

Senate Occasional Lecture Series

‘Liberal Women in Parliament: What Do the Numbers Tell Us and Where To From Here?’

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Thank you for inviting me to be a part of the lecture series.

I hope you will forgive me for having what some may consider a slightly blunt title for my lecture: Liberal Women in Parliament: What do the numbers tell us, and where to from here?

Numbers are the atom of politics. Nothing is possible without them. It isn't possible for anyone to be preselected for a seat, or to win election to a parliament, or to gain a leadership role in a party, or successfully move their policy into reality – without numbers.

I'm going to start my lecture with a short history lesson, mainly for the purpose of comparison. And this too is in large part about numbers.

Australian women have had the vote longer than almost every other country in the world, and were the first to get the right to be elected to the federal parliament, but it took decades to see the first women elected in 1943. It is no coincidence that one was the widow of a former Prime Minister, and both were elected during the Second World War – when Australia has having one of its periodic reconsiderations of the role of women.

The first two women elected represented both the major parties: Dorothy Tangney from the ALP, and Enid Lyons from the UAP, and later the Liberal Party. The two parties have often taken vastly different approaches to how to get its women into parliament – and for that matter, how, if at all, to appeal directly to women voters.

Today, the ALP has significantly more women in parliament than does the Liberal Party. It's timely to reflect on why this is, and also, what next for the Liberals.

For many decades, the non-Labour parties of Australia definitely had the numbers in terms of women.

In the early part of the 20th century, the women who most actively supported them, by joining a party-like organisation, were the largest organisation of politically active women in the country. They were also the largest women's voluntary organisation.

In time, this translated into a number of significant firsts. As is well known, non-labour women became the first women elected to parliaments in almost every state, and in the House of Representatives. The Australian first woman minister - Florence Cardell-Oliver in WA in 1947 - was a Liberal. That same year, Annabelle Rankin became Opposition Whip in the Senate and was the first to hold such a role. The first female member of the Federal Cabinet was a Liberal – Dame Enid Lyons. The first woman to be a minister with portfolio, Dame Annabelle Rankin, was a Liberal. The first woman Cabinet minister with portfolio was of course Dame Margaret Guilfoyle.

While this was happening, the UAP and then the Liberal Party had more women's votes than did the ALP. And in close elections, this really mattered. One reason why the Liberals did so well with the women's vote is that they pioneered campaigning directly to women. In the early days of the 20th century they did this through direct canvassing by women, to women.

A number of organisations did this, and the best known is probably the Australian Women's National League. It was known as the AWNL and was a Victorian organisation. It held political meetings for women, and in the days before television these were routinely attended by hundreds. The ANWL was also a doorknocking machine that most political parties would envy today, and took their message directly to women in their homes.

The central party organisations of the non-Labour parties were certainly influenced by the women who were voluntary party workers, as well as paid organisers. From the early years of the 20th century the non-Labour parties produced campaign material that was directed at women.

When the Liberal Party was formed continued this tradition. It went further, by having a 'status of women' section in its party platform as early as the late 1940s. These turned into specific policies for women in the elections of 1946 and 1949.

The history of organisations like the AWNL fed into the new Liberal Party in the 1940s, and hundreds of the women who had gained real political skills in the AWNL took these to the Liberal Party.

Robert Menzies was also responsible for the Liberal Party's approach to women, as voters and as potential MPs. There are many reasons for this. He was from Victoria, and the electorate of Kooyong, where the AWNL was especially strong. By the time the Liberal Party was formed he had been working side-by-side with women in campaigns – and with women running campaigns - since the 1920s.

Well before the Second World War was over, Menzies came to the view that the war would irrevocably change the role of women in Australian society. He believed that through the war effort, women showed themselves as capable of work that had previously been thought unsuitable, or beyond their capacity. He also thought that women's aspirations and place in society would change dramatically. Menzies explained some of these thoughts in what became known as his Forgotten People radio broadcasts of the 1940s. He also argued that a greater degree of gender equality was desirable:

"In the long run, won't our community be a stronger, better-balanced and more intelligent community when the last artificial disabilities imposed upon women by centuries of custom have been removed?"

In 1943 Menzies responded to the Women for Canberra movement. This was a local copy of the Women for Westminster campaign, which was a push to see more women elected to parliament.

Through one of his radio broadcasts Menzies said,

“Of course women are at least the equals of men. Of course there is not reason [sic] why a qualified woman should not sit in the parliament or on the bench or in a professorial chair, or preach from the pulpit or, if you like, command an army in the field. No educated man today denies a place or a career to a woman because she is a woman”.

Menzies’ Forgotten People speeches have been very well-analysed and I don’t propose to revisit all that here, except to say that what he did very well was appeal to women in ways that were very direct, as well as ways that were quite subtle. And in doing this, Menzies was light years away from the ALP and its approach to women at the same time.

Prime Minister John Curtin and the ALP continued to see women’s political concerns as a derivation of those held by men and seemed to anticipate a return to more usual working conditions when the war ended.

So in the elections of 1946 and 1949 we see the Liberals address material to men and women, develop a women’s policy statement, and have the extension of child endowment to first-born children as a key policy for women. Some ads were directed only to women. For example, some advertising about strikes and industrial relations was directed at women, making the link that strikes and shortages affect women the most, as they are the ones trying to organise households and standing in queues to buy goods.

These sound like obvious tactics for a major party today, but in the 1940s they were new and radical.

History records that the Liberals won the federal election of 1949. In the years that followed they maintained a lead in votes from women, and they sent an increasing number of women into parliament. This was most pronounced federally.

Following the election of the ALP’s Dorothy Tangney to the Senate in 1946, the next six female senators were Liberals until the election of Labor’s Ruth Coleman in 1974.

But after this, things started to change. Today, when comparing the number of ALP women to the number of Liberal women elected to the Federal Parliament between 1943 and 2011, this is what the record tells us.

The ALP has elected 32 women to the Senate, while the Liberals have elected 24. In the House of Representatives, 53 ALP women have been elected, compared to 29 Liberals. This gives totals of 85 ALP women to 53 Liberal women.¹

Today there are 15 ALP women senators and 6 Liberal women in the Senate. In the House of Representatives, there are 23 ALP women and 13 Liberal women.²

¹ Dr Joy McCann and Janet Wilson, Politics and Public Administration Section, Parliamentary Library, *Representation of Women in Australian parliaments*, 2012.

It's interesting to note that the ALP has been better at renewing in the House of Reps. Every single one of its women was elected after the quota was introduced in 1994. Of the Liberals' 13 women, two were in the parliament before 1994.

In general terms, the state parliaments show a similar trend. I won't go through every state but let me highlight three states where there have been recent changes in government.

In Victoria, in the lower house, there are 19 ALP women (including the one elected at a by-election last month), and 9 Liberal women. Of these Liberal women, five were elected at the last election, and it would not be unfair to say that most of them were preselected when their seats were not considered winnable.

In the Victorian upper house, the ALP has five women and the Liberals have 6. The Liberals elected one new woman at the last election.

In New South Wales, the Legislative Council has 5 ALP women and 3 Liberal women. In the Legislative Assembly there are 9 Liberals and 8 from the ALP.

Now let me take you to Queensland, which of course has one chamber, the Legislative Assembly. Earlier this year it had an election of tsunami like proportions. Today the ALP opposition has been reduced to 7 members, of which 4 are women, and one of these was elected in 2012. The Liberals have team of 78 (with 2 Katter members and 4 independents). This is an increase of 44 members. But only 13 women are among the 78 Liberal MPs.

Aside from the raw numbers, it is worth considering this: in each state, the Liberals have picked up new seats and what they hold is very likely a high watermark. It should be a golden opportunity to see a greater number of women elected as part of a pool of members that is also increased.

Instead, the number of women candidates was generally low. Campbell Newman was criticized for the number of LNP women candidates running in Queensland – an election where the LNP was generally seen as unbeatable. During the campaign, Newman is reported as acknowledging that the LNP “had not done a good job in recruiting female political candidates” when only 16 of the 89 candidates were female. “I wish we had more female candidates”, he said. “So long as I'm the leader of the LNP I will always push for more women to be represented”.³

What happened to cause these figures? You could probably construct a number of lectures based on that topic, so I'll quickly summarise instead.

In the 1970s, the rise of second-wave feminism prompted a new approach by the ALP and the influx of a greater number of ALP women into state and federal parliaments. But the turning point was the federal election of 1983, when the ALP used an approach that was strikingly similar to that used by the Liberals in 1949: targeting women, offering policies that were attractive to them (eg equal opportunity legislation) and selecting more women as candidates. In 1983, for the first time, the ALP had more women in the federal parliament than did the Liberal Party. Since then, the Liberals have had more women elected to parliament than the ALP at only one election, in 1996.

Prior to 1996, women in the Liberal Party, and especially in NSW, began to push for a greater number of female candidates. They were frustrated by the low number that had contested seats at elections in the early 1990s and demanded that this be fixed. They set up structures to support more women candidates but in my opinion, the most valuable thing they did was elevate the issue and vocally demand that more women run, be taken seriously, and preselected in winnable seats. When

² Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender, as at 5 September 2012, Politics and Public Administration Group, Parliamentary Library.

³ Darrell Giles, 'LNP boys club is failing women', *The Sunday Mail*, 11 March 2012.

you look at this history of the Liberal Party and its forerunners, women's representation has been best when the women of the party have loudly demanded more seats and have organised to get them.

When the Liberal women did so well in 1996, it was seen by many as vindication of the Liberals' rejection of quotas. Many crowed that the Liberals had elected the greatest ever number of women to parliament without a quota.

The ALP quota was born in 1994 when the ALP introduced a 35% preselection quota for women in winnable seats at all elections by 2002. The percentage of female candidates preselected increased from 14.5% in 1994 to 35.6 in 2010. From 1 January 2012 the system has been altered so that the outcome should be that not less than 40% of ALP seats will be filled by women, and not less than 40% by men.

There were a range of arguments against the quota, most based on accusations of tokenism and complaints that preselection should be about merit. My own view is that the ALP chose a way of fixing the problem that was consistent with its own political culture. Gender became another factor that needed to be accommodated alongside other considerations like faction. Nearly 20 years after the quota was agreed, it is clear that it has resulted in a steady pipeline of women into parliaments around Australia. And yes, there have been some duds among their number, just as there are among their male colleagues. But there have also been a large number of women who are effective members of ministries and shadow ministries.

So, why do the Liberals lag on numbers of women MPs?

In my view there are a couple of obvious reasons.

The first is that unlike the ALP, there has not been persistent pressure to keep preselecting women.

I mentioned earlier that the Liberal Party and its forerunners have been most effective in getting women into parliament when party activists argued for women, identified women candidates and then supported them. There's evidence of this happening in a number of states as early as the 1920s. In fact, it is the reason why Queenslander and Nationalist Irene Longman became the first woman elected to a parliament from her state. It was especially prevalent right after the formation of the Liberal Party in the 1940s when the new women's councils in various states formally resolved to have at least one woman on their state Senate Ticket. It was obvious too in 1996.

But after the tide of women members started to go out in 1998, the strong and vocal demand for women candidates seemed to diminish. Instead there was a view that merit-based preselections would take care of the problem.

This was a mistake, and it's a big contrast to the ALP.

Leaving aside the method it's chosen to use – in quotas – the ALP has had highly visible individual champions and organisational champions. The most visible ALP woman who has pushed and pushed for women in parliament is former premier, Joan Kirner. Joan is now in her mid-70s and she retired

from parliament twenty years ago. But she remains unstoppable in arguing for women in parliament.

The ALP also has Emily's List, which offers financial and political support to pro-choice women candidates and MPs. It provides mentoring, training and research. These are no doubt valuable, but the other role it plays very effectively is a constant reminder within the ALP organisation – and in public - that the ALP must look for and promote women candidates.

The second reason why the Liberal Party finds itself on the backfoot with women candidates is party culture. It's a culture which largely tolerates branch members asking women candidates for preselection questions about their parental and marital status.

More than forty years ago, Margaret Guilfoyle was asked at her first preselection who would look after her three children if she became a senator. Today, women who seek Liberal preselection are routinely asked exactly the same question by delegates.

Those who are unmarried or have no children also find that their circumstances are questioned by delegates. These issues have no place in a job interview - which is what these conversations really are - even when they take place in a private home or at a branch meeting.

And in fact, if these questions did occur in a regular job interview, they would be illegal.

It's not a merit-based process if only the female candidates for preselection are asked who will look after their children if they go into parliament.

It's not a merit-based process if only the female candidates for preselection are asked if they are planning to have a family and how that might work with being an MP.

It's not a merit-based process if only the female candidates are told by delegates that maybe they should wait and try for a seat when their children are older.

And to use another example that I came across a few weeks ago, it's not a merit based process if a local MP is asked to identify potential candidates and he names a woman – but then adds in rueful tone that she's just got married and he expects she'll start a family within a couple of years.

If the Liberal Party is serious about boosting its numbers of women in Parliament, then it needs to tackle this admittedly difficult problem. The first step is to acknowledge that it happens and to loudly condemn it.

There have been some moves forward on this front. In 2008, former Howard Minister David Kemp's review of the Victorian Liberals identified the problem of women candidates being asked about their marital or parental status, and described this as unacceptable. The preselection form was altered so that it no longer asked candidates to list their children.

But the questions continue and there is no easy answer to them.

Leaving this aside, there is also the issue of what these questions reveal about the perceptions of preselectors, and what they look for in a candidate.

And there's also the distinct possibility that capable women look at what happens to others during preselection and decide to simply not try.

The fact that some women manage to overcome this kind of questioning doesn't mean that it doesn't have a detrimental effect. And it doesn't mean that the questioning should be tolerated.

The Liberal Party has historically strong links with the corporate sector, and I think it is time that it began to examine some of the efforts made within that sector to tackle cultures that impede the progress of women.

Having worked for a number of major corporates, I am not about to pretend that they represent some kind of gender utopia. But many of our biggest companies have at least acknowledged the impact of direct and indirect discrimination, have begun a discussion to raise awareness of the issue and have introduced policies and practices aimed at eliminating it.

I see no reason why a political party shouldn't attempt to do the same.

The obvious question to ask is, why doesn't the Liberal Party introduce a quota system?

The first reason why it won't is that it has spent nearly 20 years opposing it, and it is hardly about to admit defeat now.

One exception to this approach is former Victorian Senator Judith Troeth, who argued in June 2010 that the Liberals needed to adopt a quota for women. This had not always been her view, and it seems it developed from years of frustration at watching a small, incremental change in the number of Liberal women in the federal parliament.

She wrote,

The custom defence against quotas is the 'what about merit' argument, as if to be for quotas you must be against merit. Like the charge of tokenism, it eventually fails the test of reason after sitting in a parliamentary party room for nearly 20 years without seeing a progressive increase in the cohort of women members. As if those handful of women members who are there were the only 'women of merit' who put themselves forward for preselection.⁴

Senator Troeth noted that from 1944 the Liberal Party had reserved 50 per cent of the Victorian Division's executive positions for women. She called for the introduction of a quota system for the Victorian Division to endorse women for preselection in a minimum of 40 per cent of its seats for the Commonwealth election' to be held in August 2010, recommended that the quota be increased to 45 per cent within a five year period, and that women comprise 50 per cent of training candidates.

Senator Troeth's suggestions were not accepted, and unfortunately the issue was put to one side once more.

More recently there has been a low key suggestion that, like major corporates, the Liberal Party should discuss targets for female representation. I am interested to see if these suggestions translate into action of any kind.

⁴ Senator The Hon Judith Troeth, *Modernising the Parliamentary Liberal Party by Adopting the Organisational Wing's Quota System for Preselections*, Policy Paper, 23 June 2010.

In two years time, I'm sure we will see the women of the ALP celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the introduction of a quota, and calculating the very large number of women who have gone into parliament as a result.

It's worth remembering that when the ALP began its efforts to increase female representation, back in the early 1980s, it had few women in parliament. Those who were there could usually see a lot more on the other side of the chamber.

Even if you don't agree with how they set out to fix the problem, the ALP at least admitted that its old approach was not working and that they needed to change how they worked to get women into parliament.

The Liberal Party certainly has a history of doing this in its own organisation. The most significant of these was the formation of the Liberal Party from the remnants of the UAP, as well as other organisations – including powerful women's organisations like the AWNL.

It's time for the Liberals to take a lesson from the past – acknowledge the problem, and stop relying on a blind faith in 'merit' to somehow provide a sudden increase in numbers of female MPs.