal backbencher) used to make a specialty of walking down the middle of the corridor, so if she didn't move sideways for him, she'd get bowled. Eventually she raised it in caucus and we said: well, we'll take it on, and we did, took it on publicly and named him.

The conditions under women worked in the Victorian Parliament caused them real stress - open hostility from some men, at worst, and patronising toleration, at best, when inexperienced women members stood to speak – and it even caused illness. But it also ignited a powerful desire among those women to make things better for the women who were to follow.

“Joan got a migraine at the end of the afternoon and had to go home, and I think this was directly attributable to the fact that we had been stuffed around so much. We literally did not know what questions to ask...and we didn't know that it would be a problem to get stamps or they only came once a quarter....all those things....the little practical things.. I know several of us decided that when we became senior members of the Council we would do everything to simplify the proceedings, to give certainty to new members and to make it comprehensible.” Margaret Ray (O'Connor)

Joan's tells great stories. One is a particularly good example of the stresses of political leadership and the crucial role of friendships among women:

I developed a melanoma on my leg while I was Premier.... I told the doctor to take it off, but not to tell anyone, 'when I got back to the office, there's a cushion and a rug, and Sue Anderson who is THE secretary to beat all secretaries, says 'Sit there and put your feet up, and you're going home at 3 o'clock: I didn't I won that battle...but oh God!

Menopause! Bloody floods and hot flushes, and then the migraines started...Its like that marvellous Joan Roster cartoon: The bloke with his head under the table saying 'Why do I have to go to school today?' 'Because you're the principal!'

And another, of the idiotic behaviour from male colleagues:

I burst into tears in cabinet over two of the Ministers (Tom Roper and Tony Sheehan) wanting to fix up their new offices...Tom wanted a toilet in his own office... a public fight over toilets and \$70,000 worth of improvements to Tony's office, ...I hadn't authorised it! I walked into Cabinet and started to say: 'Just have a look at how the public are seeing us', and with that, burst into tears, much to my, and everybody else's amazement."

She also was the victim of Cabinet disloyalty: this story was leaked to the media, which went to great lengths to take a photograph attempting to show the Premier in tears the following day.

I wonder whether women are more willing to express uncertainty in their political judgement:

"I often ask myself whether we could have used our power in that last two years more effectively: whether I should have sacked a couple of non-contributing Ministers - what would have happened if I did?- and whether I could have been tougher on the budget.... all those questions. But I never asked myself whether my principles were wrong, because my principles have been the same for 30 years.... I grew up with them and I still love them and they work." (O'Connor)

I will examine that question in Joan's biography.

Perhaps the last word should go to another of those magnificent Victorian women ministers of the 1990s:

'My health has never recovered, never, from that winter. When the worst was over I spent a lot of time vacuuming and feeding my daughter's friend . . . because you feel you've got some control in that situation . . . I would get up at 6 o'clock with the dustbuster and clean up a little corner. It's very odd but very female and a domestic way to assert some control in a situation where it didn't feel as if there was any . . . There is a cost – it's a huge cost . . . you really think to yourself, 'would I do this again?'

CONCLUSION

And so we come full circle. Does the presence of women in large numbers – or particular proportions – make a difference to political decision-making? What do they bring to politics, that men do not? Do they do it better? Leave anything to build upon? What do they pay, and must they always pay, for political power?

All of our women leaders have wanted and needed the support and understanding of other 'outsiders' in their work. Their successes, I think, are most obvious when they deliberately, wilfully accept their power as women, and their satisfaction in community values that men may not share equally. Women who networked with other women, in ways so unimaginable and threatening to many of the male politicians, paid off in political terms – but there may have been a cost to the community based women who came to take their access to women for granted, and did not learn how the "system" (as opposed to the individuals) worked. When the Kennett administration swept in, at the end of 1992, many of those 'powerful' community women lost all influence and – or so it seemed – their confidence in being effective lobbyists in the new political culture.

Do women really understand how important it is to women MPs to get positive feedback as well as clear messages when things are not going right? Do women MPs have sufficient confidence, and sense of self, not to rely on masculine networks to achieve their desires? Do they do enough to set up structures and expectations that do not depend on women's friendships –

forged in adversity – that will survive the loss of political office and the closing down of government projects?

Have the young women, toiling up the new political ladders, more willing to seek power, understood the risks in using it entirely for individual career advancement? Women in politics don't have to 'be a bloke' but nor should they expect all other women to be 'sisters'. (Kirner: 100-101). They must build their political families.

Women in politics do not necessarily change anything, unless they do 'it' differently – and that difference is a consciousness of their gender. Women can do anything – but need more than merit and hard work. They need the right tools, and a disaster recovery plan.

Women with political ambitions need to have an agenda that acknowledges that there are inequalities among women, that some women are not strong and competent, and it is not weak to acknowledge our human weaknesses. Women politicians' agenda for change must be bedded into a framework of justice. I firmly believe that successful political activity links women's personal experience of exclusion or discrimination with a fellow-feeling for the others 'on the outer' – men and children and women and the old and the poor and the 'unlawful non citizens' and the prisoners and the mentally ill - for whom nothing less than systemic, radical change is required. Above all, women politicians need to learn the language and skills associated with economics, the law, public administration, planning and accountability – and invest them with women's values of trust, cooperation, community and the common good. While women set our priorities according to the expectations of those we cannot bear to disappoint, we need the tools that will make sure we don't disappoint them.

We need the company of women behind those women seated in the House.

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