

The Politics of Political Mothers and Wives

Margaret Fitzherbert

When Julia Gillard dipped her toe in the water to see if there was support for her to become leader of the federal ALP, the story quickly became personal. What was at issue was not her apprenticeship as an ALP member or performance as a shadow minister, but the fact that Gillard is single and has no children.

Some observers reacted to this angle with surprise. Clearly, women have come a long way in politics; they have become State Premiers, they are routinely ministers in State and Federal governments, and their sheer number in Australian parliaments continues to increase, albeit too slowly. Why was it that a female politician's marital and parental status was suddenly the most relevant issue?

Once upon a time, it was generally childless women or those who had adult children who became active in politics. Edith Cowan was accused of neglecting her husband and children when she became Australia's first female MP in 1921. The fact that her youngest child was 30 went some way to countering this. Cowan was, however, unusual: many of Australia's early female MPs were childless, including Millicent Preston Stanley and Irene Longman (the next two women elected to parliament after Cowan), Senator Ivy Wedgwood, and Senator Annabel Rankin. The rule also seemed to apply to early activists, such as Dame Elizabeth Couchman and Lady (Margaret) Forrest.

As women entered Australian parliaments in greater numbers in the 1970s, many routinely faced questioning during preselection about who would look after their children once 'Mum' was in parliament. Others avoided this scrutiny by delaying their parliamentary career until their children were grown. There

is ample evidence of female MPs being asked to pose for photos that supported their mothering role, or being routinely described as a 'mother of three' as well as an MP. Admittedly, many of them assisted or even exploited this kind of coverage. Others went out of their way to avoid it.

Today, most Australian parliaments show a more diverse range of women in terms of their marital and parental sta-

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tus. There are single, divorced, married and partnered women, and they have children of all ages. From the 1990s, many elected women followed the lead of women such as former Queensland parliamentarian Rosemary Kyburz and former federal minister Ros Kelly and gave birth to children while parliamentarians.

What this shows is incremental change. There is now broad, but by no means universal, acceptance that a woman can be pregnant, and then a mother, without her neglecting either her family or parliamentary responsibilities. Yet on occasion, the major political parties still show distinct unease about the interaction between the argu-

ably traditional roles for women—as a wife and mother—and her role as a parliamentarian. Nowadays, the time when this is most likely to emerge is when a woman seeks a role in politics that is viewed as a prize: a safe seat, or a leadership role.

Julia Gillard's recent experience is a prize example. When her name was touted as a possible leadership contender, a media whispering campaign began. With little other ammunition, Gillard's anonymous detractors suggested it was not they who had a problem with a single woman leading the ALP, but that everyday voters might. Gillard would have every reason to feel aggrieved by this shoddy treatment—especially as Kevin Rudd, another leadership aspirant, paraded his wife and children for the media as he staked his claim.

Rudd's approach shows another tradition of politics: the public image of a wife and children, united behind their husband and father. For male politicians, a family is a plus. It softens their image. It shows they understand the pressures that all families face. At no time are a wife and family more valuable than during an election or a political crisis. Their physical presence is a very visible sign of support. Few other professions use their family in this way.

The idea that the issue of family gains in importance when a woman aspires to a very powerful role in politics is not the general impression. Many female MPs, who do not occupy senior political roles, have complained of a greater media emphasis on their family and marital status, than that given to men. In 2004, Joan Kirner referred to:

[T]he heavy media emphasis on women's housewife, marital or sexual characteristics. ▶

It is an emphasis that women politicians from suffragists to premiers have had to confront for over 100 years and that men rarely face.

My own modest study does not support this commonly held view. My master's thesis comprised a comparison of the print media coverage of Amanda Vanstone and David Kemp during the first six months that each was Minister for Education. I wanted to test the idea that female MPs receive less media coverage than their male counterparts, and that when they are reported, it is more likely to be in relation to women's issues. I also wanted to investigate whether they were more likely to be reported in relation to their physical appearance, marital status and parental status.

The coverage studied was generated in the six-month period after each minister attained the portfolio, that is, between 12 March 1996 and 12 September 1996 for Vanstone; and between 10 October 1997 and 10 April 1998 for Kemp.

The study examined coverage of Ministers Vanstone and Kemp in *The Australian* and in the *Daily Telegraph*. This enabled a comparison of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. It also meant that neither minister's coverage was examined in a newspaper that is produced in his or her home town, thus avoiding any possible distortion of figures due to a newspaper giving greater focus to the activities of a local.

A total of 191 items that included a reference to Vanstone appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Australian*. In contrast, in the comparable period, 153 items appeared in the same newspapers that included a reference to Kemp. Vanstone was far more likely than Kemp to be mentioned in the *Daily Telegraph*. Over the six-month period, she was mentioned on 102 occasions, compared with 46 mentions for Kemp. The results for *The Australian* were more even-handed: Vanstone was mentioned on 89 occasions, compared with 107 mentions of Kemp.

There were minimal differences in the reporting of Kemp and Vanstone. In particular, there were no references to Kemp's marital status in the sample articles, and Vanstone's was mentioned in only two. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that she is 'married to Adelaide lawyer Tony Vanstone'. A personal profile of Vanstone referred to '... Tony Vanstone, an Adelaide commercial lawyer and her husband of 18 years', and described how he helped to launch her political career by urging her to run for office.

Vanstone and Kemp were chosen for the comparative study because they had achieved significant power as federal ministers, and because they were com-

A look to the future of American politics indicates that sex and a woman's role with her family could well become a key issue in the next presidential election year. Ironically, Hillary Clinton's public approval ratings were significantly increased by the perception that she had stood by her husband and her marriage despite obvious threats. Hillary's family, including her daughter, Chelsea, provide a softening counterpoint to what has otherwise been an often confronting and hard public image. Should Hillary seek to leave the Senate for higher office in 2008, her family image will help her in a way that is more commonly associated with male candi-

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parable political actors. But the analysis of their media coverage suggests that their power was not significant enough to warrant the more intensely personal coverage of those seeking leadership roles.

Vanstone was not in a party leadership role, nor aspiring to one. As a Senator she could never be party leader or Prime Minister. In this regard, she is significantly different from the case studies in Julia Baird's *Media Tarts* (2004): women such as Natasha Stott-Despoja, Cheryl Kernot and Carmen Lawrence. As Anne Henderson once remarked, women who seek 'real power' will experience the 'blowtorch of publicity'.

Once, the handful of women entering politics was no great cause for attention except as a curiosity. Unless a woman MP made it to a position of real power, she was mainly featured for the colour she added to a drab male environment. But such media chivalry is dead.

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If Condaleeza Rice seeks elected office, as many are beginning to predict she will, then she will face the age-old question: why is this smart, attractive woman unmarried and childless, and as such, how can she represent Americans in a key electoral role? I would say, 'look to her professional record', but I have a feeling that this will not be the approach of the American media.

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