

THE 1994 INVESTIGATOR LECTURE

WOMEN, POLITICS AND THE MILLENNIUM

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SUMMARY

One hundred years after Australian women first were enabled to vote, the political system stands in clear need of reform to improve the representation of women. The political will to accomplish this appears to be developing, but an even more alluring opportunity exists to rewrite the fundamental rules of Australian politics to enshrine gender equality. The inexorable movement of the nation towards a new, republican constitution provides a unique opportunity to include gender equality as a fundamental principle of political representation. For this to happen, however, women's groups need to harness their energies and imagination towards this goal as the outcome of equality is neither unanimously supported nor guaranteed to occur. It is particularly unlikely to happen if the contemporary women's movement follows the lead of the fin de siecle feminists into spiritualism, the occult and other forms of millenarianism that are at odds with the tough pragmatic negotiations needed for the republican debate.

This is a year for celebration.

Not just for this state but for the nation as a whole. Not just for women but for all Australians.

This year we recall and honour three milestones in our nation's political history.

We celebrate one hundred years of women's suffrage in this country. We celebrate the fact that this state, South Australia, was the Australian state to first allow women to vote.

We celebrate South Australia being the first state to enable women to stand for Parliament.

And we also celebrate the fact that without the insistence - and the intransigence - of the South Australian delegates to the 1897 Constitutional Convention, Australia may have come into being as a nation without providing women with the vote. As it was, our "founding fathers" failed to include women's suffrage in the Constitution that gave birth to the nation in 1901. It was only by an Act of Parliament the next year that women were empowered to vote in the second federal elections of 1903. In the first federal poll, held in 1901, women were reduced to campaigning for male candidates who would vote in their first term for female

suffrage.

Nor should we forget the fact that the federal franchise did not flow automatically to those states where women were still denied the vote. Victoria in 1908 became the last state to enfranchise women, by which time women in that state had already voted in two federal elections!

I am very honoured to have been invited to deliver the 1994 Investigator Lecture on this very special occasion, perhaps the most significant political anniversary for women in this country.

I would like to mark the anniversary by addressing the topic: Women, Politics and the Millennium. I will begin by spending a few moments looking back, recalling and reviewing the achievements of the past century.

Apart from the achievement of suffrage itself, Australia adopted a great number of reforms, many of them at the urging of the early women's movement, which improved the lives of women and children. These included laws like those safeguarding married women's property and the right of women to custody of their children; the appointment of women police; raising of the age of consent for girls; the widows pension; child endowment and - in some occupations - equal pay for equal work.

But we should not be content with historical reappraisal. The centenary of women's suffrage should, in my opinion, become an occasion for mapping out new political goals for women, and how we intend to achieve them. As I will argue this evening, the evolving debate about the Republic can be engaged to argue for further political benefits for women, and the Republic itself, when it is proclaimed, should provide new and exciting opportunities for us as a nation to once again assume world leadership in the field of political and social innovation.

These goals are achievable. But they presuppose an intellectually disciplined, politically motivated and remarkably focused women's movement, one able to match the unprecedented pragmatism and political creativity which in the 1970s and 80s saw the adoption by federal and state governments in Australia of a substantial portion of the agenda of second wave feminism. There are tendencies within sections of the women's movement today, as well as some uncomfortably similar historical parallels, which suggest that the movement may no longer be up to the task. I will return to this proposition later in my address.

One hundred years after Australian women first were able to vote, the political system stands in clear need of reform to improve the representation of women.

We know now, as many of the first wave feminists who fought for

the vote seemed not to anticipate, that merely being able to vote was not enough. The right to stand for office - to be elected to Parliament - was a necessary corollary. That right was conferred at the federal level in 1902.

One hundred years later, we are confronting the fact that having the right to stand has by itself been insufficient. It has not resulted in significant numbers of women winning seats.

Indeed, from the perspective of what seems important to us today, the post suffrage political progress of women has been excruciatingly slow.

It was to be two decades after federal enfranchisement before a woman, Edith Cowan from Western Australia, was elected to a state parliament.

Four decades before Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney became the first women to be elected to Canberra, Lyons to the House of Representatives and Tangney to the Senate.

Six and a half decades before Annabel Rankin became the first woman minister (although Enid Lyons in the 1940s had held Cabinet ranking even though she did not have a Ministerial portfolio).

Seven and a half decades before it became established (and

accepted) that women candidates did not repel the male vote.

Eight decades before it became de rigeur for there to be at least one woman in a Cabinet, and nine decades - a long ninety years - before it became widely accepted, and the stated policy of a major political party, that women were entitled to more than tokenism and should in fact participate equally in the political system.

We now recognise that we need to devise ways to ensure more equal representation of women in the Parliaments of the land. Left to itself, the system has failed to deliver equality.

Of course, at first, a great many of the women who fought for the vote did not believe that women should demean themselves by actually trying to win seats in Parliament. Many agreed with the position articulated by the American feminist Jessie Ackermann who spent a great deal of time in Australia during the suffrage campaign: "If the social problems demanding legislation do not receive the attention of members," she wrote in her book Australia from a Woman's Point of View, "women are in a position to unseat them, and fill their places with men who will carry out their wishes".¹

Others believed, like the feisty Victorian feminist Vida Goldstein who stood as an independent candidate five times

between 1903 and 1917, that politics had to be a partnership between women and men. But she failed to win at any of these elections, suggesting that women were not voting for her in sufficient numbers. Indeed, while women remained divided on the question of whether it was seemly for women to enter Parliament, the chances of any women being elected were - as it turns out - non-existent.

Today the issues are different. We are trying to come to terms with what it means to move beyond tokenism towards true representation. Today, federal and state leaders at least give lip-service to the notion of more women in their Ministries. But, despite the rhetoric of equal representation, it is proving extremely difficult to boost the numbers of women. The pool of women in politics is still small, too small in many cases to offer the range of talents required for greater representation in the Ministry - and certainly too small for us to claim that women have got the representation we deserve.

(In saying this, I mean that women representatives should come from as wide a spectrum as do the men. Then, not all women members need be seen as Cabinet contenders; performing well as a local member, doing constituent work, should also receive recognition and acclaim.

At present in the often desperate attempts to boost the numbers

of women in senior political jobs, the mere fact of gender is often equated with being qualified for high office, a confusion that ultimately does the cause of women no good if it means unqualified women are promoted beyond their competence.)

Carmen Lawrence, who is undoubtedly one of Labor's most talented politicians, made this point in the aftermath of the blaze of publicity that engulfed her as she made the transition from state to federal politics earlier this month: "There are too few of us, so we tend to become the focus of both extravagant praise and excessive criticism," she said in a post-election radio interview. "I don't think that's healthy for the next generation of women coming on." ²

She no doubt also meant, but was too prudent to say, that it is not particularly healthy for the present generation of women politicians either.

At present, because they are so few, each woman member is subjected to far greater scrutiny and much higher expectations than any but a handful of their male counterparts. This places unfair pressure on the tiny tribe of women. In addition to the usual monitoring of their work as politicians, they can expect to have their clothing and their hairstyles commented upon - often critically, their family and other personal arrangements queried and they will invariably - even in 1994 - be expected to pose for

photos if not in the kitchen, at least in a domestic setting. I cannot recall any male MP being subjected to similar pressures.

Such treatment could easily deter many women from even considering entering politics. How could anyone have watched - and read - the disgraceful commentary on Joan Kirner's clothes and appearance when she was Premier of Victoria without their heart going out to her? Why should she have had to put up with that kind of sexist point-scoring from the media - and from other politicians, including the New Zealand Prime Minister? Did John Cain have to see himself described as "frumpish"? Does Jeff Kennett have to read that his dress sense is "improving", leading to the conclusion that the image-makers must have been brought in to do a make-over?

A determined woman can probably grit her teeth and decide she won't let any of this get to her, as Carmen Lawrence seems to have done. But there are still many practical barriers standing in the way of women who want to be politicians, making very difficult the possibility of a rapid increase in the numbers of women politicians, especially in Canberra.

The most obvious difficulties lie with the political parties and their unwillingness so far to abandon the rules and conventions that have resulted in it being rare for women to gain pre-selection for safe seats.

Both major political parties have promised to remedy this, and Labor has a stated goal of parity in representation by 2000 but the rhetoric is unlikely to be matched by such dramatic results.

Not even the most determined political party could achieve such an outcome in the space of two or three elections without stripping pre-selection from more than a third of sitting (male) members and bestowing their seats on women.

Somehow I can't see such munificence occurring, even - perhaps especially - from those, such as the Left of the ALP, who pay lip-service to the goal.

In recent days there have been reports of a deal having been struck between the factions of the Labor Party to achieve 35 per cent representation of women by 2000. This represents a downgrading of the ambition but it is probably more realistic and, for that reason, more likely to be achieved.

If by 2000 35 per cent of our parliamentarians are women, at least on the Labor side in Canberra, that will represent a massive acceleration in the rate of change over the century since Federation, and since women's suffrage. And while we will still fall short of the equal representation we must ultimately attain, such numbers will mean that the women in Canberra will no longer be a tiny minority having to be all things to all women (and

men).

But more needs to change than rules governing pre-selections and winning elections. It is not just the political parties that have to change.

We, the people, have to as well.

Our expectations of politicians are often unreasonable. We expect them to be constantly available and always responsive. We are like spoilt children, demanding their presence at every petty electoral event, even when they are Ministers. These demands are hard on all politicians, but they especially hard on the women - particularly if they have children.

Most working mothers find combining their various roles exhausting and stressful, but if on top of the usual stresses one adds the lunatic hours most Parliaments sit and - if a federal member - the constant travel to and from Canberra, it is not surprising that the majority of women federal parliamentarians are either childless or their families are well into adulthood.

A number of quite fundamental reforms are needed if we are to encourage more women into federal politics. The sitting hours need to change so that Members are not forced to abandon all semblance of family life while Parliament is in session. All-

night sittings, for instance, should never occur. They are an example of badly managed business.

But even more importantly, we the people need to set aside the prejudice against federal Members of Parliament living in Canberra. This is one area where I think we could learn from the Americans. There, members of Congress routinely relocate themselves and their families to Washington and only return to their electorates periodically.

In this age of phones, faxes and fast travel, it should not be necessary for a federal member to be physically present in her electorate. She should appoint competent staff who can manage her constituent work, and spend her energies on legislation and other Canberra work. Not all women Members would find it easy to have their families move to Canberra, but it should at least become an option because it provides the only way a Member - and more importantly, a Minister - is ever going to be able to spend significant amounts of time with her family.

We should not to forget that the only woman Cabinet member with children of recent times, Ros Kelly, was the member for Canberra and hence lived there and was able to get home each day to see her kids. And Paul Keating put his family first when he became Treasurer, moving them down to Canberra - a luxury that having a safe seat allowed. It must become possible for all Members.

The concomitant of this is that voters must scale down their expectations of just how much constituent work Members can actually do. Many women MPs are especially vulnerable here, succumbing to feelings of guilt and inadequacy if they have to turn people away, or else toiling past the point of exhaustion to try and keep up with the never-ending demands on their time.

Women members need to recognise that constituent work is like housework - it expands to fill the time available. Like housework, you don't need to do nearly as much as we used to think we did. But just as families have had to adjust to new standards of housework, voters have got to learn to respect the MP's need for rest and privacy and learn to deal with her staff, rather than insisting on the personal touch all the time.

IT HAS become an assumption of politics today that women should be equally represented in parliament. Yet there is not a lot of sensible discussion as to why this should happen. Much of the conversation - still! - revolves around stereotyped notions of women and what women have to offer. Instead of simply arguing that equal representation of women would be a natural and democratic outcome in a society where the population is divided into two sexes, there is a strong tendency shared by feminists and political theorists alike to want to try to justify an

increased female presence in politics. They do this by resorting to stereotypes.

Perhaps the pre-eminent, and I would argue most dangerous, stereotype today is the one that depicts women as ethically and morally superior, and which argues that women's increased presence in politics (and in the upper echelons of the workplace) will "raise the tone" of these places, make them less combative, more cooperative, nicer...

In 1990 when Carmen Lawrence and then Joan Kirner made all of us proud by becoming Australia's first women Premiers, the precedent, and the pleasure, was soured somewhat by their being told they were in the jobs because they were female, there to provide a much-needed, highly visible and thus handily symbolic contrast to their inept or corrupt male predecessors.

They were there, it was said, to clean up the mess left by the men. Political housewives, in other words.

In fact whole new political theories were developed around the appointments of Lawrence and Kirner. "At a time of crisis, it was not a strong man that was wanted," wrote Rod Cameron, managing director of the Sydney-based market research firm ANOP and political pollster for the ALP during the 1980s. "Strong men had made the mess. It was an honest woman with the appearance of

down-to-earth common sense who was chosen to clean it up".³

Cameron went on to predict the future "feminisation of politics" as voters rejected brute strength and ockerism in favour of "intelligence, common sense, honesty and creativity - an unusual combination of virtues more likely to be found amongst women than men".

This sentiment is a long way from that expressed ninety years ago in the Victorian Parliament by an honourable member, Thomas Bent, who fulminated: "...do you mean to tell me that woman is as competent to deal with questions of public policy as man is? I deny it... Will anyone tell me that the ordinary woman has the same business capacity as men to deal with matters affecting the State? I deny that she has".⁴

As debate about women's suffrage raged, male opponents questioned the intellectual and emotional competence of women to comprehend, let alone decide, matters of state. An even greater fear, though, was of "petticoat government", of male parliamentarians being manipulated - henpecked! - into supporting policies advocated by women.

This was a major reason for the opposition to women being able to stand for Parliament; it was feared they would put the interests of their sex ahead of those of their party - a prediction which

was in fact borne out by Edith Cowan, Australia's first female MP who consistently voted against her party on issues she regarded as important to women and who failed to be re-elected to Parliament as a result. So it is ironic today, a century later, to hear political strategists from the major parties argue that "petticoat government" is what is needed nowadays.

Once, it was claimed, women were going to ruin politics. Now we are being called upon to save them. "The absence of women ... affects the culture of politics," wrote retiring Liberal MHR and former NSW Liberal Party general secretary, Jim Carlton. "Women have a more consensual approach to decision making than men. A more balanced parliament would tend to reduce the level of conflict in politics and enhance the standing of parliament in the eyes of the public".⁵

The trouble with this kind of thinking is that, again, it stereotypes women, alleges that we are all the same and presupposes that all of us are motivated to act on behalf of our gender. This claim is patently untrue these days - just look at Bronwyn Bishop! But this kind of thinking is pervasive - even, perhaps I should say particularly, amongst many feminists who argue that women represent a higher order of morality.

A good many feminists today would no doubt agree with the words of Rose Scott, the late 19th century feminist and suffragist who

said, "Our place as women is not as camp followers to a corrupt system of Party politics, but as women to be men's inspiration to higher and nobler methods of governing a country".⁶

When we have a Labor strategist, a recently retired Liberal MHR and radical feminists all saying more or less the same thing, does this mean we have arrived at consensus on the subject? Can we agree that women not only can, but should and will, clean up politics?

I, for one, certainly hope not.

Such thinking presupposes a limited, and limiting, role for women in politics - under such a regime could a woman be Minister for Defence? - and it also implies a certain passivity. If women are endowed with a natural moral superiority, what need is there for them to develop, to evolve new skills, to learn the practicalities of statecraft? Yet how can women possibly reform politics if they stay aloof from them?

We already know from the experience of the past century of suffrage that staying on the sidelines, merely using the vote to attempt to influence male legislators, has not been effective. But nor can women politicians hope to change anything if they ignore the realities of politics. It is one thing to argue for the improvement of sitting hours and some of the other reforms I

mentioned a few moments ago; it is quite another to imply that politics, and parliaments, are going to be totally transformed by the mere presence of more women MPs.

This is utopianism, pure and simple. Or, to give it a more contemporary flavour, this is millennarianism, the view that a change in the status quo - in this case having more women run our affairs of state - will result in a happier and more harmonious society. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the push for fifty per cent women coincides with the new century, which also happens to hark the second millennium. Perhaps even the usually hard-headed strategists of the political parties have had a dash of millennarianism injected into their usual tough-mindedness. (I am not seriously suggesting this, I hasten to assure you, but I could not resist mentioning the coincidence!)

Yet I believe we need to beware the kind of thinking which can be clustered under the umbrella of millennarianism and which, I would argue, can only be bad for the political advancement of women.

Millennarianism began as a purely religious notion, spawned by the prophecy in Revelations that Christ would return to earth and preside over a perfect world for a thousand years. In its secular evolution, it has come to mean "a Millennium, not necessarily limited to a thousand years and indeed not

necessarily limited at all, in which the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy".⁷ Mmm!

Could this be the House of Representatives six year hence?

I would not want to make too much of the analogy.

Millennarianism in its popular and considerably watered down meaning today refers mostly to forms of idealism and utopianism and fortunately lacks the fervour and fanaticism that for much of the past thousand years has made it a potent and usually violent social force.

Indeed, Norman Cohn in his book on the subject has argued that the 20th century totalitarian movements of Nazis and Communism have their roots in Millennarianism. "A boundless, millennial promise," he writes in his book The Pursuit of the Millennium, "made with boundless, prophet-like conviction to a number of rootless and desperate men in the midst of a society where traditional norms and relationships are disintegrating...[was] the source of that peculiar subterranean fanaticism which subsisted as a perpetual menace to the structure of medieval society... [and in which] lies the source of the giant fanaticisms which in our day have convulsed the world".⁸

The tendency towards utopianism which, I argue, is very strong - if not predominant - in the contemporary American women's movement has been less pronounced in this country. Here,

feminists got an early dose of the allure of political power when the Whitlam Government in 1972 actually came to us and asked what we - in those days a pretty raggedy bunch of students - thought they - the Government! - should be doing for women! It proved to be a pretty potent drug.

From the early days of our movement, we became accustomed to being consulted by governments. We quickly became dependent upon the drip of the government grant. We - or at least some of us - succumbed to the unprecedented opportunity to work as advocates for women within the ranks of government, in the bureaucracy, where we soon became known as "femocrats", a term coined by someone, somewhere, in the women's movement who has never wanted to come forward and claim the credit. Perhaps because it was originally seen as a term of abuse, a hostile rejoinder to those who were seen as having "sold out". Only later - much later - did it come to have more neutral and, at least in some quarters, almost affectionate overtones.

At the time as we were being courted by the Whitlam government, our American sisters, by contrast, were being spurned by the Nixon Administration which vetoed child-care legislation and generally turned its back on women. Few subsequent Administrations in Washington until President Clinton was sworn in last year have shown much sympathy for feminism, and consequently there have been few countervailing influences pulling the American women's movement towards the political mainstream.

Being frozen out of the political system does nothing for your pragmatism, and the American movement has never really come to terms with how to relate to the national government of the day - how to sit at the table and negotiate out a few deals and commitments in the way the Australian movement has. As a result, the American movement has tended to become more interested in personal, cultural and "life-style" issues - pornography, abortion, sexual harassment, portrayal of women in the media etc - than in many of the economic or labour-force issues that have engaged Australian feminists: child-care, equal pay, gender segregation of the workforce.

In recent years, though, in Australia there has developed an impatience or boredom with this kind of politics, or perhaps it is with politics of any kind, and many Australian feminists are

retreating to other realms. Spirituality, goddess worship, the occult, personal growth movements, twelve-step programs and other forms of non-rational thinking are attracting large followings. I hope I can avoid sounding intolerant towards these tendencies - and certainly I am not trying to deny the right of individuals to pursue personal and non-intellectual goals - but I have become extremely wary of the potential of such trends to sap the political backbone from previously strong and energetic movements, and to persuade them that personal salvation, or even personal pleasure, is paramount.

This was the fate of many fin de siecle feminists and suffragettes, especially in England, where the length and ferocity of the fight for the franchise exhausted and dispirited most of those who took part. It was perhaps small wonder that many of them took comfort in the secular religions of the time, especially spiritualism and the occult both of which had acquired cult-like status. Annie Besant both exemplified and exaggerated the trend: after several decades of feminist and socialist activity, this English free-thinker turned inward, to theosophy and life in India, a great loss to the cause.

Such anti-political thinking is inimical to the large political task that lies ahead for women in Australia if we are to attach ourselves to the movement for the Republic, and to help fashion not just the debate surrounding the movement but the eventual

shape of the nation we will become.

More than a hundred years ago, we were excluded from the deliberations about the kind of federation and the kind of country we were going to be.

That must not happen this time.

The movement towards a new, republican constitution provides us with a second chance. We can now push for inclusion. We may go so far as to demand that gender equality become a fundamental principle of political representation. We may want to insist on a provision for the new position of Head of State - the Presidency, or whatever it is ultimately named - to be occupied alternately by a woman.

There are many issues we may wish to canvass, but so far there is no sign that those fomenting the Republican debate are any more conscious of gender issues than were the founding fathers a century ago. Indeed if you raise the subject, even enlightened people tend to look puzzled and wonder what on earth you are talking about.

I would like to conclude my remarks tonight by trying to map out just what it is we might be talking about if we were to successfully marry the Republican quest with our desire to have

women's interests more successfully represented within our political system.

This is new and uncharted territory. Few of us have thought much about it - myself included, as I was very recently made aware - but history has given us, the second wave of feminism, a chance denied to our forebears of the first wave. We must not waste it.

Recently, at a dinner in Sydney with the visiting American feminist Betty Friedan, the question "What are you?" was posed to me by Friedan's companion, a professor of political science from Princeton. He had become interested in the Republican debate while he was here and he was testing various propositions he thought were integral to the issue.

"What are you?" he asked again. After only a small hesitation, I replied, "I am a woman and I am a writer and editor..." After that I faltered, not sure how next to categorize myself. It was evident, however, that I had disappointed my interlocutor - and ruined his theory! - by my failure to describe myself as "an Australian".

Betty Friedan then took up the challenge: "I am woman, an American and a Jew". She elaborated that these were her three most important points of self-identification, more integral to

how she thought of herself than the fact that she is also a mother, a grandmother and - of course - a celebrated writer. The others at the table, all of them American, also included their nationality in their self-description although, interestingly, neither of the men present thought their gender was relevant in stating what they were.

This conversation got me thinking about why it was that I had not included being Australian in my description of what I am. I certainly think of myself as proudly Australian, proof of which surely can be seen in my recent decision to return to Sydney after nearly seven years of living in New York. But it is not the only thing I am and it is not even the first thing I am. Why not? I started to ask myself.

Part of an answer came to me a few days later as I read John Hirst's new book A Republican Manifesto⁹ and was struck by the following passage:

No-one would wish away our peaceful severance from Britain.

Few would deny that the benign supervision of the evolution of the Australian colonies into nationhood was one of the great triumphs of British statecraft. But there has been a cost. There has never been a moment when we have attached ourselves to our political system as the embodiment of our nation.

Our critics are right to say that Australia does not need to become a republic to acquire a distinctive identity.

Australians have a very well-developed sense of who they are, but it relates almost solely to their social being. We are free and easy, egalitarian, not snobby, and not class conscious: we are not Poms.¹⁰ (emphases added)

This description rings very true. It certainly captures the extraordinary difference between the attitude of most Australians towards their constitution and that of, say, most Americans. Living in the United States I was constantly reminded of how important the political system, and the Constitution, is to Americans of every walk of life.

People there cherish, and constantly refer to, their "constitutional rights". I once witnessed an altercation between two police officers and a bunch of homeless, street people who invoked the Constitution to protest against being asked to move. Americans have enormous respect for the institutions of their government. Whatever they might think of the current incumbent of the White House, their reverence for "the President of the United States" is quite startling to Australians accustomed to the bagging politicians in this country constantly receive.

The challenge for us in the next few years is to try to evolve our political system so that it does begin to embody who we are.

For women, the challenge is to find ways to marry being a woman with being an Australian. I would argue that the Republic provides us with the opportunity to do both of these things.

In her contribution to the Republican debate, Ann Curthoys makes the extremely interesting point that Australian feminists, both today and in the past, have been over-possessive of their achievements for women. "Feminist historians are often quite proud", she writes, "of the exemplary achievements of Australian women in the context of world history - gaining the right to vote so early... - and feminist activists are equally proud of the rapid successes of second-wave feminism since 1972. But we consider these to be feminist rather than national gains".¹¹

Why is this so? Have we lacked vision, or have we lacked courage? Why have we not insisted that such pioneering achievements as women's suffrage and, much later, women's refuges, sex discrimination legislation, the appointment of femocrats, state-funded child-care, be seen as national, as Australian, accomplishments?

Curthoys suggests it is because the nation has been seen as synonymous with racism and masculinism, and that feminists have not wanted to identify with these characteristics. But, in fact,

this view of the nation would have to be revised considerably for it to incorporate the achievements of and for women. At the very least, the masculinist label is challenged by Australia's feminist record, even if the racist tag is not.

I suggest there may be another reason. Curthoys herself points to it, later in her chapter, when she describes newspaper reports of the visit to Australia in 1992 of Mrs Merwat Tallawy, the head of CEDAW (the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). After being briefed on Australia's accomplishments for women, she described them as being "a model for the rest of the world".

A few days later, the Prime Minister, Paul Keating gave a speech in which he referred to her accolade. "Nowhere in the image we present to the rest of the world - nor I suspect in our self-image," Mr Keating said, "is there a reflection of that fact".

What I found especially interesting about Curthoys' use of this episode is that I was on Keating's staff at the time, but I was not responsible for injecting that quote into his speech. When I saw the reports of Mrs Tallawy's comments, I said to myself, So what! We all know that! What I failed to understand is that, in fact, most Australians - including in this case the Prime Minister and his senior advisors - did not know that, and they were proud and excited to find out.

Don Watson, who is the Prime Minister's speech writer and who suggested those lines to Paul Keating, did not know. I remember him coming into my office and pointing to the newspaper clipping. We must shout about this, he said. I was somewhat surprised by his enthusiasm. It was old news to me.

And I think that is part of our problem. We have segregated ourselves from the mainstream movements of this nation, perhaps we have feared the kind of rejection that was the fate of the first wave feminists who tried to become part of the debate about Federation. Women do have political power, as has been increasingly demonstrated at election times; this power now ensures our issues are listened to by politicians, and we have had some remarkable successes.

But women have not yet succeeded in winning wide acceptance for the integration of our issues and those of the nation. An example of this occurred in the early days of the 1993 federal election campaign when Paul Keating included important reforms to the child-care program in a major economic address to the nation. He was excoriated by a puzzled media for having "lost the plot", for inserting what the press considered to be a minor, sectional interest into a national economic statement.

We still have a way to go to convince many Australians that the

interests of women and the interests of the nation are not at odds. Perhaps we once believed they were. I hope that is no longer the case.

We must make the past achievements for women part of the nation's story - our history - and we must make our agenda for full equality part of the nation's future.

Men don't have to lose out or feel excluded from this. There is no reason why men cannot share in the pride we feel at having pioneered women's suffrage. It is, after all, an Australian accomplishment.

(As a nation, Australia was denied the status of being the first to enfranchise women by New Zealand but that was only because of New Zealand's last-minute decision to break away from the other Antipodean British colonies and form an independent nation. New Zealand participated in the Australian Constitutional Conventions, including the debates on women's suffrage, and so the historical accident of their being first should not in any way diminish our pride in what we managed. After all, it took the United States another two decades to catch up with us!)

Suffrage should be included in that list of other accomplishments which Australia has pioneered - such as the secret ballot and the eight hour day - and which have made the world a better place.

These are things of which all Australians can be proud, just as we can be proud of many of our social policies which today make us, once again, a world leader in reform and innovation when it comes to the needs of people.

It is time for the story of Australia, the nation, and the story of half of her people, women, to come together.

It is time for our futures to merge and for this to happen women must be involved in shaping that future. Our new constitution must have "founding mothers" as well as "founding fathers" and the concept of equality must be enshrined from the start.

We need to find the language and the concepts to guarantee equal participation of women in our new political system. It is a big task, and likely to be a controversial one. It is one the women's movement needs to be ready for, with arguments honed and political skills fine-tuned.

It is not a Millennium we want - or need - but a political system which entrenches the notion that "all women and men are equal". It is not a big ask - but it hasn't yet happened in Australia. The Republican debate provides the perfect opportunity. Let's not waste it.

ENDNOTES

1. Jessie Ackerman, Australia from a woman's point of view London, Cassell, 1913. p.221

2. cited in The Australian Financial Review, March 15, 1994

3. Rod Cameron, "Feminisation - the Major Emerging Trend Underlying Future Mass Audience Response". Address to the 11th National Convention of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, October 19, 1990.

4. cited in Audrey Oldfield, Woman Suffrage in Australia. A Gift or a Struggle Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1992 p. 190

5. Jim Carlton, "How to break Parliament's male monopoly" The Independent Monthly February 1994 P.35

6. cited in Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police. The Colonization of Women in Australia Melbourne, Penguin, 1994 (rev. ed.) P. 412

7. Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Messianism in the Middle Ages and its bearing on modern totalitarian movements London, Mercury, 1962 P. xiii

8. Ibid. 319

9. John Hirst, A Republican Manifesto Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994

10. Ibid. p.3

11. Anne Curthoys and Stephen Muecke, "Australia, for example" in Wayne Hudson and David Carter (eds.) The Republicanism Debate Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 1993 P. 189 Emphases added.