



Paradise postponed: women & the House of Representatives

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On 1 March the Treasurer, Peter Costello, announced in a National Press Club speech that Australia must look at how to improve opportunities for women and to create 'the most female-friendly environment in the world'. Interestingly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) had released figures the week before showing Australia had slid to its lowest-ever place in the league table of representation of women in national parliaments. The latest figures (27 February) show Australia to have dropped to 29th place internationally. The ranking is based on representation in the lower house of the national parliament.

In 2004 the number of women in the Australian House of Representatives fell for the first time since 1980. It had been gradually increasing with each election, peaking in 2001 at 25.3 per cent (it is now 24.7 per cent). Australia is a long way behind Nordic and Northern European countries and even close neighbour New Zealand. In the top 19 countries over a third of parliamentarians are women.

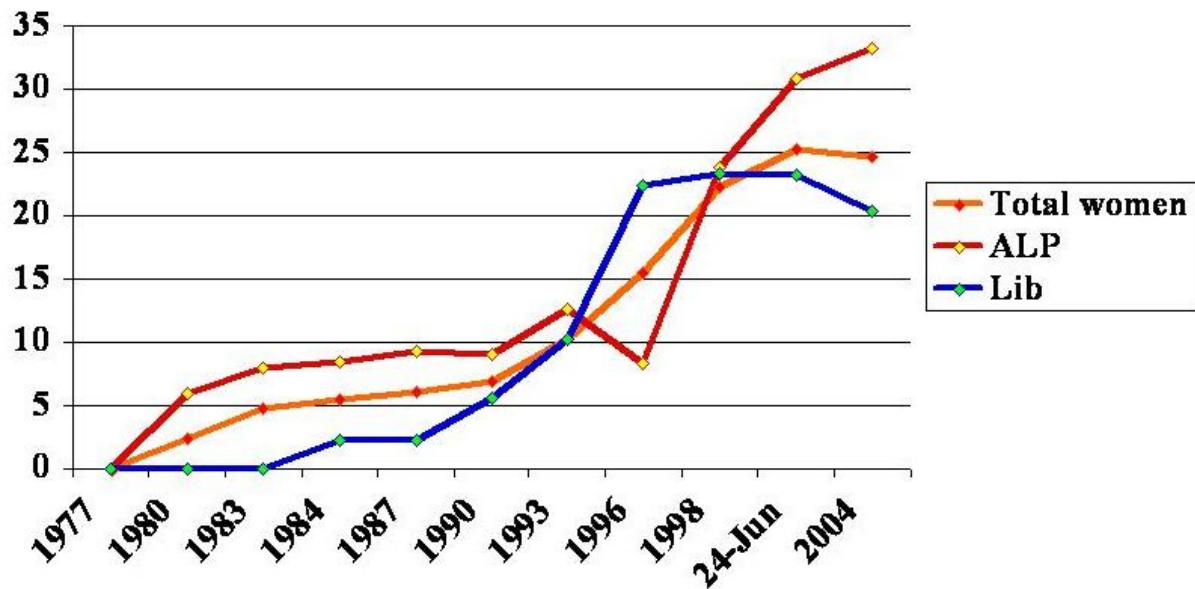
The fall in the number of women in the House of Representatives is basically due to the Coalition's failure to put forward women candidates. The number of women nominated by the Liberal Party for the House of Representatives has fallen at each election since 1996 (Table 1).

Table 1. Liberal and Labor Women Candidates, House of Representatives, 1996–2004

Election	Australian Labor Party	Liberal Party of Australia
1996	30	34
1998	51	31
2001	58	24
2004	46	23

Women constitute 20.3 per cent of Liberal MHRs, as compared with 33.3 per cent of Labor MHRs (Figure 1). There is a similar pattern around Australia. If we look at the number of women in all Australian parliaments in December 2005, women make up 36.8 per cent of Labor parliamentarians, but only 21.2 of Liberal parliamentarians. (See this [table](#) from the Parliamentary Library's Politics and Public Administration Group). The Nationals lag behind even further. The Greens have the highest proportion of women (53.3 per cent) but this is out of only 15 parliamentarians Australia-wide.

Figure 1. Women as percentage of Liberal and Labor House of Representatives members 1977-2004. Total line is for all parties and Independents.



Because Labor, with its higher proportion of women MPs, is currently in government in all States and Territories women's overall presence in Australian parliaments is higher than at the national level. The highest proportion of women is in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly (40 per cent). The Northern Territory is also interesting for having a woman Chief Minister and Leader of the Opposition and for having three Indigenous women MLAs in the Parliamentary Labor Party.

Australia is not unique in going backwards in relation to representation of women in its national parliament. The Conservative victory in Canada in January saw the first drop in the number of women in the Canadian House of Commons since the early 1970s. Canada ranks below Australia on the IPU table, with women comprising 20.8 per cent of MPs. This is despite now having a third woman Governor General. The current Governor General, the Rt Hon Michaëlle Jean, came to Canada as a refugee from Haiti and replaces Adrienne Clarkson, who came as a refugee from Hong Kong. Australia is yet to have a woman Governor General.

Another thing that has happened under the current federal government is a fall in the number of times women are actually referred to in parliamentary debate by government members. This trend is gradual over time, but is clear in the following figures despite their being incomplete (Table 2). So not only is there a fall in the presence of women in the House of Representatives but also a fall in some aspects of substantive representation.¹

Table 2. Mentions of woman or women 37th/38th (1993–98) parliaments and 39th/40th (1998– 2004) Parliaments

Party		AD	ALP	GRN	Lib/CL P	NP/Nat	Other	Total
Parliament	37/38							
	Senate	425	1127	115	1348	135	496	3646
	HofR	N/A	1664	N/A	1346	274	309	3593
	Total	425	2791	115	2694	409	805	7239
Parliament	39/40*							
	Senate	519	1665	163	1200	58	390	3995
	HofR	N/A	1698	17	1268	205	482	3670
	Total	519	3363	180	2468	263	872	7665

* The figures for the 40th Parliament are incomplete, ending 23 April 2004 when this survey was done.

If the Treasurer is serious about his desire to make Australia more female-friendly, one of the first areas of action might be Liberal Party preselection processes. In 1903 we were the first country in the world where women stood as candidates for the national parliament. 28 countries have now gone past us—it's time to recapture some of Australia's earlier reputation for promoting women's equality.

¹ For detailed analysis of different approaches to measuring the substantive representation of women in parliament see: Marian Sawer, Manon Tremblay and Linda Trimble (eds), *The Representation of Women in Parliament: A Comparative Approach*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, May 2006.