

**Are Women in leadership responding to women's  
interests?**

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**Janine Haines Annual Lecture**

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Senator Allison, Friends

It is a great privilege for me to be here this evening to give the Janine Haines Annual Address and to have the opportunity to pay tribute to a woman who certainly changed the face of politics in this country.

Janine was of course the first woman to hold a leadership position in an Australian political party, first as deputy and then as leader of the Australian Democrats. She also held the distinction of being the first woman to be elected to parliament as an Australian Democrat.

She made a huge impact on political life in Canberra, leading her party to a large increase in representation in the first election after the departure of party founder Don Chipp – a victory that the media thought was impossible.

Negative and skeptical media portrayal was one of many political crosses Janine had to carry. She was ridiculed for having a house-husband, she was derided as not being a serious person because she talked about women's issues and she, like most other women in politics, had to deal with the double standard. As she said to the *Age* newspaper in 1986:

*I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. If I raise questions of pornography, child abuse, incest, domestic violence, they say I'm obsessed with sex. If I raise equality of opportunity, difficulties women face, they say I'm a man-hating feminist. If I'm flippant about them, I'm a sarcastic bitch. If I make strong statements, I'm aggressive; if not, I'm weak. If I'm angry, I'm emotional.*<sup>1</sup>

Sound familiar?

Janine might have said that 20 years ago, but I wonder how much things have really changed. That is one of the issues we are going to address this evening. I want to look at the extent to which women in politics are addressing women's issues – or interests, as they are sometimes called – and also at the extent to which they are taken seriously when they do so.

Janine Haines was one of the first women in federal parliament to not be afraid to speak up for her sex. She saw her role in public life as being partly to represent the interests of other women although, of course, she also recognized her wider responsibilities – especially once she became leader of the party.

It is noteworthy that women politicians standing up for women's interests is still seen as being a sectional thing, as representing a special interest, or as being

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Julia Baird, *Media Tarts. How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians*. Scribe, 2004 p. 107

outside the mainstream of politics. Women in politics who aspire to higher things are often counseled not to champion women's issues if they want to be taken seriously. This places them in an invidious position.

Some of you may be aware of the rather tough comments I made about women politicians in my recent book *The End of Equality*.

In a chapter I entitled "Political Eunuchs" I pointed out that although there were record numbers of women in parliament – at the time there were 60 (today there are 65) – their large and growing number had in fact coincided with the largest rollback in women's rights in this country's history. I argued that very few political voices had been raised in protest against the cuts to women's policy monitoring units or to women's services. I documented this rollback in great detail since I did not want to be thought to be exaggerating. Sadly, it is impossible to exaggerate the damage that has been done to women's interest by the Howard government.

Perhaps the act that most symbolized the government's attitude to women was the political downgrading of the Office of the Status of Women via its removal from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the policy powerhouse of the government, its relocation in the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and its renaming as the Office for Women.

All notion of women's status in society has now gone. Now we only exist in the eyes of the government in our family roles. (And of course they are now paying top dollar for every baby you have.)

This political demotion of women's issues followed the government's enfeebling of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner via a reduction in her powers and her ability to investigate complaints. This was accompanied by a staggering 40 per cent reduction in the budget of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the loss of the Commission's powers to conduct public hearings.

When it was first established, in 1984, the position of Sex Discrimination Commissioner was a relatively powerful one, with the Commissioner able to investigate complaints, conduct hearings and use the powers of the Act to determine whether areas such as industrial awards indirectly discriminated against women. They did!

Today, the role of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner is, to quote from the HREOC website, to "undertake[s] research, policy and educative work designed to promote greater equality between men and women".

In other words, no power to do anything. The enforcement of the Sex Discrimination Act is a thing of the past. The Commissioner's job is to research

and educate – but not to ensure that people comply with Australia’s landmark anti-discrimination legislation. As a result, they don’t. You won’t be surprised to learn that firing women while they are on maternity leave is rife in corporate Australia today – despite it being totally illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act.

As I reported in my book, within three years of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner losing her powers the number of complaints under the Act had dropped from more than 2000 a year to just over 300.

What are they today? Who knows! They are not reported. But there is not much reason to complain any more as there is no power.

It was actions such as these on the part of the Howard government that made me very impatient with women politicians. It was why I spoke out so strongly – perhaps even intemperately (although I should say I toned it down considerably after Joan Kirner commented, not at all favourably, on the first draft!). I felt very frustrated by the fact that – finally – there were all these women in Canberra yet for the most part they were not speaking up for women.

At the time, I got some very feisty responses from young women MPs. They were angry with me and they let me know it. I was pleased to have at least stirred up a reaction.

The question we want to address tonight is: has anything changed in the past three years? Are women in Canberra these days more likely to defend women’s interests?

This question can also of course be broadened and extended to other areas, for instance business, the education sector, the trade union movement. Are women leaders in these areas standing up for women’s interests?

In the limited time I have available to me tonight I can only skim the surface of this question and so will confine myself mostly to talking about political leaders.

I think there is some good news to report in this area.

But before I get to that, I will just note a couple of trends in other leadership areas which I find rather disturbing.

In business, the number of women directors of large companies is not increasing and may even be falling slightly. Research into Australian company directors conducted this year by the Australian Council of Super Investors found that women accounted for only 9.2 per cent of all directors of boards of the top 100 companies. This was a decrease on the 9.3 per cent of women directors in 2004.

I wish I could report to you how women are faring in senior management in the corporate sector but there is no up to date information. The annual census that was conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in Employment Agency (EOWA) – the government body in charge of administering what used to be called the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act – was dropped after just two years. The last such census, conducted in 2002, showed that women made up 8.8 per cent of senior management – up from 8.4 per cent the previous year. The survey has not been conducted since so until someone else picks up the mantle, we won't know whether women are going forwards or backwards.

And without women in leadership roles, how will women in the rest of the organization fare?

But let's look at the good news.

I believe there has been a noticeable change in the willingness of women in Canberra to take a stand on women's issues or issues of great concern to women.

The stellar example of course has been the leadership on the overturning of the ban on RU486 provided by women Senators and instigated by your very own Lyn Allison.

Earlier this year Lyn Allison combined with three other women, Fiona Nash, Judith Troeth and Claire Moore, to support a private senators bill that sought to overturn the ban over the import of the so-called abortion drug that had been imposed by the Minister for Health. Two things were rare – and encouraging – about this action. It was instigated and run by women – on an issue of deep personal concern to women. And it was run across party lines.

The four women who championed this bill represented four different parties. They came together from across the political spectrum to remove a restriction on women's right to control their fertility.

This was a new way of working – for women and for parliament. And it worked. On the conscience vote in each chamber a majority prevailed that ensured the ban was lifted. It was a great day for women and for women's politics. The question is: was it a one-off or was it a precedent?

At the time, I interviewed Senator Allison who told me there was “an ongoing agenda” and that there was plenty more to come. If this turns out to be the case, we will have witnessed a “seismic shift” in federal politics.

There are some encouraging signs. Women across the parties are calling publicly for reforms and increased funding for our antiquated and biased child-

care system. So far, the government has resisted doing anything to improve the affordability of child-care for higher-income women by, say, allowing women to salary sacrifice the cost of care. Will we see women come together across party lines on issues such as these? Will there be more private members/senators' bills?

Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja is promoting a bill that would require government-funded pregnancy counselling services to inform pregnant women of the full range of options available to them, including abortion.

If you see the federal Health Minister's multi-million dollar funding package for pregnancy counselling services as being a form of payback for having "lost" RU486 – and I do – then it is obvious that the Stott-Despoja bill is the next staging ground for the new women's politics in Canberra. It will be a test of the extent to which there is indeed a seismic shift in politics, with women – and their supportive male colleagues – willing to take a stand in defence of women's rights.

Will this happen? I certainly hope so but I am far from optimistic. The RU486 debate was a rare example of parliamentarians being relieved of their usual obligation to vote along party lines. The therapeutic cloning bill promises to be another. Generally, however, MPs have to defy their party and cross the floor if they want to defy the party line. We saw several Liberals do this recently over the Migration bill. The power of their actions and those threatened in the Senate led to the government withdrawing the legislation.

Here was a clear example of how brave and determined politicians were able to prevent bad policy being legislated by the government. This is a very powerful precedent. It could be applied to protect women's interests.

It does seem easier to use political leverage to *stop* something. A further test of the new politics will be the extent to which they can be used to introduce laws or benefits. Will governments allow such non-partisan legislation to dictate how they spend money?

There are many areas of vital interest to women where political action is needed. This is all the more evident since the government abdicated its own responsibilities in this area and, as mentioned earlier, no longer monitors how policy impacts on women and does not enforce the laws designed to protect women from discrimination. However, of all the many areas requiring action, I would nominate two as being of special urgency: child care and violence against women.

Child care reform is urgently needed. There are a range of issues within the system that need to be addressed but in my view the most important is affordability. Women – parents – in all income ranges need tax or other forms of

financial relief for this essential cost in earning a living. Child care is the only work-related expense that does not attract tax assistance? Why should a professional be able to write-off a holiday – sorry, conference – in Paris on his tax while a struggling family gets no significant help with the cost of child care. This is an urgent issue for women in Canberra to address.

Violence against women continues to be a national disgrace. Recent ABS figures confirmed a rise in the incidence of physical and sexual violence against women, especially against women aged 35 or older. Yet we do nothing. The government runs expensive TV and cinema ads saying “Australia Says NO to Violence” while the evidence suggests and reverse. I, for one, am not encouraged that these ads are a realistic way to address the problem.

If there were two items for women leaders in politics to address – it would be these. Women who are free of violence and who can seek employment because they can find and afford childcare are going to have an independence and a control over their lives that is impossible without them. It is a huge agenda but it is a worthwhile one. I hope others will agree with me. And I hope the women in Canberra will rise to the occasion – as they did over the RU486 debate.

Recently Carmen Lawrence expressed her pessimism about this happening. She told a forum in Sydney that she felt party discipline and the desire of women with political ambitions to play the game would rule out any more significant cross-party political action by women.

Much as I want to think she is wrong, it is pointless to ignore the overwhelming reality that women in Canberra – and elsewhere – are still subjected to many of the same stereotypes and double standards that Janine Haines complained of two decades ago.

The media continues to treat women politicians differently. Remember the fuss about Julia Gillard’s kitchen. Women journalists criticized her for being “too tidy”. We have perhaps left behind the days when over woman politician had to pose over a stove to prove she had not surrendered her femininity by going into politics, but we have certainly not gotten over the attitude that says a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Gillard also copped it for not having children.

Janine Haines said you are “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”. It’s still the case. Julia Gillard was castigated because she does not have children. Code: she’s not a real woman. Yet if you do have children and run for high office, you are all too often accused of neglecting them. In France the glamorous (and bikini-wearing) mother-of-three Segolene Royal is running as the Socialist candidate for President of France, and the men in her own party are saying “who will look after the children?” Incidentally, they are not asking the same question of Royal’s partner, the father of these same children, who is also

considering running for the Presidency (also for the Socialist Party!) Their pillow talk must be interesting!

It is very encouraging to see that the visibility of women in politics has greatly increased. Women are now regular and natural players on the political scene, whether they are the federal Communications Minister, the Leader of the Australian Democrats, the Queensland Treasurer, the federal Deputy Leader of the Federal Opposition, the foreign Minister of Israel, the Secretary of State of the United States or the President of Chile or the Chancellor of Germany.

We do appear to have reached some sort of critical mass. Women's participation is natural and, let's hope, inevitable from now on. But when we look at our own situation here in Australia it is not easy to see a woman at the top in federal politics any time soon.

We can envisage Anna Bligh as Queensland Premier in a year or so, but when will there be a female Prime Minister. You might recall Gough Whitlam saying a few weeks ago on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday that he thought it would happen in eight years – that being the time, he apparently figured, for Labor to win office and Julia Gillard to assume the party leadership. Maybe it's possible but you wouldn't want to hold your breath (especially if you were Julia!)

On the coalition side, there are women in Cabinet but only one – Julie Bishop – is a member of the chamber that Prime Ministers are drawn from. She might have a chance but, again, you would not want to pin all your hopes on one woman. I think we all know the perils of placing the burden of expectation and hope on a single female's shoulders. How many women politicians have been burned – and burnt out? – by the weight of such media-fuelled hype?

The best hope for women's political leadership is for there is be a field of experienced and talented women who can move up through the system and be part of the pool from which leaders are tested and drawn. That's how the boys do it. And while there are lots of things about male politicians that women would not want to emulate there is one quality they have a proven track record on – and that is winning.

Thank You.

