

Time to make the shoe fit

By Anne Summers

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Australia was the second country to give women the vote but lags behind much of the world in letting them lead. Why can't we have a female prime minister?

Maxine McKew's audacious bid to unseat the Prime Minister at the next election has ignited the political imagination and sparked speculation about the future of the former ABC broadcaster. "Maxine for PM" emails were flying round before she had even secured the nomination - let alone the seat. If she takes Bennelong, McKew will go down in history as the Howard slayer - but it is most unlikely she will ever end up in the Lodge.

Australia's track record on women political leaders is poor, and is unlikely to be altered by the individual success of a political star such as McKew. In January, in the same week that a woman began her historic bid for the US presidency, the Australian Prime Minister reshuffled his cabinet and reduced the number of women by one-third.

No government in our history has ever had more than five women ministers. Elsewhere the democratic world is increasing the number of women in politically powerful positions. France could have a female president next year and it is very likely that the US will too. There are women presidents in Chile, Finland, Latvia, Liberia, the Philippines and Switzerland. John Howard's cabinet has just two women members. The total ministry has only four - or 13 per cent. This puts us in the company of countries such as Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo - all of which have fewer than 20 per cent of ministerial positions filled by women.

It is 105 years since Australian women became entitled to sit in Parliament, and 31 years since Margaret Guilfoyle became Australia's first cabinet minister. Yet the number of women in cabinet, and thus qualifying for prime ministership, remains abysmally low.

The reasons for this are partly structural. In the parliamentary system, where prime ministers are drawn from the majority party in the representative chamber, women need to be elected to that chamber and to move into leadership positions within their own parties, gaining policy and managerial experience, if they are to position themselves for the top job.

In Australia, where we have never had a female prime minister - or even a deputy - the number of women thus positioned is still relatively low. It is changing gradually, with women now making up 24.7 per cent of the House of Representatives (17 Coalition and 20 Labor). But it is difficult to arrive at a scenario that has a woman leading a party that is in office within the next 10 years. Although we were the second

country in the world, after New Zealand, to give women the vote, we have been very slow to elect women to positions of political leadership.

It is not that we don't have talented, able and motivated women, but we do seem to lack a culture that nurtures this talent, rewards ability and matches motivation with opportunity. We have done less than other countries to address, let alone solve, the fundamental quandary faced by working mothers: how to balance the needs of children with the personal ambitions and career demands of women.

These days we have a government led by a man whose rhetoric has not moved much beyond the 1950s when it comes to women. The Prime Minister encourages mothers to stay at home by providing handsome financial incentives, and regularly insults the choices of women who opt for combining work and family.

We still trivialise women in the public eye, obsessing with their appearance. Any woman in politics who can string a sentence together is branded - and cursed? - with the prediction that she is prime ministerial material. At the same time, few high-profile women in politics - at federal level at least - have escaped vilification for any number of apparent or imagined transgressions, more often than not involving sartorial crimes. Carmen Lawrence, Natasha Stott Despoja, Cheryl Kernot, Amanda Vanstone, Bronwyn Bishop, for example.

Women are still too often measured by their maternal and domestic prowess. Julia Gillard was criticised for not having children and for having a kitchen that was too clean. The criticism came not from her colleagues or the public but from journalists. Some of them women journalists at that.

In many ways, the media is more uncomfortable with women political leaders than the public. Voters have shown themselves to be quite willing to vote for women. With women comprising between 26 per cent (NSW) and 40 per cent (Northern Territory) of lower house members around Australia, female politicians are no longer a rarity. I do not think voters would have a problem with a woman prime minister. It is our political parties and our media that seems not be ready.

And even when the parties finally seem willing to put (at least a few) young, competent women into Parliament, even into safe seats, there seems to be no commitment to fast-track female talent. It was done for Peter Garrett and will be done for Bill Shorten. Will it be done for Maxine McKew if she wins? Or is the ghost of Cheryl Kernot still looming over Labor? The parties, like the media, are quick to stereotype and to generalise individual mistakes or failures into flaws of the entire female sex.

As Julia Baird documents in her book *Media Tarts. How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians* the media portrayal of female politicians is skewed. Women are often depicted as frivolous, making it easy for their colleagues to not treat them seriously, or are expected to conform to outdated housewife/mother stereotypes. Baird argues that some women's political careers have collapsed due to media persecution and colleagues' criticisms, even when the women still enjoyed the support of the general public. Carmen Lawrence is a case in point.

Of course Howard is not the only Australian political leader to have dropped women from senior positions in recent times. In Victoria after the last state election, the number of women in Premier Steve Bracks' cabinet was reduced from seven to four, a decline from 35 per cent female representation to just 20 per cent. Howard's announcement also followed on from Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd dropping a woman from his frontbench team, reducing the number of women in the shadow ministry from eight to seven. But at least federal Labor retained a woman as deputy leader.

Nor are we the only Western democracy with a questionable record on women's representation. The US is also down there with the male-dominated ministries, with only 15 per cent of the Bush cabinet being women. But in the case of the US this represents a significant decline from the Clinton era, when 26 per cent of appointments to the administration were women, whereas Australia has never had a greater representation of women than it does today.

It is worth making the point that only Australia, Israel and the US among the developed democracies have such small numbers of women political leaders.

In stodgy, sexist old Europe, by contrast, women make up 47 per cent of the Government of Spain, 45 per cent in Norway, 42 per cent in Finland, 40 per cent in Sweden and 31 per cent in the Netherlands and Denmark. France (20 per cent), Italy (23 per cent), Ireland (20 per cent) and Belgium (19 per cent) - all supposedly socially conservative countries - have far more women in their governments than the country that pioneered giving women the vote.

Some countries can even claim parity or close to it. Chile, for instance, has a government where 50 per cent of the ministers are women - and there is also a female president. South Africa has 47 per cent women ministers, Nicaragua 45 per cent and Bolivia 29 per cent.

When it comes to prime ministers, Germany is led by a woman. So are Jamaica, New Zealand, Mozambique, South Korea and the Netherlands Antilles. New Zealand's past two prime ministers have been women, and when Helen Clark first assumed office, the leader of the opposition was also female. (As was the governor-general and the chief justice of the Supreme Court!)

In Australia, even those women who make it into cabinet are frequently ineligible for the leader's role. Howard's cabinets have tended to contain a preponderance of women senators. Prior to the last election, three of the four women ministers were senators. It is only since last month, after Amanda Vanstone's departure from cabinet, that majority of women ministers in the Howard Government have been members of the House of Representatives.

The situation with federal Labor is somewhat better, with four of the seven women in Rudd's shadow ministry being from the lower house, and three of them being young enough to have potentially lengthy political careers ahead of them. If Labor should win the next election, and these women stay on its front bench - perhaps joined by Maxine McKew - the prospects of women achieving higher political leadership would improve. On paper at least.

In reality, I think the chance of a woman leading either of our major parties (while that party is in power) within the next decade is remote.

At present each side of federal politics has only one plausible candidate: the Liberals' Julie Bishop and Labor deputy leader Julia Gillard. Despite their apparent appeal and readiness for the top job, each faces formidable obstacles to actually getting there.

Education Minister Bishop is relatively untested, having been a pretty ordinary junior minister since 2003, and in cabinet for just a year. Despite press profiles boosting her credentials for the prime ministership, it is unlikely she will claim the job later this year if the coalition is defeated in the federal election.

Her most favourable scenario is to become deputy leader of the Liberal Party under Peter Costello, Brendan Nelson or - quite possibly - Malcolm Turnbull. If she fails to win the deputy's position, her ascendancy will be stalled, probably permanently, as the next generation of Liberal leaders stake their claim on history.

On the Labor side, Gillard has already signalled her intention to try for the top job. She is widely respected and although she has never been a minister, she has accumulated important parliamentary experience via her position as leader of Opposition business in the House. But she faces formidable barriers to becoming leader. Her membership of the Left faction is the principal one and, since she has never indicated that she would consider realigning herself, appears to be a permanent impediment.

Besides, if Labor wins this year, Rudd will be unassailable for a long time to come. If he follows the pattern of previous prime ministers who led their parties to power after a decade or more in the wilderness, he will serve two, possibly three, terms.

He could equal Bob Hawke's record and be in office at least until 2016. Gillard might have to settle for being acting prime minister whenever he takes his holidays.

We have done better at the state level, where there have been two women premiers and two women chief ministers, one of whom - Claire Martin of the Northern Territory - is still in power. Anna Bligh is widely tipped to become the next premier of Queensland. If she does, it will have been a long time between premiers, but at least there is a bit of a track record.

However, federally, the dearth of women is embarrassing. We are conspicuous in the Commonwealth, where Britain, Canada and Jamaica - to name just three - have had women leaders, and in our region we are one of the few democracies not to have produced a woman leader. Look at India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, and of course, New Zealand.

Women are assuming political leadership around the world. Even in the US, women are stepping up. Nancy Pelosi is now Speaker of the House of Representatives, the first woman to hold that powerful position. Hillary Clinton is running for president, the first woman to do so.

In Australia, however, while we have sparklers such as Maxine McKew enlivening the political scene, and contenders such as Julia Gillard cementing their credibility, the road to the top is strewn with seemingly insurmountable barriers. At least for now.

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