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In 2002, the Clare Burton lectures were delivered by Moira Rayner, former Victorian Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, prominent lawyer, social policy analyst, human rights campaigner and author.

Focusing on women and politics, Moira's speech was full of insight and constructive analysis. Central to her analysis were five working propositions, which in our mind, deserve a wider audience. Below is an edited version of Moira's speech.

A Pound Of Flesh - Women, Politics and Power in the New Millennium

These are profoundly individualistic times. "Choice" is promoted as the pre-imminent public virtue. The idea of collective interests is as old-fashioned as talk about the common good. I use both terms without apology. Women have claimed, over a hundred years of women's suffrage, that their interests are different. Women have also claimed but I will argue, failed to convert institutional, political power to meet those particular social, emotional and philosophical needs.

I will suggest that women who are active in their communities tend to "do politics" differently and arguably better, because they take their social capital and invest it again in formal political structures. If they do this successfully, political women integrate their public lives with a strong sense of femininity, while taking the confidence and authority of public success, once thought of as 'masculine', back into the private realm of relationships, family and the home.

Women in politics are doing it hard. Women political leaders are targets—witness the public humiliation of Cheryl Kernot—not her erstwhile lover, Gareth Evans—and the overwhelming of her female Democrat successors; Meg Lees, who sought pragmatic credentials through a GST 'deal' with Coalition powerbrokers; and Natasha Stott-Despoja, once the media's darling until she attained political leadership when she became its object of derision. We have observed the scavenging over Carmen Lawrence's political career, though she was acquitted by a jury in just minutes, after a Royal Commission process that should have put paid to the fantasy that Royal Commissions are fair and discover truth.

We have also recently witnessed the attempts of factional warlords in the ALP to "wind back", its highly successful affirmative action targets to put quality women candidates in winnable seats. The historian Barbara Tuchman (1992) would call this "wooden-headedness"—the pursuit of policies by a political entity contrary to its own interests. In the end, the ALP's special convention backed off on lowering the targets, giving recalcitrant branches instead another decade to achieve even a target of 40% quality women candidates in winnable seats.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

My starting point is not that “women” do use power differently, but that the exercise of power by women seems to be very different, certainly in some circumstances. I begin with a big question: are there women with political power who use it in “womanly” ways—and what are they—and if there are, does this make a positive difference to women’s lives?

To explore it I asked five little questions

- 1- *Does a “critical mass” of women—either in large numbers or particular proportions relative to men—make a difference to the way political decisions are made or power is used?*
- 2- *Do women politicians bring different values, styles or approaches to the political process and working with government departments, ‘interest groups’ (such as the business sector) and community groups?*
- 3- *If so, do these values and styles actually result in different—and from women’s point of view, ‘better’ decisions?*
- 4- *What have our recent political women leaders left behind? And*
- 5- *What price do women pay for political power?*

**Does the presence of women in large numbers of particular proportions make a difference to political decision-making?
What do they bring to politics, that men do not?
Do they do politics differently or better?
Do they leave anything to build upon?
What do they pay, and must they always pay, for political power?**

FIRST PROVISIONAL HYPOTHESIS

Politically active women do not necessarily become different kinds of political leaders than men. What makes them “womanly” leaders is related to how they got their position. If it was as a result of family connections, the women appear more likely to model that ‘family’s’ attitudes and practices, the dominant political paradigm. There may be a veneer of ‘difference’.

There seems also to be a significant difference between these well-married or-connected/related women leaders; and those who ‘rose’ from the community, who seem to take the strategies and tactics that their own networks used, internally, to function in the formal political world. These tactics have tended to include co-operation, respect for others’ opinions and unwillingness to permit confrontation or aggression, or at least the language of such ideals.

Politically active women’s use of power seems to depend on what they wished to achieve through their political power—whether they have a clear Party or principled manifesto, and whether their agenda is based on ‘women’s

concerns', that is to say, a set of values based on their life experiences as women, and a commitment to women.

SECOND WORKING PROPOSITION

Women who are or have been active in their communities tend to find it more natural to 'do politics' differently, because they take their friendships, trust and co-operation-their social capital-and invest it in formal political structures. Successful women integrate into their public lives a strong sense of womanhood and, if they are lucky, can take the confidence and authority of their public success into the private realm of relationships, family and the home (Orenstein: 99). Women politicians who come from an activist background and who have struggled for recognition seem to find it easier to express inspirational values and seek to adopt a different political style, from those with business or professional backgrounds or who were slipped into 'safe' seats by powerful masculine networks (yes, men have networks too!). Women with community activist experience at least use the language of co-operation and respect for others' opinions and group support. Perhaps, given the long-standing party-political practice of awarding 'unwinnable seats' to such women, these qualities are more visible.

THIRD WORKING HYPOTHESIS

The 'style' women bring to their political activity directly affects their effectiveness. It is powerfully influenced by women's perceptions about what it means to be a woman with power, and whether they feel the need to be supported by other women, rather than powerful men or dynastic structures, and whether those needs are met. Those women who deliberately sought ongoing support from other women seemed to remain sensitive to 'women's issues' because they were constantly reinforced.

FOURTH WORKING HYPOTHESIS:

Women will not change a political culture in which they struggle, nor influence political decisions, unless they are closely linked to the executive side of government. Without a living pipeline to the community of interests of women, and keeping the 'ethical edge' that makes women different, women politicians are no more worthy of support than male politicians. That 'ethical edge' is easily chipped off or sandpapered away as the women climb. They need the company of women to keep it sharp. They need a long-term plan. Short-term wins are easily set back.

What have Australian political women leaders left behind them?

Is there any evidence that the women who follow them have foundations to build on? I think that the greatest legacy of women politicians is in their structural innovation; their courage and persistence, and the roles that they model, are important but not a sufficient bequest.

Let's look briefly at the achievements of Victorian women politicians of the Cain and Kirner years. These Victorian women politicians and their electorate assistants, secretaries and friends tried to look at each issue, and explain it to their male colleagues, from a women's perspective. They took their

community interests and made them public policy. "Private" issues became mainstream this way. Some of their male colleagues were enlisted and made symbolic changes, such as the Police Minister marching against rape; childcare, volunteer and community activities were government-funded. Most importantly, women became a legitimate source of advice for government. What mattered most then, was that there were structures left to influence policy and the political culture. All governments fall. If power is meant to be claimed, to be shared and used for more than individual benefits, then what it is used to attain most survive the natural fall of all governments.

There were a couple of major structures that survived. One was the LandCare program-a constructive, lasting achievement because it was built on existing community models and links. Another was the Victorian Women's Trust, also built with the support of women of every political persuasion, with its impact on public policy and progressive philanthropy.

FIFTH WORKING HYPOTHESIS

Building links among women without regard for party political differences leads to the kind of 'one voice' among women that, at symbolically important times, can make a very great difference to political decisions and to the democratic culture. It was the political will of Victorian women of all or no Party affiliation that stymied the Kennett government's plans to close down women's prisons and locate all women prisoners in Jika Jika, or "K" division, the 'punishment' wing of Pentridge men's prison in 1993 (Kirner:70). Women need to build lasting institutional or structural change; we tend to base our work on personal ties.

CONCLUSION

And so we come full circle. Does the presence of women in large numbers of particular proportions make a difference to political decision-making? What do they bring to politics, that men do not? Do they do politics differently or better? Do they leave anything to build upon? What do they pay, and must they always pay, for political power?

Women in politics do not necessarily change anything, unless they do "it" differently-and that difference depends on a consciousness of their gender. Achieving change takes more than merit and hard work. It includes bridge-building, on commonalities among women of all political views. A political woman doesn't have to 'be a bloke', but neither should she expect all other women to be 'sisters' (Kirner: 100-101).

However, women with political ambitions need an agenda. It should acknowledge that there are inequalities among women, that some women are not strong and competent, and that it is not weak to acknowledge this. Women politicians' agenda for change must be bedded into a justice framework. Successful political activity links women's personal experience of exclusion or discrimination with a fellow-feeling for the others 'on the outer'-men and children and women and the old and the poor and our unlawful' non citizens' in detention centres and Pacific camps, and the prisoners and the mentally ill - for whom systemic, radical change is required.

Above all, women politicians need to learn the history, language and skills associated with the “hard stuff”-the economics, the law, public administration, management and governance-without squandering their investment of the (arguably) ‘womanly’ values of trust, co-operation, community and the common good.

Moira Rayner 2002