

Women in Parliament - Yes! But What's It Really Like?

Kathy Martin Sullivan MP

I understand that, in addition to being the longest serving woman MP in the Australian parliament, one reason that I have been asked to give this address is my unique experience of the Australian parliament, namely being the only woman to have served in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

When I paused to think about what I might talk about to acknowledge the significance of 1993 being the fiftieth anniversary of the election of the first women to the Australian Senate and the House of Representatives, it came as something of a shock to me to realise that I have been serving in parliament myself for only a little less than half that time.

Therefore, my perspective cannot help but be a somewhat personal view. As I tried to determine as objectively as I could the significance of that personal experience of the past twenty years, I realised two things: firstly, how much has changed in the past two decades; and, secondly, how much remains the same.

Whilst I do not intend today to make this occasion a totally personal indulgence, I am aware that my experience is not wholly unique and that what I have lived through has been shared by many other women in parliament (both within Australia and abroad) and also by women in the world outside political life.

Nevertheless, if I may, I will go back to my beginnings for a couple of minutes.

The May 1974 election set few records with respect to women being elected to the national parliament. Four women — two Labor and two Liberal — were elected to the Senate, and one — Joan Child — to the House of Representatives. Only Joan Child's election was truly newsworthy, she being the first Labor woman elected to that chamber. Of the four women elected to the Senate, Margaret Guilfoyle had been a senator since mid-1970 and there had been more than four women in the Senate simultaneously on previous occasions.

However, the media hype that accompanied the election of five women to the Commonwealth parliament in May 1974 was quite extraordinary.

This was not explained by the numbers elected — as I have already said, no records were being set — but it was an indication of the climate of the time. Dorothy Tangney and Enid Lyons might have been surprised by the hullabaloo. It was almost as though their truly momentous election 31 years earlier had not happened.

Nevertheless, the public commotion was indicative of the public expression of interest — or curiosity — emerging about the 'new' woman and her expectations with respect to her role in the scheme of human endeavour and, even more fundamentally, her assertion of the right to choose her role and not be confined by other's notions of women's biological 'destiny'.

This interest was to become a two-edged sword for many women in public life over the years to follow.

While she herself denied that her objective had ever been to blaze a trail for women, Senator Dame Annabelle Rankin (who had left public life three years before I entered it) was my greatest help. By doing her job as a Queensland senator well, she had shown that women senators could be at least as capable as the men were.

Many Australian people in the early 1970s expected a woman entering public life to fit one of several preconceived stereotypes: not quite 'normal', even 'downright butch'; strident or sexually manipulative; whiz-kid or vacuous; bra-less or firmly corseted, 'hairy-legged' or, if not actually a grandmother, at least having the decency to look like one.

These preconceptions were counterbalanced a little by one of the more endearing Australian traits; namely, a sentimental inclination to support the underdog. Countless were the occasions during my eleven months as a Senate candidate travelling the state of Queensland when men — average blokes — that I met, uttered the words, 'I think women should be given a go'.

Annabelle Rankin's contribution to my career was also frequently and spontaneously expressed, namely, 'Dame Annabelle Rankin was a good member of parliament. If you are as good as she was, you will be okay'.

Thus, feeling as though I was viewed as some extraordinary combination of Dame Annabelle and Norman Gunston, I was propelled into the Australian Senate.

The title of my speech comes from what followed — an experience that I know most women in public life have had. Once elected, many were those who would commence a conversation with me with the question, 'What's it like being a woman in the Senate?'.

When I replied, 'It's really just like being a man in the Senate', they would smile knowingly or impatiently and say, 'Yes, but what's it *really* like?'.

Well, in those days at least, it was really like having a split personality, and continued to be so throughout the 1970s. The contrast between expectations of me by senators on the one hand, and by electors on the other, was stark.

In the Senate itself, it was just like being a male senator. The male senators had long since become used to working with women and had few preconceptions about any of their new colleagues, whether men or women. The workload in the Senate was very heavy, particularly with its committee responsibilities. All that was expected of any senator was that he or she approached the job as part of the team and carried a fair load.

Most likely, the memory of Dame Annabelle Rankin, having been both a Whip of many years standing and a Minister, also meant that the men were used to working not only with women, but with women who were in positions of authority — an experience totally atypical of Australian society in those days.

On the other hand, the electorate was quite a different proposition. Whilst it was not unkind to me — and I never encountered personally any aggressive rejection or challenge (although I was aware that quite a few women were unsure what my significance to them was) — people generally were a little wary. As I travelled the state of Queensland in a different town each day, I was aware of a phenomenon that I termed 'looking for the second head'.

By that I mean that there was a general public expectation that a woman doing something as different as entering the national parliament had to be very different indeed from the average human being. I suspect that this was due in no small measure to the fact that it was, by then, more than three years since Dame Annabelle Rankin had left public life, and that there had been local government elections in early 1973. The elections had two interesting results.

Firstly, there had been quite a dramatic change in the composition of local shire councils which meant that many councillors and chairmen had never previously met Dame Annabelle.

Secondly, and quite coincidentally, there had been a surge in the number of women standing for election to local government in Queensland (indeed, throughout Australia). As people attempted to adjust to the notion of female councillors having the power to affect their lives, along I came — a young, female, blonde, divorcee senator — and really scrambled all their preconceptions about public figures.

The end of that story is that when, like Dame Annabelle, all we 'different' ladies made it clear by our actions that we just wanted to get on with doing the job, the same as any man would have, the second head apparently faded from view. Then we could get down to business as the men realised this and visibly relaxed. Well, most of them did!

By the early 1980s, I was aware that I evoked neither curiosity nor resentment as I travelled the state doing my job. I wondered whether this change meant either that people were more used to women in public life and we were no longer such a curiosity or oddity, or whether the general public was just more used to me. In retrospect, I suspect the explanation was a bit of both.

I believe that the 1980 federal election was a true watershed in Australian politics, and an examination of the statistics of women elected to parliament — both state and national — tend to bear this out. The outstanding aspect, to me, was the fact that three women were elected to the House of Representatives.

On only one previous occasion, and more than thirty years earlier — the brief three years of the 1946-49 parliament — had more than one woman served in the House at a time. In 1980, this event passed without public remark, which was in itself remarkable.

At the time I could not help but think back to the ballyhoo of 1974.

As the eighties progressed, however, I started to become concerned about a complacency on the part of some women with respect to their attitudes towards efforts to further the status of women; in particular, the attitude of young female journalists. Externally, the situation appeared encouraging enough. The number of women in public life was still increasing, though not at nearly the rate of the previous few years. However, time was to show that it had almost plateaued, a fact that many political women were slow to realise.

The activities of the 1970s had their reward in the increasing number of women in public life in the 1980s. The smugness of the mid and late 1980s resulted in the rate of progress being markedly slowed in the 1990s.

Whilst the proportion of present Senate membership that is female appears encouraging, I believe the figures are misleading. If one looks at the proportion of women who represent the major parties — that is, the government and the coalition — the story is rather different.

To go back to the beginning for a few moments. Following the election of Tangney and Lyons in 1943, women appeared to make steady progress at the Commonwealth level.

After the 1946 election, the number of women in the Commonwealth parliament increased from two to four in the Senate, and from one to two in the House of Representatives. In 1949, this rose to a total of five women in the federal parliament — four in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives.

However, when Dame Enid Lyons retired at the 1951 election, it was to be 15 years before another woman was elected to the House of Representatives.

That woman was Kay Brownbill, who served only one term from 1966 to 1969 following the 1966 federal election landslide to the Holt government. In the Senate, the numbers remained at four until the 1955 election when they increased to five and stayed at that level for the next nine years, until the 1964 Senate election. They then steadily dwindled. There were four after the 1964 election, three after the 1967 election, and only two remained after the 1970 election. The 1974 election only brought the Senate numbers back to the level of ten years earlier, but it also saw Joan Child's first election to the House of Representatives.

Joan Child's term lasted only from May 1974 to December 1975. Again, there was a gap in women's representation in the House of Representatives for no clearly discernible reason.

In 1975, six women were elected to the Senate and this number remained static until 1980, when eight women were elected to the Senate and three to the House of Representatives. Early in 1981, the number of women in the Senate increased to ten

when Florence Bjelke-Petersen and Margaret Reid were appointed to fill casual vacancies. Another landmark: double figures in the Senate for the first time.

Following the 1983 election, it appeared that the numbers of women were inexorably increasing. The increase was actually only in the House of Representatives, and it was a very small increase even so. The apparent increase in the Senate since then has been virtually all due to the increasing representation of the Australian Democrats and the independent senators (Nuclear Disarmament or Greens), most of whom are women. To illustrate, the combined number of National, Liberal and ALP female senators following the 1983 election was 12 out of a total of 13 female senators. In the 1984 and 1987 parliaments, these parties' combined totals rose to 13 out of 18, and the 1990 election produced only the status quo — 13 out of a total of 19 female senators.

In 1993, the number of female senators dropped — for the first time since the 1970 election — to 16 senators, only 11 of whom came from the government or the coalition — fewer than the total of a decade earlier.

If it were not for the Democrats and the Greens, the proportion of women in the Senate would actually have declined. As it is, the decline in the female Senate representation from the major parties is a matter that men and women of all political persuasions should view with some concern.

Over those same ten years, the number of ALP female Members of the House of Representatives has fluctuated: it was six after the 1983 election, seven after the 1984 election, eight after 1987, falling back to seven after 1990, then rising again to nine after the 1993 election.

The number of Liberal women in the House of Representatives remained zero until my election in 1984 — the first in fifteen years, the second in thirty-three years and the third from non-Labor Members of the House of Representatives in the eighty-four years of federation.

No additional Liberal women were elected until the 1990 election, when two were added and, following this year's election, there are now four.

Until the 1990 election, no woman Member of the House of Representatives was given a 'safe seat'. All women, except me, won their seat from an opposing party. My seat of Moncrieff was considered on paper to be National Party, and the pundits all wrote off my chances of winning in 1984. Therefore, whilst it was a safe non-Labor seat, it was not a Liberal seat for the taking.

Janice Crosio, the Labor member for Prospect since 1990, is the first woman to have received endorsement for a seat held by her party, and Judy Moylan, the Liberal member for Pearce, followed suit in 1993.

The idea that women should be endorsed for anything other than seats difficult to win has therefore been a deeply rooted one.

All this is not to say that a number of these women have not made their seats safe in the interim — that, in fact, has been closer to the general rule than not.

Perhaps it is the realisation of this that has prompted moves within both the Labor and Liberal parties in recent weeks to press the subject of female parliamentary representation — in Labor's case, there is the beginning of a move towards looking at the feasibility of parity of male and female representation, whilst the Liberal Party has set up a group to devise ways to increase its female representation in parliament — an objective which will be substantially aided by the statement from its parliamentary leader, Dr John Hewson, that he personally would like to see more women in parliament. (The impact of Dr Hewson's public support for the principle should not be underestimated.)

Nevertheless, resistance to effective equality has lingered. When, following the 1987 federal election, Prime Minister Hawke had to go to considerable lengths to ensure that at least three women were elected by Caucus to his ministry, some male politicians still chose to call this tokenism.

When I had occasion to point out to a large group of these men that three women ministers out of a total of thirty, namely ten per cent, was not really tokenism but could probably more fairly be described as power sharing, many were the blank faces I gazed on.

This year's appointment of five women to the opposition front bench — and it would have been six if Senator Bishop had accepted the offer made to her — is a very substantial move forward.

The apparent misconception of the 1980s that the progress of women in parliament was a fixed aspect of the political scene was reinforced by legislative progress. The early and mid-1980s contained some legislative landmarks for women, namely, the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986.

The Sex Discrimination Act did not have substantial public opposition, although it is noteworthy that inclusion of sexual harassment as a discriminatory no-no raised a few worries amongst men and employer organisations in the community. The reasons for this have never been researched and can only be speculated on. (I have my own view naturally, but I shall not indulge myself on that score on this occasion.)

The Affirmative Action Act, however, had a much rougher passage both in parliament and in the public arena. (The parliamentary story is well documented in Ann Millar's book *Trust the Women*.) Apparently, when one moved past the principle of equality to the idea of tackling actual obstacles, nerves — public and private — were touched.

My own behind-the-scenes experience bore out to me that there was a quite deeply felt opposition to this Act, not least because it was generally misunderstood to be introducing positive discrimination and quotas in employment for women, rather than as identifying and eliminating unnecessary obstacles to women's employment and promotion.

Many men were prepared to accept the principle of equality but they reacted vociferously and vehemently to the suggestion that inequality might be pro-actively reversed. Again, no worthwhile research was done on the reasons for their feelings at the

time, which is a great pity. It appears to be an unfortunate fact that feminist academics do not focus on such problems at a time when feminist euphoria is high.

I could advance as many theories as any other feminist, academic or otherwise, as to why this happened, but the theories are purely subjective and have a worth equal only to anything which is subjective, that is, its value extends only so far as the regard the reader or hearer holds for the person proposing the theory.

To resume my story at the point of my own political watershed of 1984, an event which was to greatly influence my approach to women's issues.

My experience when I first entered the House of Representatives was virtually the opposite of what it had been when I first had been elected to the Senate more than ten years earlier. This came as a great surprise to me.

The 1980s electorate seemed to adapt very readily to the notion of a woman as a serious candidate for election in the first place and then as the local member of parliament. However, the House of Representatives was a different kettle of fish altogether.

It took me some time to realise that the men I was working with in the House of Representatives — on both sides of the chamber — considered me to be a total stranger in one sense, but in another and totally negative sense considered themselves to be overly familiar with my views.

I was warned by friends in the House against speaking on subjects to do with women — well-intentioned warnings, I must emphasise — with such statements as, 'The Labor women only ever talk about women's issues. In this place you must represent both men and women, so don't be like them'.

I spent a great deal of time listening to all members of the House of Representatives in the early months of my time in that chamber and was very quickly apprised of the fact that the Labor women talked about a great variety of subjects — as did the Labor and non-Labor men — and not just about women.

Nevertheless, they did raise the subject of women when it was relevant to a bill being debated. However, so did the male members of parliament.

I found this all a little mystifying. Why had the fact that women had spoken on women remained in the front of male members' minds to the exclusion of all other subjects the women debated, when the same words uttered by men in the House of Representatives apparently had no impact at all?

It was not until we debated the Affirmative Action Bill that the situation became much clearer to me. The debate on the second reading of this Bill covered two days, and many government and opposition members participated. I spoke on the first day. Therefore, the *Daily Hansard* including the transcript of my speech was available on the morning of the second day of the debate.

I was more than a little startled to be approached on the morning of that second day by a number of my male colleagues exclaiming in surprise at the fact that my speech had

dealt with the subject of education. Those colleagues included ones with whom I had served on the Coalition's Education Policy Committee for some years. Despite those years of co-service, they clearly had no idea of anything I had said on the subject of education in that time. One even said to me, 'I am surprised to discover that we share the same views on so many things'. Surprise is not an adequate description for how I felt; shocked would be more like it.

The dawning realisation came to me slowly and painfully: many of my male colleagues had not actually heard what I had said in the previous twelve years, whether in parliament, in the joint party room or in committee meetings. Nevertheless, they all thought they knew what I had said — thoughts which were so far removed from reality as to be grotesque. I was drawn to the painful and unwelcome conclusion that the mere presence of women in the parliament and in the party room is not enough.

It appeared that women MPs can state their views however they like — tactfully or aggressively, sweetly or stridently, obliquely or bluntly — but, if they are expressing views about women, too often a majority of the men in their audience automatically close their ears, believing that they are about to hear fringe, feminist rhetoric which is to be automatically rejected. This realisation, as I said, was a painful one — especially considering the number of years I had spent patiently explaining, I thought, modern women's aspirations.

The experience I have had in the House of Representatives in the intervening six years has led me to a conclusion that I was not quite ready to draw in 1986. It did not occur to me then, and it has only emerged for me following the 1990 and 1993 federal elections. Yet it is not complex.

Most of the men with whom I was serving in the House of Representatives in 1986 had been there for some time.

Losing the election in 1983, after previously suffering a substantial reduction of members in the 1980 election, taken together with making only marginal gains in 1984, meant that the great majority of House of Representatives members of the Coalition had been in parliament for quite a number of years by 1986 — the last substantial influx having been in December 1975 — and their experience of the world outside parliament predated the movement of women into business, into the professions and non-traditional areas of employment.

My male colleagues of the 1980s had an employment experience — and, therefore, opinions of women — which related to an Australian society which no longer existed. It has been only as new members have come into parliament over recent years that attitudes have slowly but surely changed. These attitudes do not depend on age. Chauvinists can be young; the more modern men can be middle-aged. For the great part, my colleagues' views on women's status derive from the experience of the world they knew prior to coming into parliament — in particular, the experience they have had of women as peers in the work force. I believe this goes a long way to explaining the apparently more liberated attitude of male ALP MPs in that, with the electoral fluctuations of the past thirteen years, new Labor members are far more likely to have been elected to parliament than new Liberal or National Party members of parliament.

It is highly relevant that John Hewson's views, to which I have already referred, are those of someone who entered parliament only seven years ago.

As I read Ann Millar's book and what it has to say about the post-suffragette movement and the first women elected to federal parliament, and have become more familiar with the views of Lyons and Tangney, and the views of others outside parliament at the time of their election in 1943, I have had two thoughts in the front of my mind.

The first is how long and difficult the struggle to reach this point has been. That may appear self-evident. However, when you are actually involved in the struggle — as I have been for over thirty years — historical perspectives are something you rarely have time for.

The second is to wonder what Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney would have thought of the political events that followed their parliamentary terms, the fluctuations of the 1960s and 1970s and into the 1980s. I wonder whether even they foresaw the time that had yet to elapse before their momentous election to parliament led to that sufficient strengthening of women's position required to provide a secure foundation for the future.

They are sobering thoughts. Too sobering for me to undertake speculation on what lies ahead. I can only hope that the momentary (in history's terms) slip in momentum of a few years ago never happens again.

I am sure I would speak for every woman who has ever served in parliament, as well as for every woman who has struggled outside parliament over the years to achieve at least legal equality with men, when I say that none of us has ever looked for gratitude from future generations of women.

All we would ever hope for was some awareness by those young women that things once-upon-a-time were not as good as they should expect to enjoy in the future, and that the effort that was necessary to create genuine momentum towards a status of equal value for women's and men's views was slow and difficult and must be guarded.

We are yet far from the day when any of it can be taken for granted.

It would be enough for all of us to know that future generations of women will accept responsibility for maintaining the principles for which we have all worked.

Questioner — One of the things that struck me when the notorious 'sweetheart' statement was made was that women on both sides of the House were willing to make quite sophisticated public comments on it. Do you think there is a place for a grouping of women across parties to come together and have a joint position on certain political issues; in other words, to break down that strict party barrier so that when issues come up there is a consensus among women in parliament generally?

Mrs Sullivan — It is a bit hard to break down the barrier once it has been established. However, there have been occasions — not numerous, but they have been there — when we have come together. For example, in the early 1980s, following the 1983 federal election, we orchestrated — we being a couple of Labor women senators, Janine Haines and I — an adjournment debate on the subject of the ratification of the

United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. We quite deliberately took advantage of the fact that speakers are called alternately from each side. We stated our bipartisan view that it was important that ratification of this convention go ahead. There was at the time a quite extreme, almost hysterical, campaign being orchestrated in the community in opposition to the convention and our exercise was in response to that. It helped that none of our parties were opposed to it. But we did get together and decide to do that.

I would like to put something on the record right here and now which I have never had the opportunity to do before. I am misquoted quite badly in that Senate debate. It is an interjection that was incorrectly attributed to me and that I was unaware of because it was an interjection. This interjection was used against me in the 1984 election quite badly. I could do nothing about it because I had never corrected the *Hansard*. The reason I had never corrected the *Hansard* is that we never see interjections that are attributed to us. In one of the Labor women's speeches, referring to the women who want to be women, there was a reference to 'the three Ms'. The interjection, which I did not make but which was attributed to me, reads, 'Yes, male, middle-aged and married'. I know who did make it, but I am not about to say who it was. I was sitting near that senator. I welcome the opportunity to correct that.

The remarkable thing about the reaction to that 'sweetheart' comment was the totally prompt and spontaneous reaction to it everywhere. The Speaker ordered a withdrawal, so he determined instantaneously that it was unparliamentary language. I was surprised by that. I was surprised by the spontaneous reaction of dismay on both the government and opposition sides and in the press gallery. As I said earlier today, if that had happened ten years earlier, I think it would have gone over everybody's head. I would have just worn it. It does show that there has been a change in perceptions in the last ten years about what is acceptable. It was interesting that a number of Labor women were prepared to go on the record on the subject, and I appreciated it. Not everybody shared the point of view, of course.

There has been an informal networking amongst a number of us for quite a few years. In those years, I was the only Liberal woman in the House of Representatives. I do not mean to put down my male colleagues. A lot of them were very supportive and very good, but it was difficult in other ways. It was like permanently being in a locker room, with some supportive and nice colleagues also in the locker room. I got a lot of moral support from quite a number of the Labor women. We did not have to say what we were sharing; they knew what it was like. There was a camaraderie there, so it has its effect.

Questioner — I once had the opportunity to be a female councillor in an otherwise all male council in a village and rural district where very few women would take the trouble to get involved in thinking about public affairs. After six years, the men made me vice-chairman. I think that is some evidence of the fact that, if we work with mutual respect and without too much gang warfare leaking into our rhetoric, we can keep our pecking order.

I want to be brief and discipline myself because I do not want my thinking to get in the way of people remembering the wonderful words you have been giving us. I have very much appreciated your attitude and what you have been saying. I want merely now to ask you if you could say a few words about the world that people know during their first

seven years being indelible nearly all their life. We have been allowing what I dare to call national socialism on an international plane to sneer at the important role of motherhood. The psyche that we women can produce during those first years can make such an enormous difference to our ability to share and to manage effectively in a decent way, respectful of each other's dignity — not shouting for our own rights all the time, but caring about our responsibilities.

Mrs Sullivan — Quite right. I attribute everything that I am to not only my mother but also my father. My mother was atypical. She had been educated to the end of high school. Born in 1910, that was very atypical. She was reared by two maiden aunts, one of whom was a school teacher and who in the late nineteenth century had secretly, and certainly against her father's wishes, been educated by the nuns, who are great at doing that sort of thing, to become a teacher. He knew nothing of it until she told him she was leaving home. So in that sense I owe something to the generation before, which was a very strongly female generation.

But I also owe a lot to my father. I will never forget my teens. When I went to school, girls left school at the age of thirteen — at the end of what is now called grade eight, the old scholarship in Queensland. Very few girls went on past there. My sister was four years older than I was. She had done her full high schooling — a very bright girl — and then went on to do pharmacy. I followed. We had to put up with my father being very soundly criticised by his peers, in front of us, for educating his daughters. He had to defend to his male peers why he had educated his daughters. I think it helped that we did not have a brother. The other downside was that my mother had to go to work in 1955 — in the days when it was very unfashionable for mothers to go to work — so that my sister and I could have that education.

So I agree with you about the great importance of women. In my involvement in parliamentary life and with my interests in women in the Third World, I have found to be very true the old story that, if you educate a woman, you educate a nation; and how education, the productivity and the general raising of standards within the society flow on. The point women in Australia are at in the 1990s all goes back to that little slip that the powers that be had when they allowed women to learn how to read and write.

Questioner — What would you say to the suggestion that the Sex Discrimination Act should be a 'sex discrimination against women act'?

Mrs Sullivan — I think it was publicly tenable only because it was not a sex discrimination against women act. We all knew that women were far more affected than men, but there were areas of discrimination against men, and to some extent there still is. Because I am a woman member of parliament, I have heard over the years a great deal about the operation of the Family Law Act.

I had quite an extraordinary experience around about 1980 when I was still a senator. I started getting a lot of letters and personal approaches, mainly from men, out in the public arena about the subject of custody as it was affected by the Family Law Act. When this sort of thing starts to happen quite spontaneously and goes on and on, the normal political experience is that there is something really happening out there. If I was getting it, my colleagues must be getting it too. So I decided to start discussing this with

them, see whether they had any views and then work out some views on what was necessary. When I asked my male colleagues if they were getting a lot of letters and approaches about the effect of the implementation of the Family Law Act on custody, they all looked at me blankly and said, 'No'. I learnt something else. It was not only women who come to women members of parliament, because some women feel uncomfortable with male members of parliament; there are some subjects that men want to discuss only with women and not with their peers. There was, and I think there still is, a degree of unfairness in the matter of custody, but it is a terribly fraught area and I do not want to go into it.

The simple fact was that the blow had to be struck that way. It has had the effect of some more equality for men. One of the important things about that type of legislation is the effect on community attitudes. When you put these principles into legislative form, you are establishing them as the community standard and people start to look through new eyes. I think that has had a flow-on benefit for quite a few men.

Questioner — I missed the beginning of your speech. I am very concerned about women of my age — and I am a 78-year-old great-grandmother — and the non-recognition of all the years that we have been the backbone of society by being unpaid volunteers. I am quite sure that there are a lot of women here today — and men, of course; but the greater majority of the unpaid volunteers are women — who know that the home and community care program and the community visitors program are absolutely dependent on us. We are the backbone of the child-care industry because of our volunteerism. We are very concerned about the budget item; that the government is going to increase our pension age eligibility from 60 to 65 years of age, which we totally oppose. We think it is absolutely outrageous. What are your thoughts on this? We are saying, 'If you are going to make us get a job when we are 60 years old — if we can get a job when there is ten per cent unemployment — then pay us for all the unpaid voluntary work that we do and we will not need a pension'.

Mrs Sullivan — I think that that 60 to 65 years of age decision has been reversed; it is going back to 60 years of age. Am I right? I am not a member of the government so —

Deputy Clerk — No.

Mrs Sullivan — It is not?

Questioner — Not yet, but we are up here lobbying today. We really feel that it is about time.

Mrs Sullivan — You cannot keep a good woman down. I agree with you. I cannot cover all the subjects that you have covered very quickly. But there has been over the years, particularly in recent years, an amount of emphasis in debate in the parliament on the subject of volunteerism — particularly of older women, and the contribution of those women to the community. There was, in the opposition's policy for the last election, an attempt to move towards recognising that in financial terms. I have to say that more and more this is being pressed on the government as the government is called on more and more to pick up the tab to pay for the lack of volunteers as they have steadily declined,

as more women who once were volunteers are now very firmly in the work force and intend to stay there for quite a few years.

Questioner — In all the stages that women have been in the work force I have not been in the paid work force for those many years.

Mrs Sullivan — That is my point.

Questioner — I have been an unpaid volunteer. That is the excuse they make. The other thing is: why is it that you cannot see that we save the Australian economy approximately \$3 billion a year?

Mrs Sullivan — You misunderstood my point. My point is certainly that your generation are the volunteers. That was not the stage at which women were going into the work force in large numbers. Over the years, the number of women volunteers has declined as more women in their forties and fifties have remained in the work force. You will have to take it up with the government. That is all I can say.

Questioner — I will not argue the figures with you because we have young ones right up to great-great-grandmothers.

Mrs Sullivan — I know. When the family allowance was brought in it was the first recognition of the economic contribution of mothering. It was fine to pay child-care workers, but it was not fine to pay the woman who was the mother. Of course, the volunteers — the grandmothers or the aunts — remained totally unrewarded and unrecognised. That is true. The family allowance was the first step, but we have not made any progress in that role since then. You are right.

Questioner — I notice you mentioned that you found it difficult to get men to hear what you were saying when you were talking about women's issues. In general, what strategies have you found to overcome that? I ask you specifically: have you used or given consideration to any of the more radical feminist views on how to get heard?

Mrs Sullivan — I have always held the view that you do not persuade people by shouting in their faces; I think they just get a little deafer. The most important thing to happen is to have more women saying it in parliament. If I can indulge myself once more, I will tell one of my favourite stories. I will never forget the maiden speeches of Fran Bailey and Chris Gallus, the two other Liberal women elected in 1990. The reason I did not enjoy being the only woman was not that my male colleagues were rough on me — I reiterate that a lot of them were good friends — but that I felt like an oddity. It had been so long since I had been the only woman anything; it was well before I was in the Senate. I looked like an oddity by virtue of being the only one there, but at least there were a few on the other side. I used to say over and over again, 'I can hardly wait for the next woman to be elected on our side. I don't care if her views are 180 degrees to the right or to the left of mine or whatever, provided she is there and I am no longer the only one'.

Fran Bailey and Chris Gallus came not trailing the feminist preconceptions that the men had about me. I will never forget their maiden speeches. Everybody goes in to hear a colleague's maiden speech and I went in. As sure as God made little apples, up it came in both of those speeches: child care. I sat there and hugged myself. I was no longer the only one they were hearing it from. I looked around and saw the faces falling as the realisation dawned on a number of my longer-standing colleagues that I was not an oddity; this was coming from more than just me. That was important. I really believe that you have to have the numbers because then you can start to put forward female values and have them taken notice of as a legitimate point of view. That is the great challenge.

Questioner — So it is building up a critical mass.

Mrs Sullivan — Yes. Absolutely.

Questioner — I do not know if you meant to put it this way, but I do not think that raising feminist views is necessarily about shouting.

Mrs Sullivan — No. It was a matter of technique. You were asking me about technique rather than views. I understand that, because there are plenty of very conservative ladies around who can shout.

Questioner — Could you say something about how much you feel you have to sacrifice to a male-dominated patriarchal system working within the parliament? I work in health care. I am a woman relatively isolated in that area in terms of often being the only woman in a meeting with a large number of men. The processes of preselection that you mentioned seem to me to be a very powerful control on what women can say in parliament and how much they can push for a different way of running our political system here in Australia.

Mrs Sullivan — In relation to your second point, that is changing. The importance of the moves in the last few weeks within both the Labor and Liberal parties has been the recognition that there is a deficiency if there are no women there and they are not putting their point of view. Also, there is the recognition that it counts in the ballot box. It has taken a long time for that to dawn. The facts have been there pretty clearly for a long time. I should not say that it has taken a long time to dawn; there has been a lot of lip-service to it. It has taken a long time for a leader to stand up and say, 'I want more women in my parliamentary team'. That really is what we have needed and I have been saying it for years.

As far as the other point is concerned, you have to learn by experience that on occasions men and women communicate very differently; they almost use a very different language. You have to recognise that in men. Of course, you wish that they might recognise it in you too. When you are in the position of being on your own, then up to a point you have to use their language to communicate without compromising yourself. The biggest mistake you can make is to be a pseudo-man because the men hate that. They want to have their cake and eat it too. Many of the men want women to be feminine but they do not want them to talk like women or think like women, when you are on your own. That will change.

The so-called sensitive new age guy is the one whose ear is attuned to realise that, when women give certain priorities in a debate or use language that they think is appropriate to the topic which men may not have been traditionally used to thinking, he can open his mind to it. But we have to open our minds too. We have to accept maleness if we want them to accept femaleness.