



RESEARCH NOTE

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Women in Australian Federal Cabinet

Introduction

The issue of women's representation in positions of power is regularly a subject of political discussion. This research note focuses on women's representation in Federal Cabinet. It offers a multi-dimensional profile of the number of women in Cabinet over the last twenty years and highlights the possible implications such a profile has for future trends.

Role of Cabinet

Although the Cabinet is not mentioned in the Constitution, it is nevertheless a core institution of government in Australia. It is within Cabinet that policies are discussed and developed and decisions made on policy implementation and expenditure. It is the members of Cabinet who

must explain and defend policy initiatives and outcomes. Furthermore, each Cabinet Minister is responsible for a portfolio and so represents the connection between the political ideas of the government and the particular concerns of the Minister's department and relevant interest groups. It has been argued that this positioning provides Cabinet Ministers with power to bring about policy change that is unavailable to other political actors.¹

Looking at the Numbers

Because Cabinet is a powerful component of the body politic, it is not surprising that in recent years attention has been drawn to the under-representation of women within Cabinet ranks. Although women gained the right

to vote and stand for election to the Commonwealth Parliament in 1902, it was 1943 before any women were elected. In 1949, Dame Enid Lyons became the first woman to hold Cabinet rank when she was named Vice-President of the Federal Executive Council. In 1966, Senator Annabelle Rankin became the first woman to administer a government department (Housing) but this was not a Cabinet position. It was not until 1975 that women were represented by a Minister with a portfolio inside Cabinet. Senator Margaret Guilfoyle entered Cabinet as Minister for Education in 1975 and in 1976 was made Minister for Social Security. Guilfoyle stayed in Cabinet for over 7 years and remains the longest serving woman Cabinet Minister. However, be-

Selected Years	Women in Cabinet		% Govt Women in Cabinet	Women in Ministry*		% Govt Women in Ministry*	Women in Parliament**	
	No.	%		No.	%		No.	%
1975-77 (LNP)	1	9	33	1	4.3	33	6	3.1
1978-80	1	7.7	33	1	3.7	33	7	3.7
1980-81	1	7	33	1	3.8	33	10	5.3
1981-83	1	7	20	1	3.8	20	13	6.9
1983-84 (ALP)	1	6.6	7.7	1	3.7	7.7	19	10.1
1984-87	1	5.8	7.1	1	3.7	7.1	23	10.3
1987-88	1	5.8	7.7	3	10	23	26	11.6
1989-90	0	0	0	2	6.7	15	26	11.6
1990-92	1	5.8	8.3	2	6.7	16.7	28	12.5
1992-93	1	5.5	8.3	3	10	25	28	12.5
1993	1	5.2	7.7	3	10	23	29	13
1994-96	1	5.8	7.7	3	10	23	29	13
1996-97 (LNP)	2	12.5	8	4	14.2	16	46	20.5

*Does not include Parliamentary Secretaries **Includes House of Representatives and Senate

tween 1975 and 1996 there was only one woman in Cabinet at any time. There have been two since the change of government in 1996.

The table shows these absolute numbers as percentages, and takes into account other factors such as the changing size of Cabinet, the number of women in the government and the number of women in Parliament.

Several trends are evident. First, a decrease in the percentage of women Cabinet members is apparent after 1983, with no significant increase until 1996. This is largely because the number of women in Cabinet did not change (or fell, as was the case after Senator Susan Ryan resigned), while the actual size of Cabinet increased during the same period, reaching a high of 19 in 1993. After the 1996 election, the number of women in Cabinet doubled while the overall size of Cabinet shrank, hence the 6.7 per cent increase in women's presence.

Secondly, between 1975 and 1981 one-third of the women in the governing parties held a Cabinet post—there being only three women in the governing Coalition, one of whom was a Cabinet Minister. This proportion decreased after 1983, with the number of women in consecutive Labor governments increasing to thirteen without a corresponding increase in the number of women in Cabinet. This would suggest that increasing the number of women in Parliament is not in itself a sufficient means to increase the representation of women in Cabinet. Other factors such as longevity of political service both within and outside Par-

liament are also of considerable consequence.

Thirdly, the total number of women in the House of Representatives stood at only 3 out of 125 in 1980 (2.4%) and 10 out of 148 (6.8%) in 1990. Over the same period, there were almost double these numbers of women in the Senate, where there were 7 out of 64 (11%) in 1980 and 18 out of 76 (23%) in 1990. Such disparities between the number of women in each chamber might be problematic for women's Cabinet representation in that three-quarters of Cabinet is usually drawn from the House of Representatives.² The number of female members in the House now stands at 23 (15.5%) and is comparable with the number of women in the Senate which is also 23 (30%). However, ensuring women continue to make up a critical mass in the House of Representatives appears significant for their representation in Cabinet.

When we broaden the parameters to include the number of women in the Ministry generally, the picture is brighter after 1987. Between 1975 and 1987, the percentage of Ministers who were women hovered around 4%, but after 1987 rose to 10% and, with the exception of the 1989–91 period, stayed at this level and increased by 4 per cent after the 1996 election.

Based on past figures, women are more likely to hold places outside, rather than inside, Cabinet. While non-Cabinet Ministers have limited access to the major decision-making arena, acting as a Minister or a Parliamentary

Secretary offers women training for future inclusion in Cabinet.

Conclusions

Margaret Guilfoyle noted in 1994 that unless women were positioned in the Cabinet then the effect of more women in Parliament would not be felt in the arena where the decisions are taken and the policy directions are set.³ If it is accepted that without women present in Cabinet, women's interests may be overlooked, then the statistics presented above suggest that the issue of women's representation within Cabinet remains a critical one. While increasing the number of women in Parliament is important, other factors such as increasing the number of women in the House of Representatives (particularly in safe seats to allow for longevity of service) and including them in the outer Ministry are also of significance.

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