

‘Carry On the Fight’ Women in the Australian Senate*

Women throughout Australia have had the right to vote in elections for the national Parliament for one hundred years. For all that time, they have also had the right to sit in the Australian Parliament.

Australia was the first country in the world to give most women both the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament when, in 1902, the federal Parliament passed legislation to provide for a uniform franchise throughout the Commonwealth. In spite of this early beginning, progress to more than a token level of participation by women in the Parliament was slow and unsteady. It was 1943 before women were elected to the Senate and the House of Representatives. In June 2004, there are twenty-two women out of a total of seventy-six senators, and thirty-eight women out of a total of one hundred and fifty members of the House of Representatives.

The Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902 stated that ‘all persons not under twenty-one years of age whether male or female married or unmarried’ would be entitled to vote in federal elections.¹ One of the qualifications for candidates for election to Parliament is that they are eligible to vote in federal elections. The removal of the requirement that voters be male, which had been carried into the first federal elections in 1901 by all states except South Australia and Western Australia, also removed that qualification on eligibility to stand for the federal Parliament. Once women had the right to vote in federal elections, they had the right to become members of Parliament. This issue was barely discussed in parliamentary debates on the Franchise Act in 1902.

* This is a revised edition of Senate *Brief* No. 3 ‘Women in the Senate’. The full brief is available from the Procedure Office of the Senate or online at www.aph.gov/Senate/Brief3.doc

¹ The Act excluded Aboriginal women and men unless they were eligible to vote under state law.

There was considerable reaction in the press, however, when, in December 1903, at the first federal election following the passage of the Act, four women nominated for election. Vida Goldstein (Victoria), and Nellie Martel and Mary Ann Moore Bentley (New South Wales), stood for election to the Senate, and Selina Anderson stood for the seat of Dalley (New South Wales) in the House of Representatives. They were the first women nominated for any national Parliament within what was then the British Empire.

The entry of women into Parliament would, it was claimed, undermine family life in Australia. Underlying the pillorying of female candidates in publications such as the *Sydney Bulletin* was the fear that women would usurp the position of men, and men would be relegated to the domestic sphere. There was little cause for apprehension. Australia was one of the first countries in the world to give full political rights to women, but was one of the last western countries to elect women to its national Parliament.

Women as federal candidates

There were limited opportunities to vote for women candidates between 1903 and 1943, as during that period only 26 women in total nominated for election for either house. Having achieved the right to enter Parliament well before their counterparts in other countries, why did so few women stand for election?

Many Australian men and women of that era thought that it was not respectable for women to have paid employment. Women who worked outside the home generally did so out of financial necessity. They were concentrated in unskilled occupations, and were paid less than men who did the same work. While it was acceptable for middle-class single women to work, they were expected, and in some cases required, to give up their jobs upon marrying. The small minority of women who pursued professional careers usually did so with the expectation of not marrying.

Women did a great deal of unpaid work in areas traditionally associated with the interests of women, such as social work, education, and family matters. It was widely believed that women's best contribution could be made in these areas, rather than in the policy matters dealt with by the federal Parliament. The Commonwealth government did not begin to exercise power in relation to laws affecting family and domestic matters until after 1946.²

Faced with strong social conventions, all but a few women were deterred from seeking the responsible and public office of a member of parliament. In any case, for women with full responsibility for house, husband and family, the time spent travelling to and attending parliamentary sessions, especially in the days before air transport was common, would have been a formidable barrier to entering the federal Parliament. Even today, many federal parliamentarians find that the time which they must spend away from their homes puts pressure on their family lives.

No woman was endorsed by a major party as a candidate for the Senate before the beginning of the Second World War. Overwhelmingly dominated by men, the

² In 1946, an amendment to Section 51 of the Australian Constitution gave the Commonwealth the right to legislate on a wide range of matters affecting social security.

established political parties saw men as being more likely to win the votes needed to advance their political causes. It was thought that neither men nor women would vote for female candidates.

Many early feminists distrusted the established parties, seeing them as being formed by men and protective of men's interests. Those who presented themselves as candidates did so as independents or on the tickets of minor parties. Vida Goldstein, for example, refused to align herself with the Labor Party, which espoused many policies similar to hers, and so denied herself possible back-up and support. In 1903 she wrote:

Women should carry on the fight and the campaign by means of their own organisations, and not by means of any existing ones controlled and directed by men. If they do the latter, they must adopt men's methods and men's aims, and simply help in perpetuating the old order of things. The right of the franchise will have been bestowed on them for no purpose.³

The Second World War brought about social changes that resulted in a less rigid perception of the role of women. With many men in the armed services, women were employed in jobs that had previously been reserved for men, and they did them well and enjoyed doing them. When the men returned from the war there was for a period a reversion to the old roles, but attitudes had changed and, in an atmosphere of expanding employment, it became more acceptable for women at all levels of society to work outside the home. This was followed by cautious acceptance of the participation of women in wider spheres of public life, such as politics.

Changes in social attitudes towards women brought about by the war appear to have contributed to the election of the first two women to the federal Parliament in 1943. While only eight women in total nominated for election to the Senate between 1903 and 1943, five women nominated in 1943 alone. Where previously the maximum number of women to nominate at any election for the House of Representatives had been four (in 1934), nineteen women nominated in 1943.

In August 1943 Dorothy Tangney, the first woman to gain endorsement for the Senate by the Australian Labor Party, managed to gather enough preferences to fill an extra vacancy caused by the death of a Western Australian senator. At the same election, Enid Lyons, well-known as the widow of former Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, won one of the five House of Representatives seats for Tasmania for the Liberal Party. In New South Wales, Jessie Street won the highest number of primary votes for the seat of Wentworth, but was defeated on preferences.

Two steps forward and one step back

Ten women stood for the Senate election of December 1949, and two were elected. This was the first election in which a system of proportional representation voting was implemented for Senate elections. This system requires that multiple candidates obtain a proportion of the votes cast, rather than a majority.⁴ Proportional representation is

³ *Womens Sphere*, 10 July 1903.

⁴ For further information on proportional representation see 'Electing Australia's Senators', *Senate Brief No. 1*, Senate Research Section, Canberra, 1998.

thought to be more favourable than other systems to the election of women partly because of the 'ticket' voting system and partly because it encourages the election of members of small parties and minority groups, which women have often sought to represent.⁵

Any benefit was slow to be felt, however, as the proportion of women in the Senate did not improve, and even regressed, over the next 25 years. While more women were being nominated for election to the Senate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the major parties continued to withhold their support, in the belief that women would not poll well in federal elections. Women were endorsed by the major parties, but invariably for elections for difficult or even unwinnable seats. In July 1971, there were still only two women senators, and only seven women in total had served in the Senate since Federation. During much of this period there were no women in the House of Representatives.

While improvement in their parliamentary representation was slow to eventuate, Australian women made important gains in political, civil and economic rights during this period. In the 1960s, the ban on married women in the Commonwealth Public Service was lifted, women were granted equal pay for equal work, and increasing numbers of young women gained access to university studies. Reforms such as this gathered into a tide of feminism, which was fuelled by the foundation of the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972. In the 1970s and 80s the Commonwealth Parliament enacted a number of laws to promote the status of women, provide them with equal opportunities and prevent discrimination against them, and ultimately, to implement affirmative action to remove barriers to equality.

Women senators played an important role in creating these increased opportunities for women to participate in Australian society on an equal footing with men. The introduction by Senator Susan Ryan in 1981 of a private senator's bill on sex discrimination was particularly significant. Although this bill did not proceed, Senator Ryan introduced an amended version in 1983 when she was Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women. The bill was passed and became the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. Other acts resulting from Senator Ryan's original 1981 bill were the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986*, the *Public Service Reform Act 1984* and the *Equal Employment Opportunity (Commonwealth Authorities) Act 1987*.

Women began to seek political office more actively, and the political parties at last began to recognise the value and justice of encouraging female candidates. In 1981 Australian Labor Party adopted an affirmative action program that set quotas to be achieved in the endorsement of female candidates for parliamentary elections.⁶ The Liberal Party used women's networks within the party to recruit, mentor and train women to stand and campaign for election. The Australian Democrats, founded in 1977

⁵ See Arend Lijphart, 'Australian democracy: modifying majoritarianism?' in Marian Sawer and Sarah Miskin (eds), *Representation and Institutional Change*, Canberra, Department of the Senate, 1999 (*Papers on Parliament* no. 34.)

⁶ In 2002, the ALP adopted a '40 40 20' model, which aims to ensure that by 2012, Labor women will stand for at least 40 per cent of winnable seats, as will men.

without the traditional structure and allegiances of the older parties, from the outset was a party which subscribed to gender equity. A majority of Australian Greens and Greens (WA) senators have been women.

During the 1980s and 1990s the number of women in parliaments Australia-wide increased steadily. By July 1991, there were 18 women senators, and by July 1996 there were 23, or a little over 30 per cent of Senate membership.

It is no longer considered that voters discriminate against female candidates; in fact in Senate elections, there is some evidence that women voters prefer to vote for women, and seek them out on the ticket.

Perceptions of women in politics

Women senators have made an immense contribution to changing public perceptions of the role of women in politics. Condescending attitudes from within the Senate sometimes encountered by early women senators⁷ were apparently gone by the time Kathy Martin arrived there in 1974. She recalled:

The male senators had long 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.⁸

There was an expectation that female senators would be active in areas traditionally associated with women's interests, sometimes seen as the 'soft options' in politics, such as health care, education, the arts and family and community matters. In the last fifty years, such issues have assumed more status and political significance. The first female minister was allocated the Housing portfolio (Annabelle Rankin, in 1966), and the first Senate Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committee to have a female Chair (in 1970) was the Health and Welfare Committee. Currently, a female senator holds the portfolio for Family and Community Services (Kay Patterson).

Women senators make it clear that they are willing and able to deal with all matters before the Senate. Senator Helen Coonan is the Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer, Senator Amanda Vanstone is the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, and Senator Judith Troeth is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. It would be difficult to detect a bias in the subject matter of the wide range of Senate committees on which women serve.

⁷ Senator Annabelle Rankin was given the unofficial title of Senate 'mother' despite the fact that at one period she was one of only three members of the Opposition in the Senate, thus speaking on a wide range of policy issues. On her retirement, in 1971, one senator said he was sorry to see her go because 'as Government Whip [she] always provided midnight suppers for honourable senators whose tempers were frayed.'

⁸ Kathy Martin Sullivan, 'Women in Parliament—Yes! But what's it really like?' *Papers on Parliament* no. 22, February 1994.

Women have assumed other leadership roles in the Senate. In 1986, Senator Janine Haines became the first woman in Australia to lead a political party when she took over the leadership of the Australian Democrats. Four subsequent Democrat leaders have been women, and as leaders of a party that frequently holds the balance of power in the Senate, all have played a central role in negotiations for the amendment and passage of important legislation.

Senator Margaret Reid was elected President of the Senate in August 1996, and presided over business in the Senate for six years. In this prestigious position she was to many the public face of the Senate, who acted as its representative in dealings with the executive government and persons outside Parliament.

Still not quite equal

While women are no longer at the margins of federal politics, as they were for so many years, they are still not represented in Parliament in the same proportion as they are in the community, and there are still few of them in cabinet.

One hundred years after Vida Goldstein and others faced a hostile public, press and Parliament, women have overcome the social conditioning which excluded them from the political sphere, but some obstacles remain. Failure to gain endorsement continues to be a barrier to the equal representation of women. In the general election of October 2001, of 285 nominations for election to the Senate, 93 were for women.⁹

The long hours, heavy workloads and constant travelling which parliamentary service entails continue to create particular difficulties for some women. Current female senators had an average age of 40 at time of election. A number of senators are mothers of young children. Without adequate child-care facilities within Parliament House, it is difficult for women with children to match the long hours which many other senators devote to parliamentary work.

Speaking at the Women's Constitutional Convention in June 2002, Senator Amanda Vanstone said:

One hundred years ago, women got the right to vote and to stand for Parliament ... These rights having been fought for by women and men are meant to be used and used not in part but in full. We cannot say that has happened until we have something like 50 per cent representation in federal Parliament. And when we have 50 per cent of the Parliament, we should be aiming for 50 per cent of the Ministry and Shadow Ministry and 50 per cent of the Cabinet.

⁹ AEC *Electoral Newsfile* No. 101, October 2001.

**Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments
November 2003**

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Lower House Women</i>	<i>Lower House Total</i>	<i>Upper House Women</i>	<i>Upper House Total</i>
Commonwealth	38	150	22	76
New South Wales	23	93	13	42
Victoria	27	88	13	44
Queensland	34	89	–	–
South Australia	16	47	6	22
Tasmania	6	25	4	15
Western Australia	13	57	10	34
Northern Territory	8	25	–	–
Australian Capital Territory	7	17	–	–

Women's Political Rights in Australia

<i>States</i>	<i>Right to Vote</i>	<i>Right to Sit</i>	<i>First Woman Elected</i>
South Australia	1895	1895	1959
Western Australia	1899	1920	1921
New South Wales	1902	1918	1925
Tasmania	1903	1921	1948
Queensland	1905	1918	1929
Victoria	1908	1923	1933

Political Rights for Women—Selected National Legislatures

Multiple dates against one country indicate that full female suffrage was introduced in stages

<i>Country</i>	<i>Right to Vote</i>	<i>Right to Sit</i>	<i>First Woman Elected</i>
New Zealand	1893	1919	1933
Australia	1902 ^a /1962 ^b	1902 ^a /1962 ^b	1943
Finland	1906	1906	1907
Norway	1907/1913	1907/1913	1936
Denmark	1915	1915	1918
United Kingdom	1918/1928	1918	1918
Germany	1918	1918	1919
Czechoslovakia	1918	1918	1920
Austria	1919	1919	1919
Canada	1919	1919	1921
Netherlands	1919	1917	1918
United States of America	1920	*	1917

- a** Women from the states of South Australia and Western Australia voted at the first federal election held in 1901 because it was conducted under the electoral laws of the six states. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* provided for uniform franchise for all persons from the age of twenty-one. Section 4 provided for disqualification of coloured races, unless they were already entitled to vote under state law.
- b** Aboriginal women and men were not enfranchised on a national basis until 1962.
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- The 19th Amendment to the American Constitution gave women the right to vote in every state. In many states, women had been voting and participating in government for years before the passage of the Amendment in 1920, and there was nothing to prevent women from entering Congress before then. Jeanette Rankin entered the House of Representatives in 1917 as the first female member of Congress.

Women in the Australian Senate

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Period of Service</i>
Tangney , Dorothy Margaret	ALP	Western Australia	1943–68
Rankin , the Hon. Annabelle Jane Mary	LP	Queensland	1947–71
Robertson , Agnes Robertson	LP; CP	Western Australia	1950–55; 1955–62
Wedgwood , Ivy Evelyn	LP	Victoria	1950–71
Buttfield , Nancy Eileen	LP	South Australia	1955–65; 1968–74
Breen , Marie Freda	LP	Victoria	1962–68
Guilfoyle , the Hon. Margaret Georgina Constance	LP	Victoria	1971–87
Coleman , Ruth Nancy	ALP	Western Australia	1974–87
Martin (later Sullivan), Kathryn Jean*	LP	Queensland	1974–84
Melzer , Jean Isabel	ALP	Victoria	1974–81
Ryan , the Hon. Susan Maree	ALP	Australian Capital Territory	1975–88
Walters , (Mary) Shirley	LP	Tasmania	1975–93
Haines , Janine	AD	South Australia	1977–78; 1981–90
Hearn , Jean Margaret	ALP	Tasmania	1980–85
Bjelke-Petersen , Florence Isabel	NCP; NPA	Queensland	1981–93
Giles , Patricia Jessie	ALP	Western Australia	1981–93
Reid , the Hon. Margaret Elizabeth	LP	Australian Capital Territory	1981–2003
Crowley , the Hon. Rosemary Anne	ALP	South Australia	1983–2002
Reynolds , the Hon. Margaret	ALP	Queensland	1983–99
Zakharov , (Alice) Olive	ALP	Victoria	1983–95
Knowles , Susan Christine	LP	Western Australia	from 1984
Vanstone , the Hon. Amanda Eloise	LP	South Australia	from 1984
Vallentine , Josephine	IND; GWA	Western Australia	1985–90; 1990–92
Newman , the Hon. Jocelyn Margaret	LP	Tasmania	1986–2002
Powell , Janet Frances	AD; IND	Victoria	1986–92; 1992–93
Bishop , the Hon. Bronwyn Kathleen*	LP	New South Wales	1987–94
Jenkins , Jean Alice	AD	Western Australia	1987–90
Patterson , the Hon. Kay Christine Lesley	LP	Victoria	from 1987
West , Suzanne Margaret	ALP	New South Wales	1987 and 1990–2002
Dunn , Patricia Irene (Irina)	NDP; IND	New South Wales	1988; 1988–90
Bourne , Vicki Worrall	AD	New South Wales	1990–2002
Kernot , Cheryl*	AD	Queensland	1990–97

* Member of the House of Representatives after resigning from the Senate

Lees, Meg Heather	AD; APA	South Australia	from 1990
Sowada, Karin Nicole	AD	New South Wales	1991–93
Chamarette, Christabel Marguerite Alain	GWA	Western Australia	1992–96
Margetts, Diane Elizabeth (Dee)	GWA	Western Australia	1993–99
Troeth, the Hon. Judith Mary	LP	Victoria	from 1993
Denman, Kay Janet	ALP	Tasmania	from 1993
Neal, Belinda Jane	ALP	New South Wales	1994–98
Collins, Jacinta Mary Ann	ALP	Victoria	from 1995
Stott-Despoja, Natasha	AD	South Australia	from 1995
Mackay, Sue	ALP	Tasmania	from 1996
Lundy, Kate	ALP	Australian Capital Territory	from 1996
Allison, Lyn	AD	Victoria	from 1996
Coonan, the Hon. Helen	LP	New South Wales	from 1996
Ferris, Jeannie	LP	South Australia	from 1996
Gibbs, Brenda	ALP	Queensland	1996–2002
Payne, Marise	LP	New South Wales	from 1997
Synon, Karen	LP	Victoria	1997–99
Crossin, Trish	ALP	Northern Territory	from 1998
McLucas, Jan Elizabeth	ALP	Queensland	from 1999
Kirk, Linda	ALP	South Australia	from 2002
Moore, Claire	ALP	Queensland	from 2002
Nettle, Kerry	AG	New South Wales	from 2002
Stephens, Ursula	CL	New South Wales	from 2002
Webber, Ruth	ALP	Western Australia	from 2002
Wong, Penny	ALP	South Australia	from 2002

AD—Australian Democrats
AG—Australian Greens
ALP—Australian Labor Party
APA—Australian Progressive Alliance
CL—Country Labor
CP—Country Party
GWA—The Greens (WA)
IND—Independent
IND LAB—Independent Labor
LP—Liberal Party of Australia
NCP—National Country Party
NDP—Nuclear Disarmament Party
NPA—National Party of Australia.