

# **The Trailblazers The First Women in Cabinet\***

*Margaret Guilfoyle and Susan Ryan*

## **Dame Margaret Guilfoyle**

I am delighted to be here with Susan Ryan to talk with you today at this conference.

I suppose we should say that everyone is a product of his or her own timing. My timing to enter the Parliament in 1971 was at the end of the 1960s when women had become so much more active with regard to their careers, to their requests for more educational opportunities, and for more opportunities in general for work outside the home. Although in the 1960s I worked in organisations and the Liberal Party, I was in Parliament before the real effective work of Women's Electoral Lobby and some of the other groups who, in the early 1970s, were very notable.

My entry was at a time when there was only one other woman in the Parliament—that was Dame Nancy Buttfield from South Australia. You are fairly evident if you are one of two. Nancy immediately went to the United Nations for three months, so I was one of one in that first Parliament in which I sat. But I did enter the Senate with a number of new senators, and I think in the Senate they had been accustomed to working with some women. At some time in the past there had been four or five women at one time. In the Senate, you are expected to have a full share of responsibilities. So it wasn't a case of having to demand opportunities; it was really being required to accept responsibilities.

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My first opportunities in the Senate were to be appointed to such bodies as the Finance and Government Operations Committee, and the Joint Public Accounts Committee, which really did relate to my prior career as an accountant. In the Senate I had the opportunity to look at many things in more detail than I had in a practising career.

The emphasis on economic rationalism at that time led me to a Senate committee looking at the financial arrangements of our mining industry. Such things were important and informed you. It's been said that experience teaches. I think that experience can teach slowly, but it can also be experience gained at the cost of some mistakes.

I was appointed to the government in 1975 as Minister for Education. I had been shadowing education for the year of 1975, and that was a very interesting time for me to be looking at education all around Australia, with no resources other than my own energy. I found that year particularly productive, having the previous year been shadowing the Minister for the Media and looking at the creative work that was being done in writing, film-making and all of those sorts of things. So that kind of experience was very helpful.

After the caretaker government period, I was appointed as Minister for Social Security in the new government. Perhaps the first thing that alarmed me a bit was when the Prime Minister said, 'Now, for the swearing in, we'll all be wearing striped pants.' I didn't really know whether that included me, but he was indicating that it was a morning ceremony and morning suit was the appropriate garb.

In the position of Minister for Social Security I was the largest spending minister. It was a time when expenditure was expected to be curtailed. There were the demands through the whole of the early period on looking at restraint of expenditure, where expenditure could be cut and where programs could be changed. I think perhaps the nicest headline I ever had during my time was the one in a Sydney paper that said, 'Minister unhelpful'—unhelpful in cutting the programs that coherently gave income security to millions of people; unhelpful perhaps in not seeking to improve many of the welfare programs that were in conjunction with the states; and maybe unhelpful in trying to persuade other ministers that there were essential matters that needed to be built upon and not destroyed from time to time.

I said that experience teaches but I think responsibility educates. Responsibility educates you to know that it must walk hand in hand with authority and indeed with power for you to be able to do the kind of job that a responsible minister needs to do in the cabinet system of government in this country. When we were appointed ministers, the Prime Minister said to us: 'Use your departments. Use their experience and listen to them.'

I would have to say that, as a new Minister for Social Security, I was very well served by the officers of the Department. They were the people who would brief you for your arguments in cabinet. I always regarded Andrew Podger as the best briefer of a Cabinet Minister, because it didn't matter what silly questions you were asked or what

important matters were raised, somewhere in the briefing material there was that information that you required. It really was a case many times of looking to win the argument on things that other people might want to change that maybe didn't work.

In that department, the Office of Child Care was directed by Marie Coleman, who had the opportunity to devise most of the child care programs that were started in the 1970s (as well as the women's refuge programs and many other programs for disabled people, families and children). That was a very rewarding side of the work because, unlike many of the other programs in the Department, it had some money that was just a little bit flexible because it was a new office. All the money had not been already spoken for, so we could be creative through that particular office. It was a very useful time to see that new things can be done, new arrangements can be made and many people's expectations can be fulfilled.

In my time in the Department of Social Security, I was often asked: 'How do you relate to the women?' I remember one statistic my department gave me said about 83 per cent of the payments that were made through the department were made to women. They were such payments as widows' pensions, aged pensions for women (who live longer than men), family allowances, handicapped children's allowance and those sorts of things. Payments made directly to women were the predominant contact with the department in the 13 million inquiries that they had each year while I was minister.

It was a huge department, and I was interested some years later to have the opportunity to review the department's system for appeals. During that inquiry, we found that the department was making payments to six million Australians of about fifty billion dollars. I had a statistic ready so that if anyone said: 'Why don't you give them another dollar a week?' I could say: 'Well, that's one hundred million dollars a year.' The figures are huge and changes are at great cost.

I don't know how the Department works in Cabinet these days but I do know how it worked when I was there. Perhaps because I was the largest-spending minister and perhaps unhelpful, in 1980 the Prime Minister thought I should be the Minister for Finance and stop all of the other ministers spending money. One thing I learnt particularly as Minister for Finance is that ministers are all 'wets' as far as expenditure for themselves is concerned; there are no 'dry' ministers. I used to marvel at some of the things I'd read in the press about my colleagues and think, well, you should do a bilateral with that Minister and see whether he's a wet or a dry.

It was a very interesting time for me as Finance Minister having that overall look at the accountability of government—to sit on every Cabinet committee dealing with economic matters and with the security of the country—because it is the accountability of government through the Department of Finance that is the responsibility of that Minister. So those years as Finance Minister were very enlightening to me.

After the government changed in 1983, I stayed in the Senate until 1987 and then left to complete a law degree that I was undertaking at the Australian National University. The last few years of my time in the Parliament were with the Public Accounts

Committee, dealing with some of the things that I had started when I first became a Senator. I took four years to become a minister; I stayed there from 1975 to 1983; and left the Parliament in 1987 having had, I felt, a very rewarding time. It was a very demanding time, but I would say to people who would wish to have that kind of career, be active in your own party and learn as much as you are able to about the political system before you enter the Parliament. Because one bright idea is not going to find much merit in a system of government that is entrenched with many programs that simply move from one year to another and build upon each other.

My years in the Parliament have led me to understand that governments must govern for everybody. The people who are affected by government are very widely spaced in our country and to have an understanding of good government, of sound government, is invaluable. There are those who say that very few women have entered the Parliament. But I am delighted to say that, from being one of two, those who are now in the Parliament are ones of many. I hope that there will be many more.

Since my time as a minister, I have seen women who have been Commonwealth ministers, women who have been state premiers, women who have been chief ministers, women who have been state ministers. Someone who was born in my year in Britain said: 'If the men talk about being the mainstream and they exclude 50 per cent of the human people from that stream, then it really can't be very main at all.' It is perhaps getting a little bit more 'main', and I hope that many more women stream into the Parliament and fulfil all the expectations that we have for them.

### **Susan Ryan**

It is just about 100 years since Australian women first exercised the vote and I think after 100 years of this historic exercise by Australian women (except for indigenous women) of this historic right to vote and to stand for Parliament, we can report progress. We can celebrate progress—sometimes glacially slow, sometimes faltering—towards the implied, if not stated, objective of those who framed the Australian Constitution. This objective, as I infer it, is the participation by women, fully and on an equal basis with men, in our political institutions. Now that in 2003 female cabinet ministers are no novelty and female representatives are over a third of our national Parliament, the objective is almost fully achieved.

From the first federal election after the passage of the Commonwealth Franchise Act, in December 1903, no constitutional or legal barriers obstructed this objective. Other factors, however, were responsible for the length of time—65 years—that transpired before Margaret Guilfoyle took her place in cabinet with portfolio. It's those other factors, not the constitutional and legal, that became the basis of my political motivation when as a young woman with small children I set about politics. It was the restrictive impacts of those other factors that formed the basis of a lot of my work when I followed Margaret Guilfoyle into the cabinet.

What were these other factors? Despite the historic inclusion of women as voters in 1903, Australian society, like all others, continued to discriminate against women so that in education, employment, property and financial rights, and in a vast array of essential services, women continued for many decades to be excluded or afforded inferior treatment.

When talking about the development of my own political ideas, I have often been asked when it was that I first became aware of the different and inferior treatment of women and girls. As I was born in 1942 and started school before the onset of the 1950s—a decade that was no milestone in women’s advancement—my answer is this: from when I started school. At that time and right up to the late 1970s there were things that girls were told they could not do: subjects like maths and science at advanced levels; professions like law, engineering, architecture or accounting; executive levels of business were way out of bounds, as were university chairs and heads of government departments. Nor could young women aspire to careers in the burgeoning mass media. They would not, society agreed, have the authoritativeness to read the news, much less as current affairs journalists to produce it. While they could be teachers or nurses, they should certainly cease this activity after they married. So there was little danger of females assuming powerful leadership roles even in health and education where talented and committed women abounded. The message at the lower end of the labour market—factory, shops and offices—was the same, and was accepted by trade unions as much as employers. That was the world I grew up in.

Unsurprisingly then, I did not aspire from an early age to Parliament. The possibility of this course really only occurred to me much later when participating in the vigorous and focused Women’s Electoral Lobby. Through WEL’s activities I came to see the importance to our whole society of female participation in government, as well as in all other areas that mattered. And, I might add, I also came to see—coming up close to male politicians by lobbying them for the Women’s Electoral Lobby—that we could do it. If they could do it, I thought, we certainly could do it.

So I became convinced that the male-only ethos of the Parliament was yet another self-serving mystification of power perpetrated by the patriarchy, as we used to say in those days. It suited men to have us think that Parliament was too demanding, too rough and tough, too complex in its tasks and procedures for women. Well, I decided to give it a go and, to the amazement not to mention the outrage of many in my own party, I got there.

When I arrived, following the traumatic defeat of the Whitlam Government in December 1975, I had help from a most unlikely source. Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, sitting opposite me in the chamber with only two female colleagues, was living proof that women could do the job; first as social security minister and then as finance minister. The competent, cool, sympathetic and, yes, the authoritative way Margaret Guilfoyle carried out her duties provided me with a daily and most valuable tutorial. None was available on my own side. I also had only two female Senate colleagues, Ruth Coleman and Jean Melzer. No woman sat in the House of Representatives at that time on either side. So that was it—six senators. How different and how much better the situation is in 2003.

I hope that, like Margaret, I was able to contribute somewhat to this improvement. ‘What was it like?’ I am often asked. To use the analogy from my memoirs, *Catching the Waves*, it was very like being thrown into a huge surf full of rips and dumpers and being left to drown or maybe make it back to the sand. My own party was indifferent

to the outcome. If I was sucked into oblivion by the undertow, there were plenty of men queuing up to take my place.

I will try to summarise how I dealt with the tasks and the environment. I tried to keep at the front of my mind the reason I was there. It was, as I saw it, to use the resources of Parliament and government to create a fairer and stronger society; one that developed and included all talent regardless of gender, race or background and provided dignity for those who, for whatever reason, didn't make it. This sounds obvious, but the dramas and brawls of parliamentary and party life can distract from the obvious, and often do. Some members start to think their real purpose is to look after their own faction or to stay there as long as possible, or—perhaps worst of all, in my view—to become a celebrity.

I tried to avoid these red herrings and focus on policy and legislation. What did this mean in practice? From the outset in Parliament it meant that I looked for issues about which I felt passionate—that's an important motivating factor—where the Labor Party had good policies and where I could add value. I devoted my energies to these, and kept out of faction wars and the endless jockeying for positions.

In my dealings with the media and the community, it meant that in interviews, statements and endless speeches, I talked about these policies—not about my own lifestyle issues. If they asked about my children and how they were cared for, I would plunge into an extended case for publicly provided childcare services. If they wanted to check out my marital status—divorced—and whether I was thinking of amending it, I would take the opportunity to point out the need for single mothers to get better training in more flexible jobs.

Now, my view is that it's a huge mistake for a female politician to let the media into her personal life, be it her relationships, her children or the trivia still beloved by some such as her choice of clothes, fitness regimes, make-up and hairstyles. I'd like to say I'm not being 'Ms Pure' or 'Ms Above All That' here; all these things matter and they matter to me. In the case of relationships and children, obviously they mattered a lot. But also, I am willing to admit, it matters whether your new hair cut looks good or terrible on TV. But you can keep all this private, and in my view you should. It still seems to me that, as soon as a serious female politician starts to acquiesce in becoming a celebrity, then sooner or later she will pay a high price for the extra publicity by the extra—often unfair—criticism that inevitably follows. For better or worse, my approach was this: the personal is private; the policies are public. And that took me through my first seven years in Parliament.

Then, after seven years of opposition, a long training ground but a useful one, we got into government and I got into cabinet. And then I had to work out another complex area of challenge. How far do you persist with proposals that, while they might be in your party's election platform, have been abandoned or demoted by your Cabinet colleagues?

There is no easy answer. If you roll over too easily, you will avoid their hostility but you will risk achieving nothing and fail to justify your presence. You can't, however, hold out alone too long and expect to prosper. Government is, after all, a collective

activity. The Cabinet is a team, even if the prime minister and some other ministers are more equal than others.

You don't achieve anything all by yourself and in my view, martyrdom, like celebrity, is the wrong look. In my role as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, coming in in 1975 and starting in 1976, I had a huge agenda—obviously not all of it was going to be achievable. I opted for what I thought would have the widest positive impact on the community and the longest lasting effects.

My proposal to bring the Sex Discrimination Bill before the Parliament in the early days of our government was not greeted with enthusiasm by my own colleagues. I persisted and it was introduced. The bill was wildly controversial—something younger women these days can barely believe. Because it gave rise to lots of negative media for our bright, shiny new government, thousands of critical petitions day after day in the Senate, daily lobbying and literally tons of hostile mail to MPs' offices, the general idea was that I should go slow or even withdraw for a while. Well, this was a crunch issue for me. I kept going, and after hundreds of hours of debate and numerous amendments the bill became law. Australian women then and now benefit from these protections.

In Education, of course, I also had huge challenges. I think it was the second largest spending portfolio at that time—probably Defence is second now, I would think. Again, I risked hostility from my own colleagues and powerful interest groups by pushing on. But, ultimately, the achievement of greatly increased participation by young Australians in the last two years of schooling, in TAFEs and in universities, was a good outcome for me personally as well as for our society.

However, by maintaining the policy of no tuition fees for university, in the eyes of my colleagues, I had gone too far; I paid the price and lost the job. Others can decide whether I should have given in or not. But the point I want to make here is that none of these decisions were easy or obvious. Government is a demanding task at every level. Those outside of government, even close observers and one's own supporters, do not always appreciate that fact.

These are reflections from the past. The business of government is crucial, never more so than now. There are other powerful positions in business, in the professions and in other institutions but none, I think, with as much potential for doing good. To be elected by your fellow citizens to this forum is a massive responsibility and a great honour.

I'm delighted that in 2003 so many more women are afforded this honour on both sides and in both chambers than in 1975 when Margaret Guilfoyle became Australia's first Cabinet Minister with portfolio and I was elected to represent the ACT in the Senate. I look forward to all of these women contributing in their own ways to Australia. I hope they will, and therefore justify the hopes and expectations of those pioneer Australians, men and women, who established our constitutional rights, first exercised 100 years ago in December.



**Question** — I'm finding is that, to try and create a political future, the environment may not be ideal at the moment. It's been suggested to me that I move state, which is not something I have on the agenda. I live here in Canberra. Did you have to engineer your career? Do you have a Sydney background? Did you deliberately move to Canberra to create better potential for your career?

**Susan Ryan** — I wish I could say I had been so strategic and sought it out but, in fact, I left Sydney to come to Canberra in a very traditional way. I came as a young married woman following my husband's career. That's what happened in those days. He was in the foreign service and then I spent a few years, again very instructive years, in Europe and in the United States with him.

When I came back to Canberra, the only reason I stayed, rather than returning to my beloved Sydney, was that I had tried to complete some post-graduate work at the ANU while I was travelling around being a diplomat's wife and a mother. It was almost complete so I thought I would come back to Canberra for a short period of time, finish my Masters and then go up to Sydney.

I came back in the middle of 1971, which was a very electric time politically in Canberra. Everyone was politics mad. People on the Labor side were very enthusiastic about Gough Whitlam, and I got caught up in that and therefore learnt how the preselection system worked in the ACT. I managed, with a lot of work and planning—and the planning did come in then—to secure preselection.

But there was an element of luck there because the Labor Party, particularly the New South Wales branch of it, was not at all sympathetic to people like me, let alone women like me. I used to say to Graham Richardson, who was state secretary at the time: 'If I moved back to Sydney and tried to pursue a career in the Labor Party there, I would still be cutting up the cabbages for the coleslaw at the Labor Party barbeques.'

So it was fortuitous that I found myself back in Canberra because of my marital situation. The branch here was autonomous. It was not controlled by Sussex Street in New South Wales so we were able to have a very democratic election process. I should finally say I always support democratic preselection processes, not only philosophically, but I believe women always do better when they have a democratic system to work in.

**Question** — You have spoken of the difficulties of women in the roles that you took on and the fact that you didn't get a great deal of party support. I wonder whether it's going to be another 73 years before we get a woman Prime Minister. Do you think that the party system will allow that kind of movement forward or are we still going to have to wait a very long time?

**Margaret Guilfoyle** — I think it depends a lot on circumstances. If we look at the instance of, say, Margaret Thatcher, two years before she became leader of her party,



she made a public statement that there wouldn't be a female leader of the Conservative Party in her lifetime and there certainly would never be a female Conservative prime minister. She managed to overcome whatever she had felt at that time to become leader of her party in opposition and then to win government.

I think very often timing and circumstances make things possible that may seem to be distant. But you really do have to have experienced women in position, who have taken responsibility, and have won the support of their colleagues in their judgements, who believe leadership could be undertaken by them. We've had state leaders who have been women. I foresee that some time there will be a woman in that position in the Federal Parliament. But who knows? These things happen very often through a chain of circumstances. I don't see it happening easily because I think that women need to get that experience, to be in position to be the right person for the leadership role. So let us just hope.

**Susan Ryan** — I think Australia is culturally ready for a woman Prime Minister now, which it was not perhaps when I first went into Parliament. We have had women premiers. We've had a number of women in cabinet. It's not a novelty. Then if you look across the ocean to New Zealand, they've had women prime ministers on both sides and, again, the novelty—the 'Can this happen?' aspect—has gone. I think the electorate would be ready for a woman prime minister. But I agree with Margaret, to get to the leadership position you usually need to have put in a lot of hard yards and demonstrated to your own colleagues that you can carry them forward. There may be women who are setting about doing that right now, and we could see a woman prime minister in the next decade. I certainly hope we do.