

The more things change: Women, politics and the press in Australia

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Abstract

Female politicians have long complained that the media treat them differently from their male colleagues. This paper analyses the press treatment of the first female MPs, members of cabinet and government leaders in the States, Territories and the Commonwealth. The original study began with Edith Cowan in 1921 and ended with Joan Kirner in 1990. However this paper will also include discussion of contemporary female politicians who have more recently received coverage as the Other.

Female politicians have long complained that the media treat them differently from their male colleagues. Henderson (1999) argues that female politicians are routinely described according to their dress and appearance, while the media also concentrate heavily on the housewife/mother aspects of their lives. At the same time, Haines (1992) argues that female politicians are expected to behave better than their male colleagues, and when those high expectations are not met, the condemnation is all the greater. However it must be added that this softer, more caring image has been encouraged by some female politicians as a means of making themselves more attractive to the electorate (Lake, 1994).

This difference in coverage is not just an issue in Australia. In Britain, female politicians have had to deal with headlines including "New Labour, New Crumpet" (McDougall 1998: 80), while in the United States, Braden (1996) argues that concentration on the women's appearance and relationships can diminish their stature.

The growing number of complaints by female politicians in Australia prompted this author to conduct an analysis of the press treatment of the first female MPs, members of cabinet and government leaders in the States, Territories and the Commonwealth. The original study began with Edith Cowan in 1921 and ended with Joan Kirner in 1990. However this paper will also include discussion of female politicians who have more recently received coverage as the Other, including Labor's Cheryl Kernot and the Democrats' Meg Lees and Natasha Stott-Despoja.

To investigate the treatment of the "first women" politicians as Other, a quantitative analysis was carried out where possible on the "pen pix" (i.e. brief biographical articles) dealing with the female politicians and their male colleagues, to determine whether the women were described in a different way from the men. Attention was particularly paid to the question of the "public" versus "private" roles of all the politicians studied, to determine whether any emphasis on a particular role was related to gender. If the media were indeed determined to keep women in their traditional spheres of home and family, it would be expected that their private roles would receive more coverage, while the men, who for decades were the norm in politics would receive more coverage of their public spheres. It was necessary to keep the quantitative comparisons to the "pen pix", as feature articles dealing with the female politicians were quite common, while those dealing with the men were virtually non-existent. There were cases where quantitative analysis was not possible, as no "pen pix" were provided, therefore giving no basis for comparison between the women and the men. In those cases, feature articles dealing with the female politicians were studied qualitatively. The form of those studies will be discussed shortly.

The categories used in the Norm vs Other quantitative section of the study were selected to fall into the major categories of Public and Private. Categories defined as Public were those that described activities carried out outside the spheres of home and family, while categories defined as Private indicated activities that dealt with the individual's life within the home and family, either at the present time or in the past. The Public categories used were: Education, Work/Profession, Community (work or activities), Politics, Military service and Sport. The definitions for the categories are thus:

Education: Place where the person went to school, university or college; degrees or educational qualifications held by the person; mention of geographical area where the person was educated.

Work/Profession: Paid employment within a job, profession or business; activities related to the above.

Community: Unpaid work carried out for the good of the community, e.g. charitable work, working for improvements in community facilities, membership of organisations such as the Lions Club, etc.

Politics: Involvement or activity within the Trade Union movement, any political party/lobby group (e.g. the Women's Electoral Lobby), and local, state or federal politics/Government. Terms such as "the new Member for" a particular seat or "the new Minister" were excluded.

Sport: Involvement in sporting activities of any type. This has been included as a "public" category because the few mentions made of sport in the "pen pix" dealt with men who were known for their prowess within particular sporting organisations; i.e. they were involved in public sporting activities, rather than private back-yard activities.

Military: Service within the armed forces either in peace or at war, as well as mention of present/former rank or military honours. This does not include civilian work within the military bureaucracy.

The Private categories used were Spouse, Children, Relatives, Physical appearance, Dress, Personality, Age and Background. The definitions for the categories are thus:

Spouse: Mention of the person's wife/husband, de facto or life partner; mention of the person's marital status; any details of the spouse's activities.

Children: Mention of the fact that the person does or does not have children, including giving number of children; any additional information about the children's activities.

Relatives: Includes relatives other than spouse or children, e.g. parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews etc, and relatives by marriage.

Physical appearance: Description of the person's facial appearance, body shape, height, sound of voice etc.

Dress: Description of what the person was or would be wearing.

Personality: Mention of the person's personality traits, e.g. vivacious, friendly, outgoing, etc.

Age: Mention of the person's age at the time of the article or at other times in their careers; mention of year or date of birth; description of the person as young, elderly etc.

Background: Mention of the person's early life/place of birth; where they grew up; where they lived previously or are currently living as a private citizen; description of the person's travels as a private citizen.

The “pen pix” appeared in the newspapers during coverage directly after the election outcome or the announcement of the new cabinet. The count was carried out in a Yes/No format – if a category was included in an item, it scored 1, regardless of how many times it occurred (eg if a story described a person as elderly *and* gave their age, the score for Age was 1, not 2. If a category did not appear in an item, no figure was placed in the table. The Dress, Personality and Physical categories were included because, female politicians have complained about the media’s concentration on those aspects of themselves. They can be argued to be Private categories, because the way one looks, acts and dresses should not necessarily affect how successful or effective one is in the public sphere. Despite this, women who have worked their way into the public sphere have received coverage of their appearance and personality. This study gave the opportunity to empirically test those complaints, and compare the women’s treatment with that of the men.

Feature articles were also examined qualitatively to determine whether the newspapers gave one sphere (ie private or public) prominence over the other, and indeed whether the women’s traditional roles were given prominence over their non-traditional ones.

Findings

As many women in politics have complained in the past, quantitative analysis of the available “pen pix” revealed the media’s tendency to concentrate more on the men’s public lives, and the women’s private ones — showing particular interest in the women’s family lives.

An analysis of treatment of the male and female politicians from 1921 to 1984 (when “pen pix” or other forms of comparison were available) reveals that public categories scored 53.8% for the women, and 68% for the men (Table 1). This supports the argument that, overall, the press tended to use public information about the men more readily than about the women. At the same time, the reverse occurred with the private category coverage, which scored 46.2% for

the women, and 32% for the men. It must also be noted that Millicent Preston Stanley and Dorothy Tangney were not married and did not have children — the area of private coverage that seemed to interest the media most in the case of the women. Their higher public category scores appear to have inflated the overall public category scores for all of the women in the “pen pix”. However in the feature articles about the child free Tangney, the press mentioned the telegrams of congratulations from 100 West Australian school children, along with a request for a fruitcake from a nephew in the RAAF. It appears that in this case, the press did its best to keep alive the more traditional view of this particular woman. In the case of the married women, it was invariably mentioned that they were married, and in some instances the husband was not only named, but his occupation was also given. Indeed in the cases of Irene Longman and Yvonne Chapman, the husbands were interviewed, with the paper feeling the need to give the background to Mr Chapman’s political beliefs.

**Table 1: Private and public coverage
of all men and all women compared.**

Coverage	All Women <i>n</i> =65 %	All Men <i>n</i> =589 %
Public	53.8	68
Private	46.2	32

Of the men who received coverage of their family lives, the score was in some cases affected by the category of Relatives, which included mention of public figures related to the men concerned (Table 2). In one rare case where it was mentioned that one of the men was married, it was because his wife was the daughter of a former Treasurer, and the woman’s name was not provided. There was also one case in 1960 where it was noted that a new Northern Territory MP was the father of eight children, but it appears that this was more an appreciation of his virility than an interest in his private life. Indeed the woman who presumably mothered his brood was not mentioned. This imbalance between male and female coverage supports the argument of Foreit et al (1980: 479-480) that

“... one conclusion is inescapable. Personal appearance, age, marital status, spouse and children are more important to newspaper reporters when describing women than when describing men.”

Table 2: Description of all women and all men compared.

	All Women <i>n</i> =65 %	All Men <i>n</i> =589 %
Spouse	15.4	2
Children	6.1	2
Relatives		2.7
Physical	3.1	1
Dress		
Personality	4.6	2.5
Age	9.2	12.7
Background	7.7	9.3
Education	4.6	5.6
Work/Prof	15.4	21.7
Community	6.1	3.6
Politics	27.7	25
Military		10.2
Sport		1.7

The case of Janice Crosio in New South Wales is an example of how the press has acted to ensure the traditional view of woman is reinforced. Her home newspaper the *Sydney Morning Herald* concentrated heavily on her private life, including the information that she had married at the age of 18, and giving very little information about her professional or political life. This is despite the fact that she was a former Mayor who had also been touted as a possible future Premier. This has been described by other scholars as dequalification: “This process consists of undermining or underestimating a woman leader’s capabilities and experiences, and seeing the appropriate qualification for the job in terms of the (masculine) characteristics of the past officeholders” (Norris, 1997: 162).

Examination of the coverage of the female and male politicians over the length of the study period reveals that there was no real trend toward change in the way the press described either side. Men received majority public coverage in all but two of the years covered by the study (Table 3). In 1959, when Steele and

Cooper were elected to South Australia's Parliament, the men received majority private coverage, while in 1980, when Gillian James was appointed to Tasmania's Cabinet, her male colleague received an even 50/50 split in private and public coverage.

Of the women, six of the eleven cases received majority public coverage, but it must be added that of those, Preston Stanley and Tangney were not married and had no children, leaving the press no choice but to concentrate on their public lives. Four of the women received majority private coverage, including Crosio as late as 1984. Lyons received a 50/50 split of private and public coverage when she was appointed to Cabinet in 1949.

Another area where the "Otherness" of women was stressed was in the media's concentration on their appearance and dress. Of the 24 women covered by the Cowan to Kirner study, mention of dress or appearance in "pen pix" and feature articles was made in 11 cases, while of all the men who were studied, only two received coverage of their dress. Millicent Preston Stanley in 1925 was the first to have her dress detailed by *The Bulletin*, which described a Feminist Club function in her honour. The columnist wrote: "That intrepid lady, snug in the woolly coat and Napoleonic headgear that have clothed her march to political victory, almost dropped a tear when the whole big assembly room sprang at her with a rousing 'She's a Jolly Good Fellow.'" The item continued: "Dashing suspicious moisture from an otherwise dazzling eye, Miss Stanley gave evidence of her determination to stand shoulder to shoulder with mere man, for her hanky was of the practical sheer-linen variety, and none of your flimsy chiffoniers that you tuck in your ring or up your glove" (June 11, 1925. p.29). In this case, the description of Preston Stanley's dress gives the impression that she was possibly not a "real" woman at all, but displayed some masculine tendencies.

In some of the other cases, the newspapers concerned themselves with what the new female MPs or Ministers would wear to their swearing-in, including the vexed question of whether a hat was appropriate in the Chamber. In the case

of Lady Millie Peacock in Victoria, the *Age* gave the hat issue due consideration: “That of course is optional. The same question appears to have been asked when Lady Apsley entered the House of Commons. Lady Apsley wore a small hat. Coming nearer home, however, Miss May Holman, West Australia’s woman member, does not wear a hat in the House” (November 14, 1933. p.9).

When Dame Enid Lyons became the first woman member of Federal Cabinet in 1949, the concentration on her dress was marked: "The Dame is not only up to the minute in politics; she is right on the tick with regard to fashion. In the first photographs to hand of her as vice president of the Executive Council she is wearing with her smart lightweight suit a string of pearls, and strain of elections and all, she wears the pearls knotted in quite the latest style” (*The Bulletin*, December 28, 1949. p.19). Indeed Dame Enid’s fashionable wear was not entirely what it seemed -- she wore knotted pearls and scarves to hide the scars from the goitre surgery she had undergone before the election (Lyons, 1972).

This concentration on fashion for its own sake contrasts with the treatment of Sir Robert Menzies, who was pictured wearing his Menzies tartan tie after he had been elected Prime Minister in the same poll in 1949. He was quoted as saying that he always wore the tie for matters of great moment, giving the clear message that this was not simply fashion or appearance, but what would later become known as “power dressing”. This is a different treatment to that of the women, whose dress was mainly described simply for its own sake.

Table 3: Private and public coverage of all men and all women throughout the period studied.

	Private Coverage %	Public Coverage %
Edith Cowan (WA) 1921	33.3	66.7
All men, 1921	23.1	76.9
Millicent Preston Stanley (NSW) 1925	0	100
All men, 1925	23.1	76.9
Irene Longman (QLD) 1929	60	40
All men, 1929	48.8	51.2

Dame Enid Lyons & Senator Dorothy Tangney (Federal) 1943	33.3	66.7
All men, 1943	30.5	69.5
Florence Cardell-Oliver (WA) 1947	33.3	66.7
All men, 1947	35	65
Dame Enid Lyons, 1949*	50	50
All men, 1949	21.4	78.6
Joyce Steele & Jessie Cooper (SA) 1959	63.6	36.4
All men, 1959	52.5	47.5
Lyn Berlowitz (NT) 1960	66.7	33.3
All men, 1960	33.3	66.7
Joyce Steele (SA) 1968*	0	100
All men, 1968	46.2	53.8
Gillian James (TAS) 1980	0	100
All men, 1980	50	50
Janice Crosio (NSW) 1984	75	25
All men, 1984	37.5	62.5

*Indicates appointment to Cabinet after previously being elected to Parliament

The other man who received coverage of his appearance was Victoria's Steve Crabb, who unsuccessfully contested the Premier's position against Joan Kirner. This was the only case where a man's appearance or clothing were at first glance discussed purely for their own sake, with the press describing what would now be termed a "makeover": he was ordered by his wife and secretary to get a haircut, and it was also pointed out that he had begun buying more stylish suits. However it could also be argued that his appearance was not mentioned for its own sake: rather, it was more the idea that Crabb was undergoing what is now known as an "image makeover" as a means of winning the top job. Crabb was also described as a "riverboat gambler", but this description is of more dashing and glamorous nature than the "Mother Russia" or "Miss Piggy" terms used for Kirner.

Clothing was not the only area where the women were treated differently from their male colleagues. Many of the women studied had mention made of their physical appearance, with the references becoming less polite as the century wore on. While Preston Stanley's "dark, lustrous hair" was mentioned in 1925 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, August 27, 1925. p.8), Lyn Berlowitz was described

by her home newspaper in 1960 as being short, with the seat in the Chamber leaving her feet dangling about six inches from the floor (*Northern Territory News*, February 26, 1960. p.3). Papers outside the Northern Territory referred to her as “the plump, friendly little wife of the Territory's pest exterminator” (*Courier-Mail*, February 23, 1960, p.10; *The Mercury*, February 23, 1960. p.5). However the woman who fared worst when it came to treatment of personal appearance was Joan Kirner in 1990: “Miss Piggy for Premier” was one of the headlines that greeted her elevation (*Truth*, August 9, 1990. p.1), while another newspaper described her as “schoolmarmish” (*The Australian*, August 10, 1990. p.4). This tendency followed the findings of Foreit et al (1980) that the media tend to concentrate more heavily on the physical appearance of female politicians. Papers around Australia made mention of Kirner’s weight and general appearance, although it must be added that in many cases, those references were part of articles dealing with Kirner’s treatment by other politicians and the media. By this stage in our history it appears that while this pioneering woman’s appearance was being mercilessly ridiculed, at least it was not happening without some comment or criticism.

Not all mention of clothing or appearance took on a negative vein. At Yvonne Chapman’s swearing-in as Queensland’s first female Minister in 1986, the press commented on the contrast between her brightly coloured outfit and the suits worn by her male colleagues. However even though it was a positive image, it still showed the media’s desire to find new ways to describe the female politician as anything other than what she was — a politician.

However there were also two cases where the view of the male vs female politician was portrayed as an Us vs Them scenario, i.e. the victory for the woman was also perceived as a loss for the man. Edith Cowan received this treatment when she defeated the man who had been one of the leading proponents of women’s right to stand for parliament. He was described as the “first victim of women’s representation”, giving the impression that Cowan’s victory over him was almost a form of treachery. The use of the term “first victim” also implied

that he would not be the last if this non-traditional behaviour by women continued. Another man who was portrayed as a “victim” of a woman’s success was Peter Dowding, who was depicted in a cartoon lying in a pool of blood marked “WA Inc”, while Carmen Lawrence stepped on his body to reach the Premier’s office. Two men were shown standing nearby and commenting that in the past it was just enough to place their coats on the ground for women to walk on (*The Australian*, February 13, 1990. p.12). As we near the new millennium, the idea of a powerful woman making the man a victim has, according to some critics, grown more vitriolic, as can be evidenced by the media’s treatment of U.S. First Lady, Hillary Clinton: ““In the guise of insider political commentary, what you get is a kind of 50s sitcom: the lovable bumbling husband, Dagwood Clinton, who takes naps and rummages for snacks, and his competent wife, Blondie Rodham, who’s making all the important decisions and the poor schnook doesn’t even notice...That’s the oldest stereotype, that if a woman has power, it has to be at the expense of a man”” (Braden, 1996: 146). It is therefore ironic that Ms Clinton later won media and public sympathy through playing, albeit unwillingly, a more traditional female role – that of the betrayed wife. Some media commentators have maintained that her image has been softened by the dignified way in which she has behaved during the Monica Lewinsky saga (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January 30, 1999. p.37).

Traditional vs Non-Traditional Coverage

The previously mentioned treatment of Janice Crosio in New South Wales is only one example of the media’s apparent determination to reinforce the traditional view of woman as wife and home maker, and man as the worker and holder of power. This traditional view often included stereotypical descriptions of the women, including Millicent Preston Stanley during her maiden speech. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a 15 paragraph story on the event, full of high praise for the new MP, but also including some references about her personal appearance and feminine attributes: “Quietly, but smartly dressed, and without a hat, thus incidentally revealing a wealth of dark, lustrous hair, Miss Preston

Stanley ... made one of the most rousing and most arresting speeches in the history of the New South Wales Legislature.” Further down the article was the comment: “A new stiletto had been flung into the Labour camp. It was ripping open and laying bare the policy of Labour. It was a woman’s tongue. Labour ... squirmed under the lash of it” (August 27, 1925. p.8). This quote clearly played on the stereotype of the fear of the angry woman’s tongue. It is difficult to believe that no male MP had ever criticised those on the opposite side of that Chamber before.

Queensland's Irene Longman was placed in her domestic surroundings during an interview: “To meet her in her drawing-room one would never associate the slender quiet woman with a turbulent political meeting.” (May 13, 1929. p.11). Longman herself appeared anxious to make it clear that it was the support of men as well as women that helped her into office, and that in turn she would represent both men and women while she was in Parliament. The interviewer then introduced then asked Longman’s husband, “... who was serenely smoking while his wife was plied with questions ...”, what he thought of the whole thing. He replied: “When my wife was first endorsed as a candidate ... I felt a strong desire to go out West and hunt for fossils, but that feeling soon changed, and I have really enjoyed the campaign” (May 13, 1929. p.17).

Later in the century, reporters asked South Australia's political pioneers Joyce Steele and Jessie Cooper how they would combine their domestic duties with politics: Steele said that she would have to get a housekeeper to help with the housework, while Cooper replied that “... she would fit in her housework in the same way as a male member fitted in the running of an orchard or an accountant’s office” (March 9, 1959. p.1).

Indeed, even though there were 70 years between their achievements, Edith Cowan and Carmen Lawrence were both depicted in cartoons as apron-wearing char ladies cleaning out the corridors of power they were about to enter. In *The Bulletin* of March 31, 1921, Cowan featured in a page of cartoons showing

herscrubbing the clerk's table and saying "Bless my soul, whatever did you do before securing a decent house-keeper?" (p.13). There were other cartoons featuring her with a mop and bucket, a broom, and a washtub and board, — all in front of bemused male MPs in the Chamber. The caption at the bottom of the page read: "THE NEW 'HOUSE' WIFE" (p.13). Almost 70 years later, Carmen Lawrence would be depicted as a charwoman wearing an apron, sweeping a full garbage can labelled "WA Inc" out of the Premier's office, while saying just one word – "Men!" (*The Courier-Mail*, February 13, 1990. p.8).

Perhaps Cowan knew what to expect when she became the first female MP in Australia, as Jeanette Rankin received similar treatment when she was the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress five years previously, in 1916: "Her actions were sensationalised; she was made out to be a symbol of every woman. Many reporters seemed intent on assuring their readers that in spite of her election to the male bastion of Congress, she was skilled in the womanly arts" (Braden, 1996: 20). However it seems that this expectation has lasted long past the days of Cowan and Rankin.

However the coverage of women did evolve over the 70 years of this study, and continues to evolve. While the media still tend to concentrate on their physical appearance, dress and family lives (the wide coverage of the Australian Democrats' Natasha Stott-Despoja wearing Doc Martens for her first day in the Senate is just one example – *The Bulletin*, January 23/30, 1996), a new trend is appearing in the treatment of women. Over the years female politicians have been termed just that – female politicians – making it clear that they are a group distinct from their male colleagues. In some cases the tag "female politician" has carried with it the expectation that they behave better than the rough-house men, civilising the chambers in which they serve, and never stooping to the backstabbing, lying tactics of their male colleagues. However there have been incidents in recent years where two female politicians have been perceived to have "let down" that saintly image: In November 1995, Carmen Lawrence, at that time Federal Health Minister, was accused of giving false evidence to a Royal

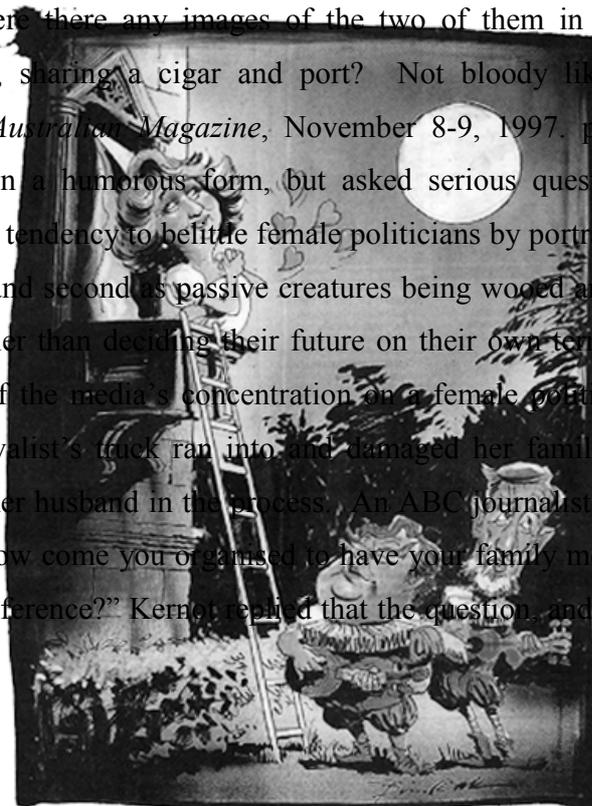
Commission; and in October 1997, Senator Cheryl Kernot, the widely popular leader of the Australian Democrats, announced her decision to quit her party and run for a House of Representatives seat as a member of the ALP.

In both cases, the media did what women in politics have longed for over the years, but for the entirely wrong reason. Both Lawrence and Kernot had been judged, found wanting, and declared to be just another politician, as if by their behaviour they had fallen from their idealised position to land among the grubby, backstabbing world of political men (which is also an unfair generalisation under which male politicians labour). Therefore in future while we may see more of the "Us vs Them" scenario, there will also be the dichotomy "women politicians" (with all of the idealised baggage that they carry), vs politicians (with all of the cynicism which that title now attracts). This argument is supported by Haines (1992), who argues that female politicians are seen as more honest and trustworthy, and less ruthless than their male counterparts. However it must also be stated that this image has been propagated by female politicians themselves as a means of making themselves attractive to the electorate (Lake, 1994).

Another reason that the situation of women politicians may now be evolving is that women are generally becoming more accepted (at least by the media) in the corridors of power. Before Lawrence's fall from grace, she was being widely touted by the media as Prime Minister material. Indeed, newspapers referred to her as the "fairy godmother" (*Weekend Australian*, March 12-13, 1994. p.21), and the "big gun from the West" (*Australian*, February 1, 1994. p.7), who'd come to save what appeared to be an embattled federal government. However she also had a female rival for the first woman Prime Minister stakes in Bronwyn Bishop, a Liberal Senator who moved into the House of Representatives within a fortnight of Lawrence's switch from WA state politics in March 1994. Indeed, one newspaper article portrayed them as "slugging it out" in federal parliament, complete with cartoons of them in boxing gloves (*Sunday Telegraph*, February 6, 1994. pp14-15). Bishop was portrayed as a strong leader, something that was perceived to be lacking in the Liberals' then federal leader, John

Hewson. However the two women were also portrayed as two obvious, and opposing, female archetypes: Lawrence as the caring, sensitive, “womanly” leader, and Bishop as the “ball breaker”, aggressive and tough. This supports the argument by Norris (1997) regarding the media’s use of gendered frames which reinforce sex stereotypes.

More recently, the media also touted Cheryl Kernot as a possible future Prime Minister, taking over Lawrence’s high-profile role within the ALP. Within hours of her announcement of a change of parties, the speculation had begun that not only was she a suitable candidate for ALP leadership, but that she was also actively seeking it. However the cartoons around the time of her defection followed the “seduction” line, showing her in bed with Labor leaders Kim Beazley and Gareth Evans (*Weekend Australian*, October 18-19, 1997. p.2), or as the Juliet on the balcony being serenaded by the same two men (*Australian*, October 16, 1997. p.3). This treatment led commentator Kaz Cooke to ask: “When the Prime Minister was promising Methuselah (Tasmanian Senator Brian) Harradine a chicken in every Tasmanian pot and an end to contraception for anybody over the age of nought ... to get him to vote for flogging off Telstra, did editorialists have Howard wearing leather chaps in a gay bar chatting up the snowy-haired Senator in a sleeveless T-shirt and hiking boots? And when the deal was done, were there any images of the two of them in the cot after a vigorous shagging, sharing a cigar and port? Not bloody likely. That’d be offensive” (*The Australian Magazine*, November 8-9, 1997. p.73). Cooke’s commentary was in a humorous form, but asked serious questions about the media’s continuing tendency to belittle female politicians by portraying them first as sexual objects, and second as passive creatures being wooed and won over by powerful men, rather than deciding their future on their own terms. Kernot also became a victim of the media’s concentration on a female politician’s personal life, when a removalist’s truck ran into and damaged her family’s new house, narrowly missing her husband in the process. An ABC journalist asked a clearly shaken Kernot: “How come you organised to have your family moved during the (ALP) national conference?” Kernot replied that the question, and the journalist’s



treatment of her, was “disgraceful”, and later defended her response by commenting on the difficulties of combining family life with a political career (*The Australian*, January 21, 1998. p.4). Her reaction was immediately labelled a “dummy spit”, and led to commentator Peter Charlton’s claim that there were doubts about her “electoral bottle” (*Courier-Mail*, January 21, 1998. p.4) for the tough federal election campaign that was expected to occur sometime in 1998 (and which was indeed held on October 3 that year). The controversy over Kernot’s reaction to the reporter’s question overshadowed the issue of whether such a question was appropriate in the first place, i.e. whether Kernot should have come under scrutiny for not being at her home for the family’s move, when her husband was no doubt more than capable of overseeing the operation. The journalist was clearly implying that the place for this particular politician was not among the powerful at the ALP conference, but where a woman should be – at home – reinforcing Tuchman’s (1978) argument that the media have attempted to banish women to hearth and home.

The following day’s issue carried a rebuff to Charlton’s comments. Elaine Darling, a former Labor member of federal parliament, wrote: “When the threat is to male political supremacy...the gender game starts, diminishing the credibility of women by portraying them as over-sensitive creatures ruled by emotion rather than reason...This argument, the flip side of which is the alleged cognitive superiority of males, reaches its heights in the oft-repeated wisdom: ‘If you can’t stand the heat, keep out of the kitchen’...Kernot’s real sin is that she has publicly criticised an interpretation of ‘the rough old game of politics’ which, while it affects both sexes, evolved from a male political culture” (*Courier-Mail*, January 22, 1998. p.11).

Another area in which the treatment of Kernot has followed the pattern of previous female politicians is that of concentration on her private life. Less than a month before the truck incident, *The Sun-Herald* broke the story of a relationship she had with a former student, Tony Sinclair, after the lad finished school in 1975. The story broke on the day that Kernot was to be formally endorsed as a Labor

candidate for the federal seat of Dickson, and Kernot herself later commented that the story had been put up by her political enemies (December 14, 1997. pp1,3). Apart from raising the question of the relevance of a relationship that occurred more than two decades previously, the furore also raised the serious issue of the privacy of the man concerned. This man had since married and produced a family, and Kernot pointed out that he had been greatly embarrassed by the controversy: "Tony has a wonderful wife and child, and they were subjected to a terrible ordeal, all because of someone else's political agenda... I am unwilling to accept that it should be part of public life" (*Australian Women's Weekly*, April 1998. p.4). Kernot also pointed out that her own family had been distressed by the story. However in this case, media commentators did at least question the relevance of the story, with Terry Sweetman asking: "The affair between a married woman and a much younger man probably wouldn't go over too well with some of the blue noses in society but what has it got to do with Kernot's qualifications to be a member of parliament?" He also commented: "But if the gossip-millers are so assiduous, you might wonder why the same truth-tellers aren't quite so active when it came to exposing the activities of some of the real sleazebags of politics over the years" (*Courier-Mail*, December 16, 1997. p.17).

Journalists need to ask themselves if it is necessary to mention a woman's family or private life rather than her political/professional qualifications and policies. This argument has already been made in the United States, with a call for journalists to portray women as they would the men (Powers et al, 1996).

As mentioned previously, concentration on the private lives of politicians, male and female, does not just affect the politician concerned, but the family and friends who believe that since they themselves are not seeking public office, they should not have to come under public scrutiny. Therefore wider privacy issues are raised when the private lives of politicians are discussed. Journalists should also consider Kaz Cooke's comments mentioned earlier in this paper – that if portraying a man in a particular way is considered offensive, then chances are that similar treatment for a woman is also offensive. Journalists need to be trained

and encouraged to think beyond the double standard, and portray both male and female politicians as people who work in the world of politics.

It could also be argued that female politicians themselves could do more to improve their treatment by the media, by conducting themselves and their campaigns with the aim of wiping out stereotypes. For example, only weeks after Kernot attacked the media's treatment of her relationship with the former student, and only days after federal MP Don Randall was castigated for describing her in Parliament as having the "morals of an alley cat on heat" (*The Weekend Australian*, March 14-15, 1998. p.1), Kernot posed for a *Women's Weekly* photo shoot dressed literally as a "scarlet woman", in a long red dress and red feather boa (April 1998, pp 2-5). Other papers also picked up the picture (e.g. *The Sunday Mail*, March 22, 1998. pp1,6). While this may be seen as an ironic comment on her treatment, it could also be seen as pandering to the image that some politicians and the media have been trying to attribute to her. In sporting parlance, it could be termed a classic "own goal". Kernot also allowed her disappointment to get the better of her on the night of the 1998 federal election, when it appeared that she would lose the vote for the seat of Dickson. She complained on live television that the Labor party should have found a safer seat for her. After days of waiting, Kernot was declared the winner – but in the meantime she was forced to apologise to the electorate for her outburst (*The Courier-Mail*, October 19, 1998. p.13).

Randall's comment mentioned earlier also caused the appearance of another media double standard. Apart from the "alley cat on heat" statement, he implied that Kernot and then Federal deputy opposition leader Gareth Evans had been having an affair (*The Weekend Australian*, March 14-15, 1998. p.1). While commentators were quick to jump to Kernot's defence and denounce Randall's treatment of her, much less was said of the hurt and embarrassment that must have been caused to Evans and his family. It could be argued that the media are still of the old-fashioned view that the woman still needs to be protected, while

the man can look after himself. Therefore journalists also need to be wary of stereotypes when dealing with male politicians.

At first glance Pauline Hanson's case could be argued as one where the media concentrate more on the person's views than the woman herself. However while most of the concentration has been on the controversy generated by Hanson's policies, every now and again the media have not been able to resist the temptation to mention her physical attributes – "Forget policy, I've got great legs" was one headline during the 1998 federal election campaign (*Daily Telegraph*, September 15, 1998. pp1,4). Hanson failed to win her seat in the October 3 poll, but still appears in the media from time to time, including a feature showing her modelling clothes, and receiving critiques from modelling agencies (*Sunday Mail*, January 31, 1999. pp28-29). And of course, Hanson herself made it clear during the Queensland State election campaign in early 2001 that she planned to launch her own fashion label, prompting a rush of full-length photographs in the papers.

Female politicians are also beginning to use gender issues as a means of attacking other female politicians. When Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja decided to run for the leadership of the party in early 2001, a supporter of leadership incumbent Meg Lees attempted to downplay Stott Despoja's political experience and policy background by claiming that the leadership battle was all about appearances. South Australian Democrats leader Sandra Kanck told the ABC that "Women over 50, we are basically told that we ought to, I guess, don a habit and go and hide in our homes. There is a resentment from society that we give way to gravity, that our breasts are no longer pert. Our mouths drop and we get crow's feet around our eyes ... I don't know many women who succeed in getting prettier as they get older." Kanck also told the *Advertiser* that ageing male Democrats "feeding sexual fantasies" were a factor in the leadership challenge (*The Bulletin*, April 3, 2001. pp 24-27). While Kanck's views were partly an attack on media coverage of Lees, they were also partly an attack on Stott Despoja, who pointed out that her relative youth had often been used as a political weapon against her.

As we begin a new millennium, it can be argued that women are still not being treated simply as politicians by the media. By that I do not mean the cynical perception of lying, back-stabbing, power-hungry people, but people who run for office and serve their nation or state in positions of power. Women politicians are still being described by their physical appearance and relationships, which it has been argued can diminish their stature as politicians. (Braden, 1996). They are also still being portrayed as people who have to work harder than their male counterparts to succeed. Now at least, the media appear to be more comfortable about the idea of women as political leaders, and appear to be more willing to consider their policies alongside their hairdos or family lives. However it appears that we still have some way to go before the idea of a female politician is no longer a novelty, and all politicians, male and female, are simply called politicians, whose policies and performance, and not their looks or private lives, rightly come under media scrutiny.

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