



THE RIGHT TO STAND *but not to sit*

It's one hundred years since Australian women were first able to stand as candidates in federal elections. Marian Sawyer reflects on a century of women candidates for the House of Representatives.

One hundred years ago, the federal election of 1903 consolidated Australia's reputation as an advanced democracy. For the first time anywhere in the world women stood as candidates for their national parliament. Australia was in the lead internationally in terms of women's political rights. In New Zealand women were regularly voting for parliament but they had to wait until 1919 to be allowed to stand as candidates.

In Australia some women voted in the 1901 federal election, but the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* extended such rights to women across the continent. Australia became the object of international attention as women took their place as equal citizens in the new nation. High hopes were pinned on the impact women would have in 'purifying' politics and focusing more attention on welfare issues. It was little noticed at the time that not all women had achieved the vote and that Indigenous Australians had to wait another 60 years for a uniform federal franchise. In New Zealand Maori and Pakeha women had gained the franchise together.

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Meanwhile mounted police and foot constables were being sent out across Australia in 1903 to enrol the new nation. They gathered almost two million names—some 96 per cent of the adult population. Some women worked as 'typewriters' (typists) in compiling the roll while other women took the plunge and nominated as candidates for the federal parliament. Three stood for the Senate, including the well-known suffrage leader Vida Goldstein. The relatively unknown Selina Anderson was, at 25, the only woman to stand for the House of Representatives.

Selina stood for the Sydney seat of Dalley as a Protectionist and had considerable novelty value as a young and eloquent woman candidate. When she married a few years later she still had the 18-inch waist so prized at the time. She lost to the sitting Free Trade member although she had union support and gained 17 per cent of the vote. It was by no means the end of her political career. She became active in the Pyrmont Labor League and (a sign of the times) secretary of the Anti-Chinese and Anti-Asiatic League. As an organiser for the Sydney Labour Council she played an important role in the laundry workers' dispute of 1906 and the following year was campaigning for the Labor Party in the state seat of Mudgee.

After her marriage, on New Year's Day 1908, Selina's political views appear to have shifted, but not her commitment to pioneering political candidacies. Under her married name of Siggins she was one of the first two women to stand for parliament in South Australia in 1918, campaigning as an Independent in the safe Labor seat of Adelaide. In 1922 she became the first woman to be endorsed by the new Country Party for the House of Representatives (and the only one until 1949). She did very badly as one of two

Country Party candidates in the seat of Calare. Selina has remained an enigmatic figure in political history, about whose motives and beliefs we know very little. This is soon to be rectified thanks to path-breaking research by Sue Tracey for a forthcoming supplement to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Over the next 40 years women candidates retained their novelty value. Only a handful were endorsed by major parties and then only for unwinnable seats. Around 75 per cent stood as Independent or minor party candidates (compared with about 7 per cent of women standing for the British House of Commons over the same period). This was partly because the women who had campaigned for suffrage and social reform came to distrust the major parties, but most importantly it was because of party attitudes to women candidates. Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, whose wife marched for women's suffrage when they were in London, called in vain for the Labor Party to select women candidates for the Senate. Stalwart women organisers were rewarded only with pre-selection for safe conservative seats such as Kooyong and Wentworth.

Dame Elizabeth Couchman was head of the Australian Women's National League from 1927, the organisation that did much of the fund-raising and campaigning for the conservative parties between the wars. She was a brilliant political organiser and a confidante of cabinet ministers and leading business supporters. Despite their admiration for her skills (and hats) they were not ready for her as a political candidate. She tried three times for Senate pre-selection but only succeeded in being preselected for the safe Labor seat of Melbourne during the conservative collapse of 1943. She was to have lasting influence on the new Liberal Party, through negotiating equal representation of women at all levels of the Victorian division up to State President as the condition for merging the League.

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Australia had quickly lost its place at the forefront of the struggle for women's political equality. Women had won the right to stand for parliament but apparently not the right to sit. There was a longer wait between gaining the right to stand for the national parliament and the election of the first women than anywhere else in the world. Already 19 women were elected in 1907 to the Eduskunta in Finland, after gaining the right to stand only the year before.

In most western democracies women were rewarded with political rights for their war work during World War 1 and the first women were elected immediately afterwards. In the three prairie provinces of Canada women won the suffrage in 1916 and in Alberta two women were elected in 1917. Roberta MacAdam's campaign poster had a fetching photograph of her in a nurse's veil and the slogan: "Give one vote to the man of your choice and the other to the sister". We can get some idea of the commonalities and differences in women's political history in Australia, Canada and New Zealand from Table 1 (below).

In Australia women had to wait until World War 2 to be elected to the national parliament. Women had been mobilising not only for the war but also to have a greater say in postwar reconstruction. A Women for Canberra movement was created and a record number of women stood as candidates in 1943. They wanted to ensure the interests of women in industry and in

the services were represented in parliament, as well as the interests of women in the home. It was the latter, however, that had priority for Dame Enid Lyons, the first woman to be elected to the House of Representatives.

Dame Enid was well-known as the widow of former Prime Minister Joe Lyons. She was a highly effective platform speaker and had first been a candidate almost 20 years earlier, despite already having seven children (she ended having 12). It was not only in Australia that the first women in parliament were often the widows or daughters of male politicians. In New Zealand both the first Pakeha woman to be elected to parliament and the first Maori woman were political widows. When Iriaka Ratana was elected in 1949 and accused of neglecting her children, she pointed to Dame Enid Lyons as a shining example of a political widow with a large family.

Being a 'stand in' for a male relative helped allay the anxiety provoked by women's presence in the public realm but did not save women politicians from the charge of neglecting home duties. Edith Cowan, the first woman elected to the Western Australian parliament (and today depicted on our \$50 notes) was accused of heartlessly neglecting her husband and children during her campaign in 1921. Her youngest child was then 30 and her husband out canvassing for her!

In her maiden speech Dame Enid used homely metaphors to refer to this fear of women. It was akin, she suggested, to the fear in the broom cupboard of a new broom and she would be careful not to be too vigorous. Pix magazine ran a cover story on "women legislators" designed to dispel such anxiety. It showed Dame Enid as 'mother', pouring tea for Senator Tangney, also newly elected. Clearly neither were about to threaten traditional gender roles.

In 1949, when Dame Enid was appointed to cabinet but without portfolio, she joked that her role was still to pour the tea. The withholding of portfolios from the first women appointed to cabinet was not uncommon. It happened to Mary Ellen Smith in British Columbia when she became the first woman cabinet minister in the British Empire in 1921 and to Dame Florence Cardell Oliver in Western Australia in 1947.

	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>
Right to vote: Most women	1902	1918	1893
Right to stand: Most women	1902	1919	1919
Right to vote: All Indigenous women	1962	Inuit 1950 Status Indians 1960	1893
First woman elected	1943	1921	1933
First Indigenous woman elected	—	1988	1949
First woman cabinet minister	1949	1957	1947
First woman party leader	1986	1989	1993
First woman prime minister	—	1993	1997

Table 1:
Political rights and representation at the national level

Photo above: Selina Anderson, the first woman to stand as a candidate for the House of Representatives. Photo: The Worker, 4 March 1905; courtesy of State Reference Library, State Library of New South Wales

Up until 1980 only three other women followed Dame Enid into the House. Its masculine character was underlined by the fact that women were not even present on the floor as Hansard reporters, let alone as parliamentary officials. While female typists might be found out the back, the first woman was not appointed as Hansard reporter until 1969. There had been an increasing struggle to find men with adequate shorthand skills to fill what was regarded as a man's job. Of course such skills were plentiful among women.

The arrival of the second wave of the women's movement in the early 1970s was not immediately reflected in the composition of the House, although the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) succeeded in putting women's issues on the agenda for all parties in 1972. The following year an abortion law reform bill (the Medical Practice Clarification Bill) was brought forward by Labor backbenchers David McKenzie and Tony Lamb. It was debated by an all-male House while nuns and members of pro-choice groups looked on from the gallery, attendants tried to bring down helium-filled balloons from the ceiling and women camped in a Women's Embassy outside.

By the time the Sex Discrimination Bill was being debated in 1983-4 there were three women in the House of Representatives, one of whom (Joan Child) was to become Speaker and one (Ros Kelly) a cabinet minister. While many men supported the principles enshrined in the bill, few had the personal experience of discrimination that women parliamentarians brought to bear on the subject.

The number of women standing as candidates for the House of Representatives increased sharply over the next 20 years, with the Australian Democrats leading the way. At first the major parties were over-inclined to give women marginal rather than safe seats, so they were washed in and out on the electoral tide. The pattern gradually improved, as can be seen from Figure 1 (below).

While once even older women entering parliament were accused of neglecting home duties, now younger women are bringing work/family issues with them into the political arena. Ros Kelly returned with an air cushion a week after the birth of her first child in 1983 and in 2000 Jackie Kelly became the first

serving federal minister to give birth. There was still no parliamentary childcare centre, however, unlike most of the parliaments ranking above Australia on the league table maintained by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Australia is currently in 23rd place).

Australia is no longer a leader in terms of women's political rights and participation as it was 100 years ago. Women now make up 50 per cent of those in the Welsh Assembly, while in Sweden they are 45 per cent of the Riksdag. The countries most similar to Australia in terms of the Westminster inheritance have all had at least one woman prime minister. Nonetheless Australia has made up a considerable amount of ground since the 1980s. While women legislators are not yet regarded as the norm, they are no longer expected to pour the tea. ■

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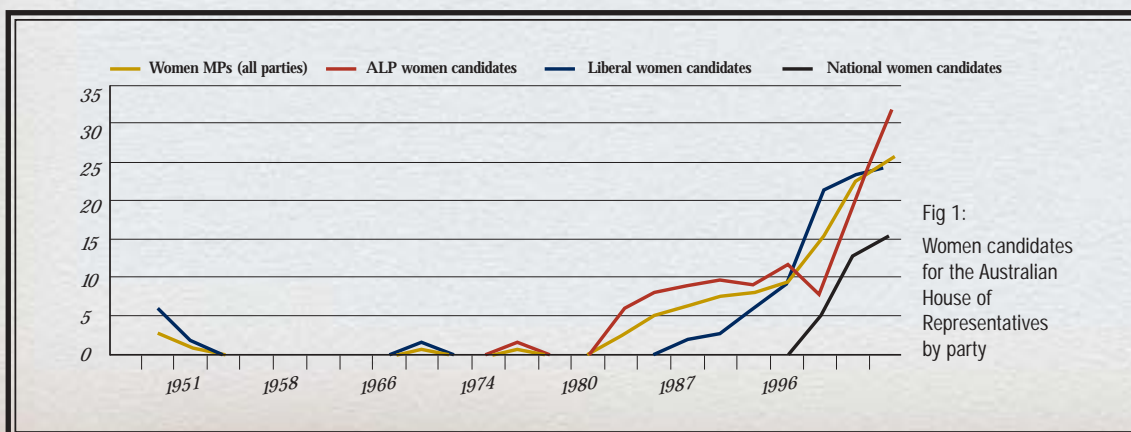


Photo above: Cover of Pix magazine in 1944 showing Dame Enid Lyons, first woman elected to the House of Representatives (right) with Senator Dorothy Tangney, first woman senator (left). Photo: by permission of the National Library of Australia