

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. I acknowledge that we have not found satisfactory ways of measuring what makes politically active women 'good' politicians in terms of achieving what women want.¹ I ask, do 'women' want the same things? Are women politicians better politicians?

These are profoundly individualistic times. 'Choice' is promoted as the pre-imminent public virtue. The idea of collective interests is as old-fashioned as talk about the common good: I use both terms without apology. Women have claimed, over a hundred years of women's suffrage, that their interests are different. Women have also claimed but I will argue, failed to convert institutional, political power to meet those particular social, emotional and philosophical needs.

I will suggest that women who are active in their communities tend to 'do politics' differently and arguably better, because they take their social capital and invest it again in formal political structures. If they do this successfully, political women integrate their public lives with a strong sense of femininity, while taking the confidence and authority of public success, once thought of as 'masculine', back into the private realm of relationships, family and the home.

¹ I also acknowledge the considerable debt I owe to Heather O'Connor for her work on the collective biography of Victorian women MPs in the Cain/Kirner years (unpublished) 1998.

Women voters consistently express their concerns as health, housing and education; all 'private' life concerns, shaped by public decision-making. Voting is a blunt and inadequate way of influencing those decisions. I will suggest that the women who make a difference are inhibited from using power adequately if have acquire that power through masculinist structures or patronage, and if they seek to play by 'boys' rules'.

Women do not necessarily use power differently from men: I will argue that the style they individually bring to their political work influences what they achieve, and how long those achievements last. Those women who have 'done it differently' seem to have thought about their values, valued friendships, shared power, and acknowledged how deeply their satisfaction lies in 'community' outcomes: they have a sense of history and very often a powerful sense of humour and the habit of pricking pomposity (as *The Age* reported in 1992, suggesting that outgoing Victorian Premier Kirner had left a very personal memento for incoming incumbent Jeff Kennett in the Premier's personal washroom).

Women in politics are doing it hard. Women political leaders are targets. This year we observed the public humiliation of Cheryl Kernot – not her erstwhile lover, Gareth Evans - and the overwhelming of her female Democrat successors; Meg Lees, who sought pragmatic credentials through a GST 'deal' with Coalition powerbrokers; and Natasha Stott-Despoja, once the media's darling until she attained political leadership when she became its object of derision. We have observed the scavenging over Carmen Lawrence's political career, though she was acquitted by a jury in just minutes, after a Royal Commission process that should have put paid to the fantasy that Royal Commissions are fair and discover truth.

You may have noticed as I have the propensity of male journalists and vixen columnists to lay the blame for Australia's economic woes of the early 1990s upon Joan Kirner, Premier of Victoria for just two years.

We have also recently witnessed the attempts of factional warlords in the ALP to 'wind back' its highly successful affirmative action targets to put quality women

candidates in winnable seats. The historian Barbara Tuchman (Tuchman: 1992) would call this ‘wooden-headedness’ – the pursuit of policies by a political entity contrary to its own interests. In the end the ALP’s special convention backed off on lowering the targets, yet giving recalcitrant branches instead another decade to achieve even a target of 40% quality women candidates in winnable seats.

Backtracking to consolidate short-term, factional power relationships would probably cost the Australian Labor Party any reasonable prospect of national government, and damage its long-term survival odds. For I remark that as of today, every State government is a Labor government. Coincidentally, or not, as at April 2002 the ALP had 132 women in Parliaments across Australia; the Liberal/National Parties just 64, with the Greens only six, the Democrats six and 13 Independents (if we leave Meg Lees where she was). The ALP ‘score’ has doubled since its ‘women-in-winnable seats’ targets were introduced, and so has its local success. Notwithstanding the perception that women candidates might lack such merit as the factional system produces, such as former Queensland Senator Mal Colston, these women are clearly non-token high-quality candidates, from Deputy Federal Opposition leader Jenny Macklin, to Clare Martin MLA, who became the Northern Territory’s first ever Labor Chief Minister.

WHY THIS TOPIC?

I offered this topic because I’m writing an authorised political biography of Joan Kirner, the first woman Premier of Victoria. Joan Kirner had entered Parliament in 1982, one of 17 women MPs during the Cain administration, of whom five were in Cabinet; one was Secretary of the Parliamentary party and several held important positions in Caucus committees and Parliamentary committees. When Joan became Premier in 1990, I had recently been appointed Victoria’s Commissioner for Equal Opportunity. We became friends after we co-authored the Women’s Power Handbook (Kirner (and Rayner): 1999) in 1999 and travelled together around Australia. We share a lot, from our Presbyterian upbringing to our first public speaking experience at the age of 16, a sermon, to a certain kind of ‘power physique’.

Joan’s Ministries have 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 insisted on her removal resigned within weeks, having made whatever his point might have been about attaining leadership. Joan Kirner paid a price in terms of her superannuation entitlements, which were diminished by both her resignation from the front bench and legislation enacted by the Kennett administration. She also paid with her health.

My interest in writing Joan's political biography began with her remarkable community political achievements. She had started 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. Joan 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: 2002; Kirner: 12) She did, so successfully that in 1980 the Fraser Government awarded her an AM for her contribution to community services. She then won ALP preselection and entered Parliament in 1982 as a result, she insists of her naiveté about how Victorian factions worked. If it were naiveté, it was inspired.

Joan brought her community values, supporters and feminism explicitly 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 the late Heather Mitchell the now internationally acclaimed national LandCare program, in Victoria.

You will note that these women are not credited with establishing what is now a nationally successful program: the men, who built on it, have been.

Joan is still a politician, though not in Parliament. Perhaps her greatest achievements are yet to come, and her most successful political activity will be seen as her work outside the Parliament, including her work for state education, establishing those ALP targets for women and EMILY's List: a political network to ensure that more progressive Labor women got into Parliament, set up in 1996, that gives funding, mentoring and strategic support for members. EMILY's List 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 their November 2001 election campaigns. 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 was pitched onto the Premier's Damoclean Throne.

Women Parliamentarians such as Kirner are singled out for this kind of attack, if not ridicule. Joan was repeatedly derided as a 'stupid woman' by then Opposition leader Kennett, and cartooned as a fat, flapping, polka-dotted housewife when she was Premier – because, as the cartoonist, Jeff Hook, admitted, he didn't know how to draw a powerful woman. (Kirner: 95).

What Joan Kirner and other Victorian women MPs created in their political activism underlies much of this lecture.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Because the biography 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 Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, to signify that, in my view, women who seek political office or engage in formal politics expect to pay an extortionate fee for their bargain, and it's time to change that expectation. I've taken that image because it raises, for me as a woman lawyer, a very big question about what it means to be a woman politician. I've used the quotation because I always test a new pen or keyboard with Portia's legal plea: *'The quality of mercy is not strained . . .'*

Mercy is supposedly a womanly virtue, though many women leaders from Boadicea and Elizabeth 1 of England and Golda Meir (Israel), Margaret Thatcher (UK), Mrs Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka), 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,’ but performed better as a ‘king’ than any male monarch before or after her. Mrs Meir would cook large, fatty meals when she was unsure of her next tactical step, feeding and disarming opponents and world leaders alike: perhaps she was also disabling her opponents as part of a long-term assassination plan.

So my starting point is not that ‘women’ do use power differently, but that the exercise of power by women seems to be very different, certainly in some circumstances

I begin with a big question: are there women with political power who use it in ‘womanly’ ways – and what are they? – and if there are, does this make a positive difference to women’s lives?

To explore it I asked five little questions

1. Does a ‘critical mass’ of women – either in large numbers or particular proportions relative to men – 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 government departments, ‘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 relative to men – makes a difference to the way political decisions are made or political power is used?

One hundred years ago all white Australian women won the vote and 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’ (Lake: 141). But did it change society? *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*² Everything seemed to happen, but nothing much changed.

The triumphalist claim after nearly two decades of women’s suffrage that women’s votes were responsible for legislation to protect married women and their property, children against cruelty, workers’ safety, provide for pensions, safe working conditions and even crushing the opium trade, is incapable of being substantiated. They were certainly not attributable to women MPs. There weren’t any.

Fifty years ago Norman MacKenzie (Simms 2002:36-40) criticised the ‘*fuzzy-mindedness of some of the most active feminists*’ of those early days, who offered up as a panacea for all ills the vote, pure and simple. ‘*Did the feminists know what they wanted to vote about?*’ MacKenzie asked – and indeed, there was no clear agenda among the women: many deliberately eschewed ‘male politics’ and formal political parties and quickly flamed out of the political firmament.

Second wave feminists (post 1970) and post-feminists (and I may be both) have asserted that a ‘critical mass’ of women in positions of power and authority would make a difference to how that authority is exercised. This may be a similar, simplistic approach to the early suffragists’. As Eva Cox (Cox: 35) and I (Rayner: 2002) have both pointed out, the evidence seems to be that it is not raw numbers of women, nor even their proportion in relation to the former power elite that changes a culture, but the qualities that women may (or may not) bring to the mix. Women who succeed on

² If you want to see its memorial, look around you: Sir Christopher Wren’s epitaph in St Paul’s Cathedral.

men's terms are likely to lose what I call their ethical edge and the desire to bring change about, becoming indistinguishable from the men they seek to supplant (Kirner:6).

As Eva 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.'

Not many women become political leaders, partly because of the public/private divide – public and political and reasonable being “manly,” and private, nurturing and emotional, “womanly” (Cox: 2002). When we look at recent women political leaders (including Aquino, Bandaranaike, Bhutto, Gandhi, Megawati Sukarno-Putri, Meir and Peron, and Helen Clark outside Australia, and Lawrence, Kirner and Martin within) it is evident that women are more likely to become ‘heads of state’ in times of social or political unrest, when the crown does not seem so attractive. Lawrence took her chalice after the collapse of ‘WA Inc’; Kirner, after Cain’s exhausted retreat from Tricontinental and Pyramid, for example.

Many of these women political leaders came from ‘developing countries, and few of these rose on their own account. Most often they have benefited from the powerful influence of family men, often a father or husband (such as Megawati, Bhutto, Peron

and Gandhi). Very few women political leaders (Meir and Clark and Kirner stand out) acquired political leadership without actually using powerful family connections – even Mrs Thatcher had married richly and well. Powerful political women often borrow their wings from men’s influence, money and connections. Another word for it is patronage. I cannot improve on the way it was put by Mary Gaudron, the first woman to be appointed as a Justice in Australia’s High Court, in 2001:

”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 women Heads of State I’ve mentioned ‘feminine’ leaders? If by that we mean nurturing, persuasive and empowering, not necessarily. Indira Gandhi and Isabel Peron were reactionary and many of their policies and programs were detrimental to women and children. Mrs Thatcher was the Baba Yaga³, not the mother, of her nation. But Gro Harlem Brundtland, Norwegian prime minister three times between 1981 and 1996, was a ‘womanly’ politician, promoting women’s political and judicial participation. She was also, and perhaps this is significant, a community activist before she went into politics, and explicitly committed to consultation. She and Joan Kirner share these ‘leadership’ qualities. I suspect they are ‘womanly’ virtues.

My first provisional hypothesis is this: politically active women do not necessarily become different kinds of political leaders than men. What makes them ‘womanly’ leaders is related to how they got their position. If it was as a result of family connections, the women appear more likely to model that ‘family’s’ attitudes and practices, the dominant political paradigm. There may be a veneer of ‘difference’ –

³ A Russian folk figure: a horrible witch who ate children with steel teeth and flew on a mortar and pestle.

Megawati Sukarno-Putri's 'motherly' aura is one - but this does not necessarily mean challenging the norms of their Parties or supporters.

There seems also to be a significant difference between these well-married or – connected/-related women leaders; and those who 'rose' from the community, who seem to take the strategies and tactics that their own networks used, internally, to function in the formal political world. These tactics have tended to include co-operation, respect for other's opinions and an unwillingness to permit confrontation or aggression, or at least the language of such ideals.

Politically active women's use of power seems to depend on what they wished to achieve through their political power – whether they have a clear Party or principled manifesto, and whether their agenda is based on 'women's concerns,' that is to say, a set of values based on their life experiences as women, and a commitment to women.

QUESTION 2: DOING IT DIFFERENTLY?

What matters next, is the values and styles women bring to their political roles. Do women politicians bring different values, styles or approaches to the political process and working with government, '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 feminine" (sympathetic, sensitive to others, "nurturing", maternity and gentleness, and weakness) – and 'being a woman', which to me connotes power, assertiveness, confidence and professionalism?

Does how the woman views this question have any effect on the way a particular woman looks at herself; her intimate relationships and capacity to combine her public work with her private world; or her perception of her colleagues and other women? More importantly, does it influence the changes she actually makes for other women in her field?

Women's priorities tend to favour those whom they can least bear to disappoint, and this is very rarely themselves (Marshall: 1992) I ask, are politically active women

overly concerned with the minutiae of women's lives - childcare and family friendly hours, holistic approaches – and inappropriately eschewing the 'real' issues, such as the operation of the economy and the labour market? If so, does “doing it differently,” mean power is less effectively used by women?

I suggest that the 'difference' lies in the value that women place on their relationships and particularly other women's friendship. These, we know, do not always survive the transition from the comradeship of shared troubles into the stressful straits of success, which change friends' relative status (Eichenbaum: 89). Perhaps this is especially troublesome in politics. It seems more 'feminine' to be supportive, 'masculine' to take control; more feminine to be a 'team player' but masculine to compete especially with another woman. Yet the political process is predicated on competition not cooperation, at least, as politics works now. Women who wish to succeed in political life have to do something men do not. They have to make a decision about how to “be”.

Joan Kirner tried to marry her public and private principles and relationships. She says, on the one hand, that she always tried to see problems and policy through a woman's perspective and to take her community focus into formal politics, including the Cabinet. On the other, she also says that the people in her life – family, friends and staff – were the most important consideration of all (Kirner:73-76). I think that Joan integrated her public and private activities to the point that her 'private time' – time for herself – came to be the hour between midnight and her retiring time of 1 a.m. (ABC: 2002), and the 6-8 week bush retreat she now takes annually out of mobile phone range with her husband, Ron. I suspect we have underestimated the significance to their success of the partners of political women.

My second working proposition is that women who are or have been active in their communities tend to find it more natural to 'do politics' differently, because they take their friendships, trust and cooperation - their social capital - and invest it in formal political structures. Successful women integrate into their public lives a strong sense of womanhood and, if they are lucky, can take the confidence and authority of their public success into the private realm of relationships, family and the home (Orenstein: 99).

Women politicians who come from an activist background and who have struggled for recognition seem to find it easier to express aspirational values and seek to adopt a different political style, from those with business or professional backgrounds or who were slipped into ‘safe’ seats by powerful masculine networks (yes, men have networks too!). Women with community activist experience at least use the language of cooperation and respect for others’ opinions and group support. Perhaps, given the long-standing party-political practice of awarding ‘unwinnable seats’ to such women, these qualities are more visible.

Women from the professions or business or who have been parachuted into power seem to have other perceptions. Bronwyn Bishop, for example, has a very different set of beliefs. 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.⁴

Women political leaders are not necessarily ‘soft’ and approachable, if that is what ‘feminine’ is meant to be. Women may encourage these expectations because of their explicit emphasis on community values, consultation and inclusion. ALP political leader Carmen Lawrence was criticised, as both WA Premier and federal Minister for Health, for being ‘cold’ (Sawer, 1995) and ‘aloof’ (Mitchell). Amanda Vanstone – a small businesswoman but a terrific ‘Tory’ – was no cuddlepot either, though she was affectionately regarded in her Customs Ministry because of her inclusive, warm personal style (not so evident in her present portfolio) (Weekend Australian Magazine June 1-2 2002).

Nobody criticises male premiers and ministers for being brusque and directive and focused on their work.

Another question arises: whether community values and inclusive approaches actually improve the opportunities for women’s issues to be addressed or make for better decisions? Women tend to assume that they do, just as women tend to believe that

⁴ (in either sense)

community involvement is an important prerequisite to political candidacy (EMILY'S List Survey:2002) which this is not the policy of either the ALP (today) or any party (other than, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Democrats). If it were true, why isn't it the practice, or is that a Tuchmann-type question?

Do women politicians actually have a more consultative style? Maybe, at least in the members who came from community movements seeking social change, as they did in Victoria in the 70s and 80s: it is not apparent among those who model men's political career patterns. Joan Kirner said that the skills from her community work were,

'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.'

Still, I have doubts. Perhaps the consultative style was no more objectively effective than the early suffragists' belief that women having the vote was responsible for the socially progressive legislation of the first two decades of the 20th century. They may have been simply a manifestation of the spirit of the age, and were certainly introduced and supported by men.

What may be more significant is, as the group of women in Victorian political life did, ensuring that they thought consciously about women's interests and valuing links with other women. Consultation with women by women politicians does create loyalty between at least those women consulted with 'their' women members. In the Cain years, the Victorian women MPs had and were seen by women, to have particularly strong credentials in matters concerning women. Equally importantly their expertise had been fed into the Labor Party committees and had shaped its policies in the lead-up to government. Once in government, these women could implement them. That linked 'grassroots' women to the Executive.

But this was probably a unique set of circumstances. In the 1980s ALP decision-

makers had gone outside the 'normal' Union-based ladder to candidacy (still operative) and looked for unusually qualified, community-supported women to squeeze into government after decades in the political cold. That in turn led to legitimate expectations that there would be a different style of government, and in the 80s and 90s, women were not afraid to tell their parliamentary representatives that they were accountable to them – and, as Summers: (2000) notes, willing to turn upon “their” women champions if they felt they had let them down.

That leads me to the next observation. Most of the political women I have so far studied emphasise that a crucial factor to their personal survival in the political zoo was the support of other women. Joan Kirner 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)

It is a reminder that politically active women work with 'hostile' or masculinist bureaucracies and need support. It need not be uncritical, but nor should it be destructive. The women's liberation movement's failure to support Elizabeth Reid (Summers: 360) and the rift between it and its shining star, contributed to her resignation. Susan Ryan writes with feeling of the unfairness of the criticism of women activists as she fought for imperfect but workable sex discrimination legislation. Victorian women politicians felt they were accountable to a constituency of women and during the 1982-1992 there were lively coalitions among feminist networks, political parties, women's groups and the executive. This mesh created real influence for women; but only for a time.

My third working hypothesis is that the 'style' women bring to their political activity directly affects their effectiveness. It is powerfully influenced by women's perceptions about what it means to be a woman with power, and whether they feel the need to be supported by other women, rather than powerful men or dynastic structures, and whether those needs are met. Those women who deliberately sought

ongoing support from other women seemed to remain sensitive to 'women's issues' because they were 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 proper development of the Law short. As a woman lawyer of that era I know that playing by 'boy's rules' does not effect cultural change. This is only achieved by getting and using power.

Power can be used in a heroic way – charismatic leader sweeping in, turfing out the old and restocking with whole new populations of people who already hold the desired new assumptions (as Kennett did in 1992) and imposing 'painful periods of coercive persuasion.' (Schein: 2002)

Another way, as Joan Kirner and I agreed in writing The Women's Power Handbook, is for women to claim power in order to share, not impose, it and work long-term for cultural change. Being satisfied with 'influence', which so many women have settled for, is to hand over power to others. An incremental approach to cultural change does not appear to work, when the culture is inimical to women's priorities. We cannot persuade the powerful to give power away. It may be lent, and will always be reclaimed. I think we need to work to a 25-year plan: then, we may expect to see clear signs of lasting cultural change.

At the very least, it seems that women need to create innovative, creative movements within the institutions and structures that do not like change: ginger groups. As they rise to power women need to retain the 'ginger', those values that make them different.

A ‘critical mass’ of powerful, cautious women is a mass of women sharing a masculine world-view and individualistic, self-oriented competitive values. This adds nothing to the quality of political life for women.

The big question is whether or not women have to play ‘by the men’s rules’; until there are enough of them at the top so that they can change them.

My fourth working hypothesis is that women will not change a political culture in which they struggle, nor influence political decisions, unless they are closely linked to the Executive side of government. Without a living pipeline to the community of interests of women, and keeping the ‘ethical edge’ that makes women different, women politicians are no more worthy of support than male politicians. That ‘ethical edge’ is easily chipped off or sandpapered away as the women climb. They need the company of women to keep it sharp. They need a long-term plan. Short-term wins are easily set back.

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 the greatest legacy of women politicians is in their structural innovation; their courage and persistence, and the roles that they model, are important but not a sufficient bequest.

It is probably appropriate to look briefly at the achievements of Joan Kirner, who would not approve of being portrayed as someone who did it alone, and so at the Victorian women politicians of the Cain and Kirner years as well. These Victorian women politicians and their electorate assistants, secretaries and friends tried to look at each issue, and explain it to their male colleagues, from a woman’s perspective. They took their community interests and made them public policy. “Private” issues became mainstream this way. Some of their male colleagues were enlisted and made symbolic changes, such as the Police Minister marching against rape; childcare, volunteer and community activities were government-funded. Most importantly, women became a legitimate source of advice for government.

Yet that influence was lost overnight when the new government swept in, in late 1992.

What mattered most then, was that there were structures left to influence policy and the political culture. All governments fall. If – as Joan believes - power is meant to be claimed, to be shared and used for more than individual benefit, then what it is used to attain must survive the natural fall of all governments.

There were a couple of major structures that survived. One was the legacy of the LandCare program, which Joan Kirner would most like to be remembered for (Kirner: 49). It was a constructive, lasting achievement, because it was built on existing community models and links. Another was the Victorian Women's Trust, also built with the support of women of every political persuasion, with its impact on public policy and progressive philanthropy.

My fifth working hypothesis is, that building links among women without regard for party political differences leads to the kind of 'one voice' among women that, at symbolically important times, can make a very great difference to political decisions and to the democratic culture. It was the political will of Victorian women of all or no Party affiliation that stymied the Kennett government's plans to close down women's prisons and locate all women prisoners in Jika Jika, or "K" division, the 'punishment' wing of Pentridge men's prison in 1993 (Kirner:70). Women need to build lasting institutional or structural change: we tend to base our work on personal ties.

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 demand that women should not have to pay and that, in The Merchant of Venice, Portia – a woman, but with the skills and confidence of a man - ensures *is not paid*.

One huge price is women's curiosity value to the media. Women politicians tend to believe that journalists are their friends and are always bitterly surprised 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; and the savagery with which Natasha Stott-Despoja was turned upon once she entered her 30s and won the Democrat leadership; and Cheryl Kernot's unstoppable credibility, until she left her party's protective culture of, scowled at intruding cameras circling her home, and offended Laurie Oakes in her misjudged biography; and of Carmen Lawrence, once the future Prime Minister of Australia, and quickly the Wicked Witch of the West.

A second is the far greater scrutiny of women in terms of their 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 for being 'unmotherly' (Mitchell: 132, 142).

A third is the personal price of political involvement is often high – broken marriages, alienated children, loneliness and the bitterness of compromise: Joan Kirner's misery at selling her beloved State Bank is a case in point (ABC:2002).

A fourth is the wounds of war that women receive, and men do not. The Parliamentary culture is brutalising for many women. Public humiliation and rowdiness in the 'bear pit' of Parliament reduces some competent, confident women to distressed silence. It hurts all women members, making some afraid to speak (Kay Setches, in O'Connor). In the 1980s it infuriated the Labor women in the Victorian Parliament that their own male colleagues joined in that 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 that kind of pressure, nor should they be expected to. Women politicians are expected not to be 'weak' but they are readily portrayed so. When Joan shed angry tears in Cabinet over the antics of two of her male colleagues (squabbling over the relative cost of renovations to their posh offices), in a remarkable example of Cabinet

disloyalty the incident was at once leaked to the media, which took trouble the next day to take a photograph purporting to show the Premier weeping.

There is a physical cost of holding high public office, too. This is Joan Kirner:

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 . . . but oh God! Menopause! Bloody floods and hot flushes, and then the migraines started."

Finally, I have started to wonder whether women politicians are inherently more willing to admit that their political judgments may be not entirely infallible. This is Joan Kirner:

"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 – values versus pragmatism - in Joan's biography.

Perhaps the last word should go to another of those magnificent Victorian women Cabinet 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 politics differently or better? Do they 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 suggest, are most obvious when they deliberately, consciously accept their power as women, and that their greatest satisfaction may be found in community outcomes.

Women's networks with other women, so alien and threatening to many men (who don't see their relationships as the networking they are, too) pay off in political terms, but perhaps at a cost to the women who rely on them or take them for granted. The Victorian example suggests that in terms of parliamentary politics this risks community women not learning how the "system", as compared with a particular woman, works which leaves them exposed and any gains, readily lost. When the Kennett administration swept in, in October 1992, and the bullying began, many of those powerful community women lost their influence and – or so it seemed – their confidence in being effective lobbyists in a new political culture.

That should not happen again.

Women MPs need positive feedback as well as constructive criticism from other women.

It remains to be seen whether modern women MPs yet have sufficient confidence and sense of self not to rely on masculine networks to achieve their political ambitions.

Have they, toiling up the new political ladders, understood the risks in using power entirely for individual career advancement?

On the other hand, do other modern women community or party-political activists make the same mistake as their suffragist sisters if they eschew the political game, think 'ambition' is a dirty word, and power an unfeminist prize?

Do women MPs do enough to set up structures and expectations that do not depend on women's friendships and that will survive the loss of political office and the closing down of government projects?

Women in politics do not necessarily change anything, unless they do 'it' differently – and that difference depends on a consciousness of their gender. Achieving change takes more than merit and hard work. It includes bridge-building, on commonalities among women of all political views. A political woman doesn't have to 'be a bloke,' but neither should she expect all other women to be 'sisters' (Kirner: 100-101): political must form new political families.

However, women with political ambitions need an agenda. It should acknowledge that there are inequalities among women, that some women are not strong and competent, and that it is not weak to acknowledge this.

Women politicians' agenda for change must be bedded into a justice framework. 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 our unlawful 'non citizens' in detention centres and Pacific camps, and the prisoners and the mentally ill - for whom systemic, radical change is required.

Above all, women politicians need to learn the history, language and skills associated with the "hard stuff" – the economics, the law, public administration, management and governance – without squandering their investment of the (arguably) 'womanly' values of trust, cooperation, community and the common good.

Women must take the authority of public life and strengthen their private ones. As women we may well set our priorities according to the expectations of those we cannot bear to disappoint. We need the tools and structures to make sure we don't disappoint them. We need strong women standing behind the seats of more women in the house.

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