



## **Gender goes missing from NSW politics**

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One clear expectation following the removal of the Taliban from government in Afghanistan was that democracy would involve universal participation in politics.<sup>1</sup> Hence the requirement in the 2004 Afghan Constitution that a minimum number of women be elected to the national assembly and the subsequent introduction of reserved seats. Among the various institutional manifestations of democracy, the rights to political equality and to representation remain essential principles.

In Australia, where women were enfranchised and entitled to run as election candidates comparatively early, the more recent focus has also been on the presence of women in legislative chambers. In the mid 1990s, there was an upsurge in interest in creating a more gender-balanced environment and women candidates were elected in unprecedented numbers at federal and state levels. However, the 2007 state election in New South Wales suggests that progress might have stagnated especially on one side of the two-party system.

In a campaign that polls consistently suggested would see Labor maintain its 55 seats in the 93 seat lower house, the Coalition picked up four seats: one from Labor, one notional gain after boundary changes and two from Independents. Labor lost three seats, while Independents lost two but gained another. In the new parliament, Labor has 52 seats, the Liberals 22, Nationals 13 and Independents hold six seats.

However, anyone interested in the progress towards gender equity (50:50 male: female MPs) will note discrepancies in the female returns. Labor has four new female MPs to replace three retirees. Verity Firth (Balmain), Lylea McMahon (Shellharbour), Sonia Hornery (Wallsend) and Jodi McKay (Newcastle) won seats for Labor. In a straight swap for a female retiree, the only new Coalition woman to be elected is Pru Goward (Goulburn). Of the 26 female MPs, 18 are Labor women, six Coalition (including 5 Liberals) and two are Independents.

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<sup>1</sup> **Tony Smith**'s PhD thesis examined gender in the NSW Parliament 1995-1999. He is the author of the chapter '1995' in *The People's Choice: Electoral Politics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century NSW*, edited by Michael Hogan and David Clune.

On these figures, it appears that Labor provides women with the most effective parliamentary opportunities. While both McKay and Goward were preselected in very tough seats, Labor's affirmative action policies have insisted on women being preselected in winnable seats. Clearly, while the Coalition parties endorsed female candidates in some other seats, in most their chances of winning were small. According to a message from Premier Iemma to 'Emily's List', the Labor organisation sponsoring women MPs, 36 of Labor's 93 candidates were female and these included 14 sitting members. Information about the Liberal Women's Forum approach to the election was not so easy to find but of the 20 seats identified by ABC psephologist Antony Green as 'key' Labor held seats, the Liberal Party endorsed female candidates in just three, although these three were in the third, fourth and seventh most winnable seats on the electoral pendulum.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1995 election campaign, Coalition Premier John Fahey sought to contrast his front bench with that being offered by Opposition Labor Leader Bob Carr. Citing the number of women in his Cabinet, Fahey attacked Labor's 'all male club of yesteryear'. Labor won that election and subsequent polls in 1999, 2003 and 2007. However, it can hardly be argued that Labor has won in spite of its attitude towards the promotion of women as candidates and ministers. Indeed, the proportion of women returned to the Legislative Assembly for Labor grew with Labor's majority in 1999 and 2003 and withstood the losses of 2007, while the numbers of Coalition female MPs have remained static.

Labor had nine female MLAs in 1995. This has doubled and the 18 women MPs now constitute over one third of the new lower house Caucus. There was one woman on the crossbenches in 1995 and there are now two. In 1995, there were five Coalition women and now there are six. This is just token level. As the following Table shows, the percentages of seats in the chamber and in the parties held by Coalition women rose only

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<sup>2</sup> ABC Elections NSW 2007, Antony Green's Election Guide, Key seats by Party and margin, <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/nsw/2007/guide/keysbyparty.htm>

because the chamber has fewer seats in 2007 and the Coalition holds only 35 seats rather than the 46 it held in 1995.

### **Female representation in the NSW Legislative Assembly, 1995 and 2007**

Women MLAs	1995			2007		
	Seats / 99	% seats	% party	Seats /93	% seats	% party
Labor	9	9.09	18.18	18	19.56	34.61
Coalition	5	5.05	10.86	6	6.45	17.10
Other	1	1.01	-	2	2.15	-
Total	15	15.15	-	26	27.95	-

Surveys over the years have identified a community expectation that a 50:50 sex balance in parliaments would be ideal. Unless circumstances have changed dramatically since I interviewed MPs of the Fifty-first Parliament (1995-1999), MPs generally also endorse such an ideal. Fifteen of the 17 female MPs I asked said that there should be ‘many more’ female MPs, and 11 of 17 males agreed. Five interviewees volunteered ‘50:50’. While there is no doubt that different electoral systems can facilitate or hinder movement towards this ideal, equality of electoral opportunity is currently in the hands of the political parties which together fill over 90 per cent of lower house seats.

The Coalition parties argue that they cannot endorse Labor’s quota system because they believe in promotion on merit. Certainly, one argument for the Labor approach has been that once a certain ‘critical mass’ is attained, the growth in women’s participation will be self-generating. Clearly, this has not worked perfectly. The minimum participation acceptable to Labor women may have become a focal point for men’s resistance. However, while Labor progress might seem glacial, Coalition progress is non-existent. The Liberal Party had an excellent opportunity to promote itself among women voters when Kerry Chikarovski was leader, but it failed to appreciate her merit. Chikarovski concluded her memoir with some sobering thoughts on overcoming barriers to equality:

'I hate to be a pessimist, but it will take a long time and a lot of work by younger women. We will get there though. I just hope I live long enough to see it'.<sup>3</sup>

Just whose gender analysis is correct remains a moot point. It might well be noted in hindsight however, that if it were to make serious progress at this election, the Coalition needed to exploit every Government mishap. The dismissal of Liberal Leader Peter Debnam certainly suggests that the party regards the 2007 campaign as a failure. In the previous year or so, several Labor MPs – male MPs - including frontbenchers created serious embarrassment for Premier Iemma. The Premier moved quickly against them. Of the MPs' greater and lesser crimes, more than one should have been subjected to serious gender analysis. Aboriginal Affairs Minister Milton Orkopolous was charged with sexual offences involving minors and Macquarie Fields MP Stephen Chaytor was suspended from the Party after being placed on a good behaviour bond after his girlfriend alleged he had assaulted her.<sup>4</sup> As the Coalition failed to identify any systemic or cultural problems, Premier Iemma appeared strong and the miscreants were dismissed as rotten apples. The Coalition's failure to maximise Labor's problems could be traced home to its ideological distaste for gender analysis, or to the shortage of women within its ranks.

During the campaign, the Opposition tried to target some unpopular ministers. The Treasurer said that he thought they were playing an implicit game of ethnic bashing because the ministers were named Costa, Tripodi and Sartor. Interestingly, at no stage did the Coalition argue that the government's alleged failure to listen to community concerns had a gender element. One strongly shared belief among MPs of the Fifty-first Parliament was that female colleagues were good listeners. Two thirds of interviewees (almost 90 per cent of females and just under half the males) agreed that women are better listeners. Men are regarded as being relatively less skilled in this area.

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<sup>3</sup> Kerry Chikarovski and Luis Garcia, *Chika*, Lothian, South Melbourne 2004, p.231.

<sup>4</sup> ABC Television Stateline NSW, 'Iemma's Dilemma', 10 November 2006, Transcript Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/nsw/content/2006/s1786780.htm>; ABC Elections NSW 2007, Antony Green's Election Guide, Electorates: Macquarie Fields, <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/nsw/2007/guide/macq.htm>

When statistics become available, it will be interesting to see how male and female voters supported Labor and the Coalition. Perhaps part of the Coalition's problems in winning government stem from a failure to understand the effect of being so male dominated. At the 1998 federal election, female Coalition MPs saved John Howard from defeat. Having won in larger numbers than expected because of the 1996 landslide, Coalition women retained key seats in outer suburbs by being effective local members. They withstood the anti-Coalition swings better than male colleagues, and yet the number of women in the Federal House of Representatives has not increased significantly from the 1996 level. As Marian Sawer has found, the fall is attributable directly to the 'Coalition's failure to put forward women candidates'.<sup>5</sup> The above Table suggests that the Coalition position in the Legislative Assembly would be even worse but for the female MPs holding their ground against severe losses for the Coalition generally.

The question remains. Why does the Coalition fail to promote women into the NSW Legislative Assembly? If it clings to its rhetoric about merit, then the inference is that the Liberal and National Parties do not attract female candidates of sufficient merit. And if that is the case, then this needs explaining. The alternative explanation is that women of merit within the parties are being thwarted in their attempts to contribute at the higher levels. While Labor's system has not been a spectacular success for women, it does appear to have been one factor in its election victories since 1995.

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<sup>5</sup> Marian Sawer, 'Paradise Postponed: Women and the House of Representatives', Democratic Audit of Australia, Discussion Paper 3/06, March 2006, p.2. Online: [http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/papers/20060306\\_sawer\\_women\\_parl.pdf](http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/papers/20060306_sawer_women_parl.pdf)