

I am Woman

What a moving site this week when Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (pictured), was sworn in by Australia's first female Governor General, Quentin Bryce. Australian women all over the planet are roaring in celebration of this unprecedented show of sisterhood in Australia's halls of power... Two strong women, technically three if we count the Queen, now hold the highest office of one of the world's major continents.



Non-Australians are often surprised to hear that Australia is a constitutional monarchy — our official head of state is Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. The Governor General of Australia is the Queen's representative, appointed by the Queen at the advice of the Australian Prime Minister. It can be confusing! At its simplest, the Governor General's role has historically been mostly symbolic and ceremonial (although not without controversy). As Australia's 25th Governor General, Quentin Bryce therefore exercises a range of procedural, executive and ceremonial powers similar to those of the Queen in Great Britain, such as granting Royal assent to laws passed by Parliament, signing regulations, signing and ratifying treaties, and swearing in of new Prime Ministers. The Prime Minister of Australia is the practical Head of State – the head of the government. The PM chairs the Cabinet, determines the Cabinet agenda and oversees the executive work of the government.

To have a female Governor General swear in a female Prime Minister in a country where testosterone still dominates is worth of voluminous collective roaring! Only 27 of 76 Senators (36%) and 37 of 150 Members of the House of Representatives (almost 25%) are women. Sadly for us idealists, these statistics are actually considered impressive against many benchmarks. The stark reality is that even in some of the world's most evolved and stable economic and political contexts, women still lag way behind men in their assumption of equal decision-making positions in the corporate and government sectors.

While women have proved equal to their male counterparts, their salaries and their representation at the top levels remain abysmal. The biannual Australian Census of Women in Leadership consistently highlights the under-representation of women in top executive and the gross "under-utilisation of the talents of the vast female workforce." In 2008, the Census revealed that the number of women on boards and in executive management positions in some areas has actually declined. Australia now trails – although not by much – the USA, UK, South Africa and New Zealand.

In Australia's top 200 companies (an Australian equivalent to the US Fortune 500), there are ten men to every one woman at the Board of Directors level, and 49 male CEOs for every female CEO. Over 50% of these companies have no female board members at all. When women do make it to the top line management echelons, they are overwhelmingly clustered in support roles that don't provide access to the profit-and-loss or direct client services, crucial pre-requisites for the top jobs. Women in other countries fare only marginally better. In Europe's top 200 companies women occupy only 8%. Not surprisingly, Nordic countries clearly lead the way. Norway has 22% of its board seats occupied by women, closely followed by Sweden with 20%. In annual studies by Catalyst women Board members constitute 13%-15% of Board membership of America's Fortune 500 companies. More heartening, only 10% of the Fortune 500 companies lacked a female board member. Similar statistics abound for women in executive roles in the corporate, professional and political arenas. Some large US firms (ex: Goldman Sachs, American Express, KPMG, Accenture) are recognizing this chronic waste of resources, and have been experimenting with alternative ways of encouraging women's career trajectories – such as the “off ramp/on ramp” model where women can power down for a few years while they raise families. However, the pace is glacial...

In the Australian political arena, it has taken over a hundred years for a female to rise to either of the two most powerful and crucial positions in the country. But women are no strangers to Australian politics. South Australia in particular, was a world pioneer – land-owning women could vote in local elections as early as 1861. In 1894, some 25 years before American women and 34 years before British women were granted the right, all South Australian women could vote and stand for elections to State parliament – a resounding symbol of equality in a land where men and women stood side by side to carve a modern democratic country out of red dirt and rocks. In 1901, along with their West Australian sisters, South Australian women voted in the very first Australian federal election. By mid 1902, all “white” Australian women (excluding Aboriginal Australian women, Asian, African or Pacific Islander Australian women) had the right to vote and stand in national elections. It was not until 1962, some 14 years after Aboriginal Australians were officially recognised as Australian citizens, and 5 years before they were counted in the Australian Census, that Aboriginal women shared the same rights as their “white” sisters.

Given this history, it seems only fitting that a law graduate of one of South Australia's prominent universities, be the first female to reach the top. But Julia Gillard's rise to the pinnacle of Australian politics, as for any female who has reached the top echelons, has not been easy. In typical Australian ‘tall poppy’ smashing style, the Welsh born Aussie has been mocked on multiple fronts – from her strong nasal accent, to “living in sin” with her hairdresser partner, having a pristine untouched kitchen (obviously not cooking dinner for her man when she arrives home late at night after a day at the office), to being a “Footscray fishwife,” to being a “ruthless barbed tongued left winger.” Conservative Senator Bill Heffernan asserted that Julia was unfit to lead a political party because she was “deliberately barren” and that leaders need to understand “the relationship between mum, dad and a bucket of nappies (diapers).”

Many wonder how past and present male Members of Parliament would describe their relations to buckets of nappies, and how that might qualify or disqualify them for the nation's top job. Julia Gillard has combated such barbs by earning a reputation as a formidable debater, a professional operator, a high performing Minister. Until her assumption of the PM role, she was an effective and loyal Deputy PM to Kevin Rudd. The pairing of Gillard and Rudd, as left and right compliments, delivered a Labor Party landslide in the 2007 election, bringing screaming halt to eleven years of conservative government. (In Australia, the conservative party is, ironically for Americans, named the "Liberal" Party). With a start in political life at the University of Adelaide, a stint as a lawyer in an all-male law firm, then as Chief of Staff for a Victorian State Opposition leader, Julia was first elected to Federal Parliament in 1998. Her Ministerial portfolios have included Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. She has also served on Parliamentary Committees for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and Public Accounts and Audit. Proponents of a continuing Labor government with Gillard at the helm argue that these combined experiences provide a rich history ensuring Gillard is not only highly qualified and experienced for the PM's role, but well prepared for the brutality of life at the top of Australian politics.

Upon assumption to the Prime Minister's role last week, Julia announced she would not move into the official Prime Minister's residence until she was "fulsomely" elected by the Australian people. She has now called an election for August 21st to give voting Aussies their say. Julia's assumption to the PM position was through a party leadership 'spill.' In Australia, the person chosen by the governing party as leader, becomes the Prime Minister. Equally the governing party can excise and replace the leader before their term expires, as was the case when Julia took over from then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. As one journalist cynically noted, Australians have never been afraid of slaughtering leaders who look like losers. Such spills often leave in their wake, bruised egos, bitterness and festering plots for revenge, all potential wedges for opposing parties to exploit ferociously.

Other aspiring Australian Prime Ministers have been asked in the past if they have the 'ticker' to stand up to those who will no doubt vociferously and artfully attempt to bring them down. As a woman, Gillard will almost certainly face more than her share of tall poppy slashing. Many Laborites argue she has already displayed strong ticker by being where she is today ... her steady track record in opposition and then in government. She clearly holds her own in the gruelling and notoriously colourful Australian Parliamentary Question Time, from which she was once ejected for calling the man who is now Leader of the Opposition a "snivelling grub."

Regardless of the outcome on August 21st, we bear witness at the end of this first decade of the 21st century, as two strong women enact their responsibilities in the highest offices of our country, giving hope to females of all ages and political persuasions that women can indeed aspire to be whoever they want to be, no matter how many "snivelling grubs" they encounter along the way...