

Liberal Women in Parliament: What Do the Numbers Tell Us and Where to from Here?*

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I hope you will forgive me for having what some may consider a slightly blunt title for my lecture. Numbers are the atom of politics. Nothing is possible without them. It is not 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 am 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 was 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 Australian Labor Party (ALP), and Enid Lyons from the United Australia Party (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 is timely to reflect on why this is, and also, what next for the Liberals.

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

In the early part of the twentieth 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.

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In time, this translated into a number of significant firsts. As is well known, non-Labor women became the first women elected to parliaments in almost every state, and in the House of Representatives. The first Australian woman minister—Florence Cardell-Oliver in Western Australia 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—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 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 twentieth 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 AWNL 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-Labor parties were certainly influenced by the women who were voluntary party workers, as well as paid organisers. From the early years of the twentieth century the non-Labor parties produced campaign material that was directed at women.

When the Liberal Party was formed it 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?¹

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 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.²

Menzies' Forgotten People speeches have been very well analysed and I do not 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 advertisements

¹ Robert Menzies, 'Women in war', radio broadcast, 20 February 1942, in Margaret Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women: Federation to 1949*, Federation Press, Annandale, NSW, 2004, p. 247.

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 1943, 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.³

Today there are 15 ALP women senators and six Liberal women in the Senate. In the House of Representatives, there are 23 ALP women and 13 Liberal women.⁴

It is interesting to note that the ALP has been better at renewing in the House of Representatives. 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 will not go through every state but let me highlight three states where there have been recent changes in government.

² Robert Menzies, 'Women for Canberra', radio broadcast, 29 January 1943, in Fitzherbert, op. cit., p. 250.

³ Joy McCann and Janet Wilson, *Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments*, Politics and Public Administration Section, Parliamentary Library, 7 March 2012, www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2011-2012/Womeninparliament.

⁴ 'Composition of Australian parliaments by party and gender, as at 5 September 2012', Politics and Public Administration Group, Parliamentary Library.

In Victoria, in the lower house, there are 19 ALP women (including the one elected at a by-election in July), and nine 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 six. The Liberals elected one new woman at the last election.

In New South Wales, the Legislative Council has five ALP women and three Liberal women. In the Legislative Assembly there are nine Liberals and eight 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 seven members, of which four are women, and one of these was elected in 2012. The Liberals have a team of 78 (with two Katter members and four 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 criticised for the number of Liberal National Party (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’.⁵

What happened to cause these figures? You could probably construct a number of lectures based on that topic, so I will 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

⁵ Darrell Giles, ‘LNP boys club is failing women’, *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 11 March 2012, www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/opinion-lnp-boys-club-is-failing-women/story-fnbwr276-1226295886185.

women, offering policies that were attractive to them (for example, 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 be preselected in winnable seats. When 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 per cent preselection quota for women in winnable seats at all elections by 2002. The percentage of female candidates preselected increased from 14.5 per cent 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 per cent of ALP seats will be filled by women, and not less than 40 per cent 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 twenty 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 is 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 is a big contrast to the ALP.

Leaving aside the method it has 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 back foot with women candidates is party culture. It is 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 is 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 is 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 is 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 is 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 has just got married and he expects she will 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 is 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 does not mean that it does not have a detrimental effect. And it does not 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 should not 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 twenty 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.⁶

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

⁶ Judith Troeth, *Modernising the Parliamentary Liberal Party by Adopting the Organisational Wing's Quota System for Preselections*, policy paper, 23 June 2010.

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.

In two years' time, I am 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 is 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 do not 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 is 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.



Question — What led you into the research of this? Was there a particular event that sparked your interest in this area?

Margaret Fitzherbert — There was a reference in one of the biographies of Alfred Deakin that referred to the AWNL and it was an extract from his diary in which he discussed how much he hated them and how badly they were treating him and it

struck me that he would not be saying that if they did not matter and I wanted to find out the story behind the quote. I spent some time at the National Library and looked at the papers and started to delve into some of the other primary sources that deal with this time. So that was the start of it.

Question — Given the somewhat negative portrayal of our current serving prime minister by some sections of the media, I was just wondering if you have any general comments to make about the role the media might play in encouraging, or more likely discouraging, women and particularly young women from entering politics and seeking high office?

Margaret Fitzherbert — I think this is a really complex issue and there are no easy answers. I think in general terms it is true that politicians of both genders are at times treated very badly and in a way that I think is unreasonable by the media and by people who use the media and by that I am thinking of blogs in particular. I think that there are times when Julia Gillard has been treated in a totally unreasonable way that is gender-specific. But I am also conscious that her predecessors have at times had their appearances ridiculed and have been treated with derision as well. There are quite a lot of studies that have looked into this and they do show that women tend to have things like their appearance and their families commented on far more. Does it put people off? I suspect it probably does and one of the ways that it does I think is when people's very personal decisions are questioned or when aspects of their family and their personal lives are put out there for public debate. I think that there are people out there who look at that and say that is not something I want to be part of.

Question — I was wondering if you could comment on whether women voters would back a woman representative to replace Tony Abbott at the next election?

Margaret Fitzherbert — If things proceed as they are now I think it very likely that there will be a woman opposing Tony Abbott for that election. The big issue there is incumbency; that is the thing you need to strip out of any study that looks at whether gender makes a difference. Most of the studies—and there is one that came out very recently from Canada that looked at this issue again—show that gender is generally neutral. If anything in some elections and in some electorates having a woman is a positive and that seems to be something that some of the states have played on a bit in years gone by.

Question — To what extent does having a female prime minister and a female attorney-general at the moment actually encourage women to see that there is a role for them in politics? I get the impression that Dame Margaret Guilfoyle might have

been a high watermark of some sort in Liberal women's participation. Why didn't that role model encourage more Liberal women to go into politics?

Margaret Fitzherbert — To address the second part of your question first, Beryl Beaurepaire said to me when I was researching Margaret Guilfoyle—and she was very much a contemporary of hers—she said, I think the problem with Margaret was she set the standard so high that people thought that they had to be as good as her and she was someone who on any measure was a standout. She was one of the stayers of the Fraser Ministry, one of the very few who was there at the start and there at the end. She was trusted by the prime minister, who many of her colleagues found notoriously difficult to work with. She was respected. She had a following in the community. She did some really significant reforms and she pioneered women's participation in economic portfolios, which was a very new thing. So she was a standout leaving aside her gender. If she had been 'Fred' Guilfoyle, she probably would not have been in the Senate, she would have been in the House of Representatives. So that was Beryl Beaurepaire's assessment, that she had set a standard that was impossibly high. I think that is quite perceptive in a way. I think there might have been something in that. I think at the time there was no general push as well that accompanied that, that Margaret Guilfoyle was sort of seen as special and a bit of a one-off in some ways.

As to the issue of whether having women in senior ministerial roles encourages others: I think it does. I think the younger you are the more powerful it is. I have three children. I have two daughters and the eldest is nearly ten and she thinks it is totally normal that the Prime Minister is female, the Governor-General is female and there are other women who are on television every night talking about their senior ministerial portfolios. If you grow up with that as normal rather than as something to strive for I think it cannot help but make a change.

Question — I always find it fascinating when white men look at a process that always selects white men and think it has merit. I do recollect, I think it was under the Keating Government, it was a front bench spokesman from the Liberal Party who I heard on *AM* one day, commenting how interesting it was that with exactly the same selection criteria for the Senior Executive Service, the Department of Social Security managed to have 50 per cent of women and the departments of Finance and Treasury had almost none. So it does seem to me that what you have here is very clearly a process that is not merit-based. But you also have a group of decision makers who simply fail to recognise this fact. How can you get them to see the reality?

Margaret Fitzherbert — The way Susan Ryan did this, and she discusses this in her autobiography, is she got the numbers. She got some research done that showed the

advantages that would flow to the Labor Party if they preselected more women and that was based very much on trying to capture that women's vote from the Liberal Party. The term that she used in her autobiography is 'numbers are like gold'. That was the only way she could get their attention. It was not by arguing that it was about merit or justice or it was fair, it was about showing this is how it will affect elections. I suspect that is partly key to it. You need real research to show how these things are going to happen. I suspect the other thing, too, is capturing the extent of the problem. When you have the sort of questioning I have talked about in preselections, that rarely becomes public. It is not a very visible problem and I think there is an awareness that it happens but I think most people would be surprised at the extent to which it happens. So I think that would be quite a powerful tool in starting to shift some views.

Question — What institutional structures are there in the Liberal Party? I understand that there is a focus on mentoring and training but what structures are there that could assist that might be similar to Emily's List, something that will facilitate the training, the mentoring and the recruitment of women candidates?

Margaret Fitzherbert — I cannot speak authoritatively on this but I do know there are a range of training programs for all sorts of people—young people, potential candidates, and women—and the women's ones do ebb and flow a little bit. I used to think that training programs were probably a good idea but I have come to the view that that is not the issue. It is not about skilling up the women or telling them what they need to wear or who they need to speak to or how to build a cv that looks good or how to write their preselection speech so that it lasts the right amount of time. It is actually about the process they are going through. I think that when you rely heavily on training and mentoring it implies in some ways that the women need help. Now I think all candidates need help but I do not know that women need particular help. I think they need a fair hearing. So that is a structural change that I would like to see in how this is dealt with.

Question — If the Labor Party uses student politics and activism generally and the junior trade union movement as something of a training ground, can you make some comparative comments about what the Liberal Party has in terms of early processes and structures for young emerging talent at university level?

Margaret Fitzherbert — There is some similarity in student politics. There are the Liberal students, there are Young Liberals as well, and there is a fair cross-over between the two. There are a range of people who have come out of that and in fact if you look at Victoria with Sophie Mirabella and Kelly O'Dwyer, they are both veterans of student politics so there is that funnel. The missing part in equivalence is the trade union movement. I do not believe that the Liberal Party has an equivalent to

that at all. Historically, many of the unions were not exactly helpful to the cause of women but that has changed over time—through again some quite deliberate strategies and effort—and has reversed and has become a quite powerful advocate in many instances for women. I think the Liberal Party does have less on its side of the ledger in that regard.

Question — Have the Liberal Party finished selection for candidates for the next federal election? Because if not, now is the time for a group of women to get in there.

Margaret Fitzherbert — They vary from state to state in terms of the timetables. In Victoria most of the marginal seats have just been completed. In Victoria on the basis of polling it is likely that there will be more marginal Labor-held seats in play than there have been previously. One woman candidate has been selected for the most marginal seat which is Corangamite. Sarah Henderson is going to contest that seat and if you were to put money on it she will probably do well and win the seat there. In the rest of the seats, if you look at seats like Deakin, Chisholm and so on men have been preselected. Slow progress. As to the other states, I think their programs might be slightly later. They are not done at the same times, so I cannot give any sense of what is happening in other states. I am not aware that there is a sudden groundswell in women for the next federal election but I hope I am wrong.