

Juggling the personal and political

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When I was asked to write about my experience as a woman who had survived a political career, I imagined I needed to concentrate on the mechanics of working at the Australian Parliament in an era when women were still a minority in the corridors of power. I planned to document my experience as a guide to younger women and to record a period of major social change. I began to organise an overwhelming number of official documents, letters, notes and speeches into some kind of logical order. I painstakingly planned the chapters to cover some of the major policy debates of the 1980s and early '90s. But, after several drafts, I realised my turgid description of politics was unlikely to engage most readers.

In 20 years of public life at local and national levels, I had learned to quickly scan detailed information on a wide range of subjects before then translating the salient points into press releases or policy briefs. Yet when I actually delivered speeches, I tried to personalise the subject by using anecdotes to relieve the tedium of factual data. However, when initially writing about Australian parliamentary life, I felt obliged to 'get it right'. Dates and names dominated my research as I set forth to present a detailed factual account of the Hawke and Keating governments. But the personal voice was missing. I could have merely cut and pasted slabs of data from Hansard and press clippings!

Therefore I changed course and returned most of my carefully collated research to the filing cabinet. I then wrote mainly from memory and discovered that parliamentary politics was only part of my story. My book, *Living Politics*, took a new direction as I recounted the journey of a typical girl of the 1950s who got involved in a diverse range of issues and in the process learnt about political processes. In telling a personal story about my experience of politics, I became more aware about the events that led me to becoming an activist. I also realised that my political path had begun long before any formal association with the Australian Labor Party. As I got involved in social issues, it was my personal experience that motivated me to question the status quo.

When I was a young teacher working with disabled children, I dared to challenge the educational practice of the era and found the Tasmanian Minister of Education was unimpressed with my efforts to give institutionalised youngsters equal access to schooling. I was amazed that senior decision makers seemed unable or unwilling to understand the reality of children's lives within the Dickensian environment.

A few years later, it was living with the extremes of racism in North Queensland that led me towards a political career. And ultimately my own experience of discrimination and sexism ensured that I would join the ranks of all those Australian feminists who campaigned in the 1960s and '70s for a political agenda that would change relationships between men and women.

I am a product of 1970s feminism, when the mantra 'the personal is political' dominated the debates of women determined to change their role in society. We set an uncompromising agenda and those of us who were elected went into the parliament assuming we could change the world!

Marian Sawer, in her book *Sisters in Suits*, documents the key legislative and social policy initiatives to create 'the quiet revolution in Australia', as governments across the country began to respond to demands from women that their specific citizenship rights be fully addressed: 'Australian feminists were to create bureaucratic machinery of a specific kind seen by its early proponents as a structure compatible with feminist philosophy.'

Not only did Australia develop its sex discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, in pioneering affirmative-action processes, we ensured that women, Aborigines and Islanders, people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds as well as people living with a disability, were brought into public life and represented in parliaments, government departments, universities, companies and on decision-making committees and boards of management.

By 1995, at the Beijing United Nations International Conference on Women, Australia was regarded as an international leader in feminist reform, with women's budget machinery across all federal government departments and 'impact-on-women' statements assessing all social policy cabinet documents.

So, 20 years on, where are we now?

It is true that the overall climate has changed dramatically and many women are more independent and confident about determining their personal and professional futures.

We see women leaders in our parliaments, judiciary, universities, companies and across the community sector.

At last, we can celebrate having Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and Governor-General designate, Quentin Bryce.

However, Anne Summers' book *The End of Equality* reminds us in depressing detail what has happened to the status of Australian women in the last 10 years.

While women's participation in the paid workforce has been steadily increasing over the past few decades, the concentration of women in part-time and casual work is on the rise.

In the 1980s, women in full-time jobs reached 63.8 per cent, but [this] has been decreasing to 54.4 per cent more recently.

Women currently hold over 70 per cent of all casual and part-time positions.

Universal paid maternity leave remains a priority for the Rudd Government after many years of obfuscation by previous administrations. There is still no child care in our parliaments and breastfeeding in workplaces is considered off-limits in most areas where men remain in charge.

Despite the ongoing work and family debate in the community, there are too many unresolved issues.

In 2007, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *It's About Time... Women, men, work and family* found that while women are in paid work in unprecedented numbers, many have dual roles as both workers and carers. Women continue to do most of the unpaid work of caring for home, children and older relatives. Australian women have responsibility for more unpaid work than men as they do 70 per cent of all family related tasks and 90 per cent of the child care.

Twenty years after the passage of sex-discrimination legislation, Australian women are still juggling the personal and political!

How, then, do women parliamentarians manage to balance work and family: the public face and private life that is so scrutinised?

Women in politics still suffer what Carmen Lawrence has described as the 'Madonna or whore' syndrome. The double standards illustrated in this phrase persist in our parliaments and indeed around the nation.

Remember the frenzied national debate about Julia Gillard's kitchen, yet I don't recall any such preoccupation with her male colleague's culinary skill! Women with children are suspected of neglecting their maternal duties while those who voluntarily remain childless are equally criticised for avoiding those responsibilities.

The public is unimpressed with the behaviour in our parliaments, yet women are still challenged to become just 'one of the boys'. Those who oblige and match their brawling colleagues are judged just as harshly as those women who adopt a more low-key style. Aggressive women are condemned while their male counterparts are praised.

There are no road rules for women in public life and most will find their journeys complicated by unexpected deviations and a plethora of 'stop' signs along the way.

Women are still more likely [than men] to have reservations about venturing into public life because they understand the personal and professional risks. It is so much harder to control the direction of a political career as demands are placed on the entire family and this can undermine the strength of any personal relationship. Many families find these kinds of pressures unacceptable and conflict between personal and public roles can lead to serious alienation. Both partners and children can resent competing for time with the family member who is in public life. Furthermore, the scrutiny of media and ever-present critics can strain personal relationships. These factors constitute a major disincentive for many women contemplating public life.

Many high-profile women have long argued that they need a wife to successfully manage the balance between the personal and political! Indeed, this is precisely how

generations of successful men have managed to devote themselves to achieving their career goals.

Women political leaders need partners whose egos are not threatened by the prospect of women's success. Anyone can feel affronted if their partner's career appears to overshadow their own, but it is more frequently men who suffer feelings of inadequacy if their role appears secondary to that of their partner.

Despite the changing roles of men and women, the community still tends to assume that in electing a parliamentary representative, they have actually elected a political couple. The partners of male politicians have long been expected to assume a double workload. However, the position of men as political partners is still unclear and, unless they have their own satisfying career, they may feel isolated.

In writing about my own political career, I hope I have opened up the debate about the delicate balance between the personal and the political. There are anecdotes where I have indulged the personal and equally there are sections where I have laboured over the political. I would argue that our society needs to strengthen the possibilities for us all to balance our personal and political roles in the interests of decision making that is more in touch with the realities of human relationships.

References

¹ Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits*.

² Ibid.

³ 'Women who want to be women', Open Letter and Petition, PO Box 169, Cleveland, Queensland 4163.

⁴ Peter Trundle, 'Discrimination in disguise?', *Courier Mail*, 29 January 1988.

⁵ Ibid.

^{6/7} Australian Labor Party, Anti-Discrimination Policy Statement, 1989.

⁸ 'Amalgamation—equity and affirmative action organisational structures and other issues', WIQUT Memo, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane 4001.

⁹ Margaret Reynolds, Letter to Hon. Peter Morris, Minister for Industrial Relations, February 1990.