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Women in political leadership: coming so far to fail?

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Abstract

The year 2012 has been a brutally punishing year for women in political leadership in Australia. Given the ‘girls can do anything’ mantra, this paper explores the sexual politics of ‘failure’ and asks what impact the current political landscape has on the leadership aspirations of girls and young women.

Introduction

The full page advertisement in the *Townsville Bulletin*, a regional Queensland newspaper says it all – women leaders are failures, and failure is contagious. The year 2012 has been a brutally punishing year for women in political leadership in Australia, particularly Queensland, where state and local elections have seen conservative governments swept into power. This paper explores the sexual politics of ‘failure’ in the current political landscape and asks what impact this may have on the leadership aspirations of girls and young women.

First wave feminists in Australia sought the right to vote as a way of tackling many social issues which remain today including domestic violence, poverty, sexual violence and inequitable working conditions. Their efforts in the late 1800s and early 1900s to gain a political voice were seen as necessary in order to improve the lives of women and girls. Australia was the first country in the world to give white women the right to vote *and* stand for national parliament in 1902, although suffrage for Indigenous peoples was not granted until 1962. However, the substantive right for white women to stand for parliament did not translate into actual representation until 1943 (Parliamentary Library, 2011). In Queensland, although enabling legislation was passed in 1915 the first woman was not actually elected until 1929 (Office for Women, 2005).

Change has been exceedingly slow and little progress was made until the 1980s when women’s representation improved, reaching an average of 15% of federal parliamentarians. The proportion of women elected representatives grew slowly to 19% during the 1990s, before averaging 29% during the 2000s (Parliamentary Library, 2011). However across Australian parliaments there has been a decline in women’s representation since 2005 (Sawer, 2012). Given this slow and now declining rate of change, many individuals and groups who had agitated for greater gender equality in political leadership celebrated the swearing in of Australia’s first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in 2010 as a significant milestone. For some, however, the milestone was not worth celebrating for a variety of reasons including religious objections to her de-facto marital status and childlessness. More significant perhaps was the ‘so what, why not’ response of many girls and young women to Australia’s first female Prime Minister. My doctoral research has considered this response and

the apparent disconnect between the post-feminist meritocracy such responses assume and the political reality.

Leading the Nation: when economic success and stable democratic process matter less than policing the boundaries of ‘woman’

Julia Gillard, in her current role as Prime Minister and previous role as deputy Prime Minister, has provided political leadership to the government and nation during a remarkable moment in history. Australia’s economy has remained strong during the global financial crisis and its people have been spared the pain of austerity measures that have been felt globally (International Monetary Fund, 2012, April). The Prime Minister has been successful in forming Australia’s first minority government and with the support of the Independents and Greens in realising a number of reform agendas; including passing significant legislation on mining taxation, the environment and disability support. And yet, the criticism of the Prime Minister’s governance has been sustained, overwhelmingly vicious, and negative – raising the question, why is this so?

Commentators have identified three key problems: firstly the process by which the Prime Minister rose to power; secondly the way that she has negotiated policy agreements within a minority government, and thirdly that she leads a Labor government that is confronted by the hostile reality of concentrated media ownership (Dunlop, 2012; Kernot, 2012; Mahlab, 2012; Scutt, 2012a, 2012b; Summers, 2012). What is common across the criticisms the Prime Minister has attracted is the individualisation of objections to her personally, and the frequent disavowal of gender as being relevant to such personal criticism. Yet, as this article will discuss, negative gendered stereotypes are endlessly applied to the Prime Minister in political and public commentary. And the commentary itself employs sexist and violent rhetoric in the application of such stereotypical characteristics to the Prime Minister.

Even a cursory examination of commentary made via the comments facility attached to mainstream digital media or twitter provides overwhelming evidence of the entitlement many men, and some women, feel to criticise in sexist and violent terms any woman who dares to speak; a phenomenon that is increasingly being documented

(Elliott, 2011). Given this, perhaps it should not be surprising that women in leadership positions, such as Prime Minister, should attract particular vitriol. In February 2012 when the first week of the Queensland State election campaign was disrupted by the Federal Labor leadership challenge both the Prime Minister and the Queensland Premier were facing constant criticism not only for being 'failures' but also for being liars. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was being called by some journalists and members of the public not by her title or name, but by the insult 'Juliar' as made popular by radio shock jock Alan Jones (Kwek, 2012), and Premier Anna Bligh's name was popularised as 'Bliar'. Women, it appeared, could not be trusted; male politicians might make 'non-core promises', but women personify them.

Law academic Jocelyne Scutt (2012a) has detailed the history of leadership ascents to power within Australian federal politics and the resulting media coverage. Australia's first twenty-six male Prime Ministers came to power in a variety of circumstances, but always through election by caucus or party room; twenty one changes of Prime Minister have occurred outside of an election, and seven of Australia's Prime Ministers have served the nation having never won an election. All of these Prime Ministers, having won the support of their colleagues, have not had their legitimacy questioned by the media.

Australia's twenty-seventh Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in contrast, has faced endless questioning by the media of her right to legitimately lead the government, despite overwhelmingly winning the support of caucus in June 2010 and February 2012. The common theme is that she 'back-stabbed' former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and that her success was the result of sneaky manipulation, rather than due process. A Labor frontbencher explains it this way "Change is never pretty. There is always blood on the floor, but having a woman do it - that offends the natural order of things...there is the idea that women should not seize power" (cited in Summers, 2012). Scutt puts this widespread media destabilisation in its historical context:

Relentless concentration upon the Prime Minister's accession to power and her retaining the post in the February ballot defies past coverage of Prime Ministers – all men, challengers always male. The savagery with which today's Prime Minister is treated online is disturbing (Scutt, 2012a).

Online comments responding to Scutt's detailed expose of the gendered dimension of media responses to Gillard's political legitimacy are indicative of the general mood feminist commentators have identified:

Come off the grass Jocelyn.

It's the nasty, vindictive, spiteful, viscous, lying, untrustworthy, conniving, hateful personality we don't like. We don't actually give a dam what body you wrap around it.

Being totally incompetent doesn't help.

What ever body you put it in, when what's in side makes Keating look soft a cuddly, you've lost most of us.

(Hasbeen, 2012)

Whatever body you put it in

Despite the sentiment expressed above, that it is not the Prime Minister's sex that is important, *whatever body you put it in*, it is precisely the female body of the Prime Minister that generates the sort of critical attacks to which male politicians have never been subjected. These attacks centre on motherhood status, appearance, sexual objectification and gendered violence.

It would seem, still, in 2012, that a woman who does not mother is acting out of role, providing an affront to deeply entrenched views of what is considered widely as the natural order, whereas for men, parental status is perceived as completely unrelated to their role as men. Senator Bill Heffernan's infamous comment "I mean anyone who chooses to remain deliberately barren... they've got no idea what life's about" (see Sawyer, 2008) has been echoed relentlessly. Yet, as Anne Summers (2012) points out in *The Gender Agenda*, senior female parliamentarians who do have children are also treated as if they have no idea of what life is about. Nicola Roxon, the Attorney-General describes how "the media is more interested in me as someone with a young child than anything to do with policy. My male colleagues who have young children don't get asked these questions", and another cabinet minister describes how "You literally cannot win. You are criticised if you dedicate yourself to your career and don't have children. Or if you do have them, you're told you are neglecting your

family. Or, when you spend time with them, that you are not doing your job properly" (cited in Summers, 2012). Women political leaders are socially positioned through their bodies' reproductive capacities; *whatever body you put it in* makes a significant difference.

The denial that criticism of the Prime Minister is not related to her sex also fails to pass the *whatever body you put it in* test on a second count. The sex of the Prime Minister is precisely related to commentary on her appearance; and she shares this burden with all woman leaders. Germaine Greer was widely reported for her comment on Tony Jones' *Q & A* television show in 2012:

What I want her to do is get rid of those bloody jackets. It's not even fashion, they don't fit. Every time she turns around you've got that strange horizontal crease, which means they are cut too narrow in the hips. You've got a big arse Julia, just get on with it.

(Greer broadcast by Jones, 2012)

Greer's comment attracted laughter and applause from the audience and panellists. In the days that followed the Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott joined in the national joke at a community forum in Sale by responding to a woman's suggestion that he: "get some of those jackets off her" with "I know, I know, I know, Germaine Greer was right on that subject" (Abbott broadcast by Lane, 2012). Abbott was subsequently asked by Carl Stefanovic on the *Today* show if he was sorry about his remark:

Abbott: Well look, it was an off the cuff remark responding to a member of the public, I shouldn't have said it and I regret it Carl.

Stefanovic: Are you sorry for it?

Abbott: Well, I've just said I regret it Carl, and I guess umm, it was inappropriate banter.

Stefanovic: You don't believe it though?

Abbott: Well, look I'm a bloke and I have learnt a long time ago Carl that you should never comment on these sort of subjects and what I discovered the other day was that I shouldn't really comment on other peoples' comments either.

(Abbot and Stefanovic broadcast by Newton, 30 March 2012).

The Leader of the Opposition called on his status as a *bloke*, in order to argue that men are the victims of a double silencing by women; the silencing of men rather than the policing of women became central. Rather than actually being silenced he effectively communicated his refusal to condemn the policing of appearances. His regret was about the sanctioning he experienced when he participated. Many of the women in political leadership identify the gendered discrimination they face. However, as Anne Summers (2012) notes, it is a difficult conversation to have. Kristina Keneally, the former Premier of New South Wales, told Summers (2012): "I can't ever consider that I experienced some kind of disadvantage because I am a woman. I won't lend support to such a thesis", and yet, in a profile piece in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* Keneally explains how, even after leaving public office, a change in her hairstyle garnered media headlines, and was something she could ill afford to do as Premier "Can you imagine what would have happened if I changed my look when I was premier?...Look what happens when Julia gets a haircut" (cited in Salusinszky, 2012). Summers describes the "near hysterical reaction from politicians and much of the media" to Senator Bob Brown's observation that "quite a bit of the criticism is sexist and unfair and unrelenting" (Summers, 2012).

The denial that criticism of the Prime Minister is related to her sex also fails to pass the *whatever body you put it in* test on a third crucial count. The sex of the Prime Minister, and other women, is precisely related to the form in which commentary is framed. Cartoonist Larry Pickering saw fit to draw the Prime Minister naked, bending over and holding the hand of Minister for Finance, Penny Wong, in a cartoon about the carbon tax; Pickering dismissed complaints about his cartoon as 'arrogant' (Best, 2012). During the Queensland election campaign, in March 2012, ten Wicked campervans were painted with a cartoon figure of a naked Premier Anna Bligh lying on her back, legs up and spread. The slogan "tick the right box" was painted and in the position of her vagina was a 'No 1' box, and over her anus was a 'No 2' box. The vans were never actually put on the road, however their effect was material in that the images were printed within the mainstream media (Gough, 2012) and were easily found online. A month later in Cairns, during the local elections, candidate Max O'Halloran's flyers ran with the slogan "Get more balls into Council" (Manning,

2012). When questioned by local newspaper the *Cairns Post*, O'Halloran said it was aimed at improving junior sport and "It also means we need a bit more guts in the council...and a sense of humour" (Strudwick, 2012). Women, in this account, are not only anatomically incorrect for leadership, but they also fail to have courage and fail to laugh enough, presumably at themselves.

The sexualised objectification of female leaders is widespread. Journalist Julian Tomlinson (2012) ended his opinion piece about blokeyness in the *Townsville Bulletin* with the question "Surely it's ok to be a man?" But it is Tomlinson's introduction which is illustrative of the entrenched and certain right of men to put women in their place through sexism. He began his column with the statement: "There's a disaster afflicting men around the country, and it's not leaked photos of a Julia Gillard lingerie shoot" (Tomlinson, 2012). For Tomlinson it appears being a man begins with reducing the status of the Prime Minister to a national male bonding exercise in sexual objectification. The newspaper refused to publish an objection to Tomlinson's column which directed readers' attention to a campaign organised by Women Everywhere Advocating Violence Elimination (WEAVE) protesting such rhetoric. WEAVE's campaign from May 2012 has seen the coordination of an open letter signed by over 59 organisations and 150 individuals making connections between community tolerance of violent discourse being used against the Prime Minister and tolerance towards violence against women in general:

Influential commentators and leaders have suggested placing her in a bag and drowning her at sea (Alan Jones June 2011, July 2011), kicking her to death (Grahame Morris Feb 2012) and having a "target on her head" (Tony Abbott March 2011), "burn the witch" placards (Carbon Tax Rally March 2011) and the persistent use of the language "liar" and "bitch" ... Violence against women is not a trivial matter..[it] cost[s] the Australian economy approximately \$13.6 billion per year. (2012).

Silencing dissent: entrenched biological determinism

Although WEAVE's open letter was widely announced in a press release, it failed to be picked up by the media, apart from opinion pieces by women involved with the campaign (Ford, 2012a; McLellan, 2012). Dissent has been effectively silenced and sexist commentary, such as that made by Julian Tomlinson, has continued to go

largely unchallenged. The silencing of dissent is particularly gendered in the form it takes. Women's Studies academic Carole Ford produced two of the only newspaper articles addressing gender prior to, and post, the 2012 Queensland elections (Ford, 2012b, 2012c). Ford reported on the negative impact on women's representation resulting from the newly elected conservative government, where representation went from 49% under Labor to 18% under the LNP and while racehorses have their rights defended by an Assistant Minister for Racing, the Minister for Women was abolished (Ford, 2012c).

In addition to the usual backlash directed at women who speak about inequality Ford was subsequently personally targeted by Max Tomlinson, at the time a media advisor for Liberal Senator Ian MacDonald and, previously the editor of the *Townsville Bulletin* from 1998 to 2003 (Caldwell, 2012) [and father of Julian, mentioned above]. Tomlinson had also won pre-selection in Thuringowa for the LNP in 2010 (Caldwell, 2012). Tomlinson emailed Ford, telling her he “generally ignore[s] the bleatings of sourpusses like you” but felt “moved” to say “Get a life”:

...Like most women, you probably don't possess the necessary drive, determination and decisiveness that men innately possess. It's not a personal criticism; it's a fact of biology...Blokes dominate most areas of human endeavour because Nature equipped them with something called testosterone. That was part of Nature's grand design to enable men to be stronger, more fearless and more determined than their sisters. Sorry, Carole, fact not fiction.

Women occupy a special but different place in the world to that of men... Women who can't cut it in - what did you call it?, the boys' club - can easily cover their inadequacies by claiming bias, sexism, misogyny, chauvinism etc. etc. ad infinitum.

It's so tiring to read such twaddle.

Face reality, my dear. Smell the coffee...

I repeat: GET A LIFE.

Kind regards,
Max

(Tomlinson cited in Crook, 2012).

Tomlinson resigned from his role as LNP media advisor over the political backlash generated by his commentary. Newly elected LNP Member for Townsville, John Hathaway, echoed the Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott saying: “They’re not views that I share”. Hathaway argued “I think we’re well and truly beyond this in the current climate and it’s all merit-based”, but was unable to explain the significantly increased gender imbalance of Queensland Ministers (Skene, 2012). Max Tomlinson, however, garnered some public support, including support from men’s rights activists. Biological determinism has a long pedigree, one hundred years ago, Clementine Churchill was responding to points similar to Tomlinson’s that had also been raised by Sir Almroth Wright, a high profile bacteriologist. Churchill (whose husband Winston later became Prime Minister of England) wrote to *The Times* in 1912:

Sir,

After reading Sir Almroth Wright's able and weighty exposition of women as he knows them the question seems no longer to be "Should women have votes?" but "Ought women not to be abolished altogether?" ...

We learn from him that in their youth they are unbalanced, that from time to time they suffer from unreasonableness and hypersensitiveness, and that their presence is distracting and irritating to men in their daily lives and pursuits. If they take up a profession, the indelicacy of their minds makes them undesirable partners for their male colleagues. Later on in life they are subject to grave and long-continued mental disorders, and, if not quite insane, many of them have to be shut up...

And may we not look to Sir Almroth Wright to crown his many achievements by delivering mankind from the parasitic, demented, and immoral species which has infested the world for so long?

Yours obediently,

C.S.C.
("One of the Doomed")

(Churchill cited in Soames, 2003; Usher, 2012)

Biological determinist reasoning is deeply entrenched in stereotypes about the capacity of women as leaders, as evidenced in the work of Almroth Wright and more recently Max Tomlinson. Although tempting to simply dismiss Tomlinson as anachronistic, to do so would be to underestimate the scope of his power to promote

and dismiss speech within the media over his very long career. These deeply entrenched stereotypes are cycled through a populist and stereotypical view of merit to explain why women don't, shouldn't, can't or won't be successful political leaders. The argument that we are effectively in "the post-feminist period", as made by former Prime Minister John Howard (Akerman, 2006), and that for all intents and purposes politics occurs within a meritocracy fails, however, to account for the sexist regulation of women who do become political leaders.

Meritocracy: gendered assumptions

Former Labor federal Minister Barry Cohen began his April 2012 column rejecting quotas within politics by denouncing the "annual whinge" of the "sisterhood" that apparently follows International Women's Day. Julie Collins (2012), Minister for the Status of Women, has advised the government's commitment to increasing the representation of women across leadership positions is on target to achieve 40% of Government board positions by 2015. This achievement demonstrates that targets which systematically address barriers achieve results; results that are missing from the corporate sector where only 13.8% of ASX200 company directors are women (Collins, 2012). Although Barry Cohen describes the representation of women within politics as historically "appalling" he rejects the notion that women face systemic barriers, after all, "[t]hose who peddle this line don't know what they are talking about. I was in parliament for more than 20 years and not once did I hear anyone suggest stopping women's entry into parliament" (2012). Ingeniously he goes so far as to suggest that he would not care if every member of parliament was a woman "provided they arrive there democratically" (Cohen, 2012). If Cohen really believed it democratically possible for men to be completely unrepresented, he has not wasted time planning for such a scenario. He concluded his commentary by suggesting a choice between two possibilities: "It's great to have vastly increased numbers of women in national parliaments but not nearly as good as treating them as human beings" (Cohen, 2012). In an actual meritocracy surely it would be possible to have both.

The late Professor Charles Arnade (2006), in his review of Julia Baird's (2004) *Media Tarts: How the Australian Press frames female politicians*, questioned the sexist

treatment women have experienced, asking “[do] Australian women encounter greater opposition and ridicule when standing for politics?” before speculating “ Maybe this is because Australians tend to be more outspoken and sometimes this translates into more insensitivity and even rudeness. It might also be a more male oriented society”. Labor Party heavyweight Bill Ludwig would seem to confirm Arnade’s observation: “The blokes here just don't like women, especially women in charge” he said recently, “The federal election is a long way off, it's different circumstances, but I don't think the blokes like Julia, either. The men of Queensland are just very negative towards women” (cited in Marriner, 2012).

The State Opposition Leader in South Australia, Liberal Isobel Redmond advised a women’s leadership lunch hosted by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia that for women facing discrimination “there’s not much point in confrontation...I think it is easier a lot of the time to just try to ignore the discrimination and get on with being the best councillor you can be, or the best whatever it is, and ask intelligent questions and make gentle suggestions and I think you’ll find the discrimination will just disappear” (cited in Keen, 2012). Redmond was roundly condemned for providing this advice but when Julia Gillard’s treatment is taken as an example perhaps such advice is not surprising. If a woman holding the highest office in the nation is subject to public harassment that largely goes unchallenged by those with the privilege of access to media exposure the outlook for all women looks decidedly less rosy. Although the Prime Minister to a large extent has ignored the personalised criticism she has received and gotten on with the job it is clear that this strategy has not made the discrimination disappear as Redmond would like. The Prime Minister does not expect everyone to like her, but she does expect respect, and has described the different expectations placed on her:

... looking across Australia's political history when Bob Hawke was there or Paul Keating ... or John Howard ... I don't recall there being constant demands for them to show more personality. I don't remember people looking at John Howard and saying gee, I wish he'd be warmer and cuddlier and more humorous and more engaging in his press conferences. They looked at him and said, well he's the bloke running the country, and I think the same standard should apply to me. I'm a woman running the country, I don't ask people to come to the view that they want to have me round for dinner on Saturday night, that's not what I'm here to do.

(Gillard cited in Scutt, 2012b).

Despite this the logic of merit continues to dominate explanations of women's success or lack of. Professor of Leadership Studies, Beverly Alimo Metcalf found during a three year study that merit went unrewarded. When women produced superior outcomes this was attributed to luck or to exerting extra effort, whereas men's success was attributed to personal capability. For men, failure was attributed to bad luck, but for women it was attributed to their lack of ability. "A major problem for women is that they simply don't look like the notion of a leader, because leaders look like men" (Alimo-Metcalf, 2011).

Meritocracy: cracks at the school gate

Prime Minister Gillard has led by example and has shown that it is possible for women to reach the highest office in Australia. Journalist Nikki Gemmell describes women's observations:

What they see: a woman getting things done. In a man's world. Quietly, differently, effectively. Amid the great roar of vitriol, and not flinching. They think it's extraordinary. Because usually as women, we flinch. It's just too hard. We bleat our vulnerability. Gabble too much about our personal lives and the toll it's taking, make excuses, give up, bow out. She doesn't play the victim, just keeps going... (Gemmell, 2012).

Gemmell's column about the difficulty women have in publically expressing support for the Prime Minister described a school gate scene where one mother's declaration of "I adore Julia" was risky: "they looked at each other, amazed; it was like stumbling across some secret society of disparate females expressing deeply unfashionable, unspoken sentiments." One mother said "She's such a strong role model for our daughters" and another said "We're all scared of saying we love her – in front of the men, especially. It's like saying you're a feminist" (cited in Gemmell, 2012). The future seems difficult when women feel unable to articulate their support of another for fear of being thought a feminist. And yet Gemmell's conclusion perhaps provides reason for optimism; she argues that school-gate conversations are starting because of the jarring disconnect between what some women are thinking and what the media narrative on the Prime Minister is. "It's a fascinating story of one particular Australian woman and the affronted psyche of a nation, and it's still unfolding" (Gemmell, 2012).

Unfolding the future: lessons for girls

My qualitative research exploring women's experiences of bringing up girls aged between 9 and 13 years has been based on in-depth interviews with 24 women in a regional Queensland town. Although this essay is broadly concerned with the sexual politics of failure, in this section, I present some early data and analysis of how the women in my study reconcile the politics of failure with the hopes they hold for their daughters. The first set of interviews was undertaken shortly after the 2010 election when Prime Minister Gillard successfully formed government after a protracted period of negotiation. Follow-up interviews occurred in the time leading up to former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's federal leadership challenge and the Queensland elections in February 2012. It seemed particularly important, at that point in time, to explore with women both their own and their daughters' ideas about women's leadership, the performance of Australia's first woman Prime Minister and the way this has been represented in the media.

Girls and young women growing up today have inherited a thirty-year legacy of the idea that 'girls can do anything'; a message which broadly morphed during the 1990s into a full-blown, consumer-driven 'girl power' culture. Prior to the 1980s the idea that 'girls can do anything' was a positional notion which recognised barriers and empowered girls in opposition to those barriers. Since then however, 'girls can do anything' has increasingly been understood as fact, girls are positioned as always, already empowered players in an ostensible meritocracy (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004). In neo-liberal times structural barriers have become invisible and instead success or failure is experienced at the level of the individual; she has personally either made good or poor choices and will commiserate or celebrate accordingly (Baker, 2010). In my research women reported that in general their daughters were nonchalant about a female Prime Minister, thinking 'so what, why not'.

Many, but not all, of the women discussed the swearing in of Australia's first woman Prime Minister with their daughters:

They just go 'so she's there, I don't want to do that, but I could if I wanted to', not recognising what it would have taken to do it...

Julia Gillard being Prime Minister didn't seem to have any remarkable effect, but then I'm not a very, I wouldn't say that I would be saying to them 'what do you think about that?' It was just, I'm not sure that there was a conversation about it...

I think we all took it on the chin and said 'of course', and I don't know if we celebrated it enough because I think we thought it was a normal thing to happen.

(Debbie: Anglo-Australian).

She just took it in her stride, I guess when you're 11 years old, it's not such a big deal 'yeah, so what? hasn't there been one there before?' [laughing]

(Sarah: Anglo-Australian)

Although girls and young women were not at all surprised to have a female Prime Minister some men clearly were, which left women to straddle parallel universes between their daughter's belief in the notion that girls can do anything and the biological determinism of some men:

I'll tell you something curious, when I came to work on the day after the result was announced finally...I went into our little corner store as it was, and to overhear the shopkeeper, who I had a lot of regard for and I've known for some years as a customer, and one of his customers talking about Julia Gillard in the kind of derogatory, reserved-for-women language.

So one of them was saying 'I've got nothing against women, as you know, and equal rights and all of that, but what if she just has a bad PMT day and sinks the economy' ...and I was on the verge, because it's a small space, of joining in, in a jocular fashion because I thought they were joking, and then the other person said 'Yeah, I know what you mean mate, it's bullshit'. And they were serious and these men were in their fifties and I could not believe what I had heard, 'Well I'll catch ya tomorrow then,' 'Yeah, seeya mate'. They really considered the country was likely to go to pot because of the hormones in the Prime Minister's body, [incredulous laughing] and that day when I came to work I was working with a young woman I didn't know very well who would be in her mid-twenties and for her it was not even on the radar that the Prime Minister elect was a female, like it was just such a non-issue because in her mind there was no issue of gender.

(Kim: Anglo-Australian)

Although all women in my study supported the idea of a woman Prime Minister in general, there were a range of opinions about Julia Gillard as Prime Minister. The women who expressed religious beliefs were opposed to the Prime Minister, who was not seen as woman enough:

So Julia Gillard, I would never want my children to aspire to be like her, never, ever...

I don't think Julia is a good role model for women because she, like she's, I don't think she has embraced all that womanhood has to offer, you know, she's never married, she's not had children, and so I just, yeah, I don't, I think she's kind of avoided the big women's issues in life, and it's very easy to go and do your politics and do all that when you've avoided the tough, the really tough, things in life, you know.

(Tanya: religious, Anglo-Australian)

In this account the Prime Minister's childlessness, which effectively places her in a position of being able to focus on a political career in the same way that men regardless of their parental status are able to, is seen as evidence that she has avoided women's issues. In the next extract, Martina, believes the Prime Minister is in a catch-22 situation; it would be 'suicide' to make strong statements about women but not doing so risks a disconnect with women:

Look I think it's an absolutely frustrating situation, we have some of the most senior people in the country are women, but in saying that, that doesn't necessarily mean because they are women they are going to advocate strongly for the position of women, or be a feminist, and I think that's one of the challenges for Julia because she's not a mother and the media will kill her whether she does or she doesn't do particular things...

So I don't know, I mean she's in a really critical position to make some difference about that [the status of women generally], but the other challenge is she's not safe, and so it would potentially, at this point in time, be career suicide to come out and make some strong statements about women, but in saying that, if she did that, I think a lot of women would actually get behind her more, cause at the moment there is a disconnect and I don't think she needs to be a mother to able to do her job, umm but again, the parental status of the men is never questioned because there is an assumption that the women are at home looking after the kids...so to me it's not about that.

(Martina: Aboriginal Australian)

For some women there was a level of discomfort with the Prime Minister's manner. Her strong assertive handling of questions from the press gallery was seen as not doing women any favours, and Joy believes that this will impact on women's chances to lead in the future.

Well I'm not a fan. There is a lot of her attitudes I don't like. And I find her very condescending in the way she speaks... and I just find her very false and I don't like her at all, and that's not because she's a woman, I just don't like her, I don't like her attitude...And the way she has her press conference she stands up there and says 'John, now when you're finished, then I'll have Bob, and then I'll have so and so, no, no, no, over here', like she's in a classroom and ordering all these people around. I don't think she's done women any favours really, and you hear more talk about not liking her, and actually it's the women who don't like her...I don't think [another woman will be elected in future], I think they would have done the woman thing, I don't think they'll be choosing another woman.

(Joy: religious, Anglo-Australian)

Jan was highly critical of the Prime Minister's "moral compass" particularly disliking her de-facto relationship status. She was also unsure if another woman would have the chance to be Prime Minister in Australia:

I don't know, cause the media is so against her in a lot of ways, I think she hasn't done herself any favours. I remember, you know, like at the beginning there was all the media thing the only way to get to the top was to put the knife in everyone's back and climb on up...is she going to be the only woman Prime Minister we have? Are the public going to do that again with her track record?

(Jan: religious, Anglo-Australian)

Keryn also disliked the Prime Minister, but was strident in her rejection of rhetoric which makes this about her gender:

I hate how, if she's a bad politician, she's a bad politician, it's not about if she's a woman, no one is saying she's a good politician, let's face it...I don't like this whole 'See, a woman, you've done it, you've got a woman in there and she's useless'. There's a lot of that going on and I'm aware of that but I don't know that my kids are, I certainly don't talk to them about it...

And I certainly don't go 'stupid bloody woman'... it's very unequal, as always. You'd never say about a man, 'well what a shithouse job he did, if he was a woman it would be better'. And see ... I think there should be more

women, there should be more of a voice of reason, there should be more of a think about my children's voice in there...

(Keryn: Anglo-Australian)

Women were critical of negative gender stereotyping the media produced and uncritically reproduced:

I thought it was interesting this week that when we've just passed what is the most significant laws to come from Parliament for ages, the papers were full of photos of her kissing her colleagues and they were the headlines. And I thought that was weird, and it actually makes me very angry. And we continue to see this focus on her as a woman instead of her as a leader, it's really unhelpful. So I don't like that, I mean, it's disappointing that it hasn't abated and I think it says a lot about how unequal we are, and it probably flies in the face of my comments earlier that the battles have largely been won, well they haven't. If you can't be a Prime Minister and just be dealt with on the basis of the work you do, it's pretty amazing.

(Kim: Anglo-Australian)

Well, I was absolutely dismayed, absolutely dismayed one day when I was looking at the national news and there was man holding up a placard... 'burn the witch' ... and I thought that is just disgusting...because you disagree with her politics, because you disagree with her opinion...

This was a man holding a venomous placard attacking her as a woman on national news at a very large rally, and I thought there are all these people standing around and nobody is saying to him 'take that down, put that away, that's not ok'. Everybody is just accepting that that's ok, 'go for it, what a bitch'.

And I think, you know, she's had a lot of things said about what she wears, and her hair, and her boyfriend, and her marital status and all sorts of things that I truly believe that it's because she's a woman, not because she's unintelligent, or ineffective as a leader, or anything like that.

(Sally: Anglo-Australian)

The existence of a female Prime Minister has acted as proof of the notion that 'girls can do anything', at the same time as her treatment within public discourse, and specifically at the hands of a powerfully misogynist media, has served as a warning. A

woman with leadership aspirations in reality faces amplified and concentrated sexism which, within the context of an Orwellian-styled assumed meritocracy, is re-privatised as a characteristic that is personal to her. Women reflected on what lessons their daughters could potentially take from such a situation:

I don't think a lot of girls would even bother trying to even go that far because of what they see get done to her, cause even Mikaela has come home and said things like 'oh well, it's not going well, Julia's not doing a good job', so yeah.

(Sharon: Anglo-Australian)

You can be smart, but you have to be pretty, and acceptable and not too opinionated, and ...people can attack you as a woman, that that's ok. So not only can they attack your opinions or your judgements or your work or anything else, they attack you personally because you're a woman and that's ok, so you've got to be perfect. And that's why my daughter ended up with depression because society was trying to make her perfect, and she felt the pressure to be perfect and she put it on herself to be perfect and to fit in, to not be the other.

(Sally: Anglo-Australian)

So as a female ...if we want to be accepted in this world, we've got to be better than a man, doesn't matter that we can have babies, and we can carry loads and do a lot more stuff than men, they don't weigh that up, you know, ... they are ever quick to down us, we have to be better, we have to be stronger...I just think it's just a big stereotype thing that they are doing on her, how can they possibly compare her with women.

...you need to compare what she's doing with what men are doing, but also realise it's stereotyping, it's discrimination...because I work out things by measuring and comparing and I do that because when you're an Aboriginal and Islander person...you're always getting compared to, or stereotyped.

(Helena: Aboriginal Australian)

The treatment of women political leaders should be of concern to all who support the leadership aspirations of girls. The personal undermining of the Prime Minister in explicitly gendered and sexual terms occurs within an assumed meritocracy where 'girls can do anything', masking structural barriers and effectively individualising 'failure'. The playing field is far from level; instead of a meritocracy women and girls report they must be 'perfect' and 'better than men'. Mary Crooks of the Victorian Women's Trust has argued that "If Julia Gillard, as an eminently capable person and

leader, is not able to continue serving as the first woman prime minister, it will set us back decades” (cited in Summers, 2012). The Trust is working on a project to address the “debasing and relentless attacks on our country's first female prime minister” arguing “[e]very time someone makes an attack on her authority to lead (as distinct from her policies), they are sending a subliminal message to every woman and girl that they are not welcome to sit at the table of real political power” (cited in Summers, 2012). I hope that the Trust and activists are able gain traction on these important issues, but as I conclude this essay I glance yet another headline “Gillard “slapped down” at G20 summit” (Benson, 2012) – one would have thought it would be impossible to put a negative spin on the leader of the world’s most successful economy speaking at this important international forum – but of course, within the sexual political landscape currently in place, women who dare to speak should be slapped and all the better if the media can pretend the whole world is slapping the Prime Minister and not just our own.

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