

WHY THE SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES OF WOMEN
IN AUSTRALIA'S PARLIAMENT MATTER TO US ALL

SEX, LIES AND

'This book will
make you gasp,
shed a tear,
laugh at the sheer
absurdity of it
all, and get vocal
about the need
for change.'

JULIA GILLARD

QUESTION TIME

KATE ELLIS

**SEX,
LIES
AND
QUESTION
TIME**

KATE ELLIS

Hardie Grant
BOOKS

*To Sophie, Charlotte and Milla and their generation
of girls who are going to run the world*

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INTRODUCTION

TIME FOR CHANGE

THERE AREN'T MANY times when you get to witness the world changing before your very eyes. I clearly remember the difference it made when Julia Gillard became the nation's first female prime minister. As a member of parliament, I used to regularly visit the schools in my electorate and ask students to put up their hand if they thought they might be prime minister one day. As soon as Julia became prime minister, an army of girls would enthusiastically raise their arms. At community meetings parents would bring along their young daughters and explain how they were interested in running for parliament one day. An inspired generation of girls was emerging and seeing the world of possibilities available to them. It was such an obvious and palpable change that tears of joy welled in my eyes whenever I witnessed this wave of young women who were going to stand up and change the world.

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This is how it should be.

But it didn't last. Attention soon turned to the overtly sexist and misogynistic treatment Gillard received as prime minister. In the years that followed the headlines were full of controversies that raised new questions about why on earth any woman would want to go into politics.

Sarah Hanson-Young spoke out about being 'slut shamed' in the federal parliament after she was told to 'stop shagging men'; Julia Banks and Lucy Gichuhi both publicly alleged that bullying of women was commonplace in our political institutions; Emma Husar's career as an MP ended following unsubstantiated sexual allegations; and Julie Bishop was overlooked by her colleagues as a leadership candidate in favour of men who were far less popular with the general public. These are the stories that reached the public and dampened the mood of optimism and inspiration that had emerged all too briefly with Gillard's ascension in 2010.

By 2017 a Plan International Australia survey showed that zero per cent of the young women aged eighteen to twenty-five surveyed would consider entering politics as a future career. Zero. The most recent follow-up survey in 2019 showed that 90 per cent of young women still believed Australian female politicians were treated unfairly.

One of the things I find most jarring about this is that the almost fifteen years I spent as a member of Australia's House of Representatives were easily one of the most amazing experiences and greatest privileges of my life. I will never again hold a job that is as rewarding, interesting and inspiring as being a

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federal MP. I don't want a generation of women turned away from that opportunity. And I don't know that we are necessarily giving these young women a clear and full picture on which to base this decision.

The key question, though, is how will we ever get enough women into our parliament if the perception remains that politics is hostile to women's interests, women's needs and women's lives? And how does that impact the nation more broadly? A parliament that is not representative of our wider community is never going to be best able to select, address and prioritise the issues important to us all.

Since I retired from federal politics at the 2019 election my belief has only strengthened that we need more women fighting in our parliament to ensure that issues affecting all women in Australia are at centre stage. We continue to see women and children killed with devastating regularity across Australian cities and towns. We see women disproportionately shouldering the burden of the impacts of COVID-19 and facing a lifetime of disadvantage as a result. After an all too brief experiment with free and accessible childcare we have now returned to the outdated and fragmented childcare funding model, despite overwhelming evidence of the constraints this places on women's economic participation. Women make up over half of our population and we need their voices to be heard on issues across the board, from economic decision-making to policies on climate change and immigration. And it's not just about hearing their voices but also ensuring that their attitudes, their management and leadership styles and their interests are fairly represented.

At a time when we have a critical need for strong women fighting for reform on the issues that matter, we have thousands of young Australian women turning away and not even considering entering politics.

When I was an MP, my press secretary would sheepishly approach me with a request to speak about my experience as a woman in politics, already knowing full well what my answer would be. It was always no. Many of my female colleagues say the same thing.

I always felt very strongly that my job was to speak about the community that I was elected to represent. Not myself. We fight elections on issues and policy solutions and values, not so that we can be commentators on our own profession. It just seemed self-indulgent.

An even bigger reason I turned those offers down was that I am aware of my privilege. Mine is not a sob story. The issues faced by women in Australian politics are first world problems. We are women who are highly paid, who have access to power and who have a voice and a platform from which we can wield that power. If we want to focus on women's issues there are many other matters that are a far greater priority. Our job is surely to fight for those living in crippling poverty or sliding into homelessness, those facing sexual assault, domestic violence and being killed each week at the hands of men, those who are unsafe and helpless without any avenue to a fair and just existence. Of course we want our elected MPs focusing on these issues, and not on themselves.

So, in breaking the habit of a lifetime, in the pages that follow I write about the real-life experience of being a woman

in Australian politics. This is not an academic thesis. It is an insider's account of what I experienced in the years I had the privilege of serving in the parliament, and a reflection on the fact that while I am grateful for every second that I served, there are some things that happen to women that just should not occur, there are some things that we face disproportionately compared to the men we work alongside and there are some things that we need a broader public discussion about.

It is also a collection of firsthand insights from women who have served in our parliament. Over the past year, I interviewed a number of women from different political backgrounds about key issues women face in parliament. Some interviews were much longer and more personal than I had expected. Some were short and over the phone. Despite having worked alongside many of these women for years, I wanted to understand more of their lived experience: the good, the complicated and the hard parts of their daily realities. I am tremendously grateful to all the women who spoke so openly and honestly with me about their experiences and insights. I am also very aware of the number of amazing women who have made remarkable contributions who I did not speak to in this process. Those achievements are not unnoted.

Politics is a tough game for both men and women, but the obstacles and attacks that women often face are different. As Penny Wong told me, 'What is different for women in politics? Any woman who has achieved a position of significance has been subjected to different standards of behaviour to those which would be expected of men. Sometimes that has been more and

sometimes it has been less. That disparity has been greater for some women than others. But there is still always a difference.'

Different methods are used to undermine women. Different standards are set for women. Different attention is paid to the appearance and private lives of women. Different levels of respect and recognition are paid to the achievements of women.

Ever since I first contemplated writing this book I have struggled constantly with the sense that I am breaking the unspoken code of not acknowledging the sexist and unfair treatment that has long bubbled away in the background of parliament. It's a bit like that silly old view that you only share the full and gory details of childbirth with women who have already been through it, as though no woman would ever choose to have a child if they knew the truth. There are some who believe we shouldn't acknowledge the ugly stuff that occurs, out of some sense of fear that we will turn others off. In my view that horse has long since bolted.

The public has already seen the brutal side and have read the headlines. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said, in a speech at Oxford University in 2019, 'I am a very, very strong critic of the culture in Australian politics ... the culture with respect to women and with respect for women and attitudes to women in Australian politics is more like the corporate world in the 1980s, maybe a bit earlier. It's far, far too blokey.'

Staying silent, hoping behaviours will change, showing that we are strong enough to brush things off really isn't helping anyone. Pretending that everything is sunshine and lollipops is not only disingenuous, it is also counterproductive. I often

wonder, if we had been more forthright in calling the culture out earlier, would the appalling misogynistic attacks on Julia Gillard still have occurred? Could we have stopped things before they exploded so dramatically? Of course we will never know – but we should do all we can to stop this behaviour now.

I will not sugar-coat some of the examples of women's poor treatment, because I want it to be called out. I want it to stop. At the very least I want the next generation of women to go in with their eyes open, fully aware of the obstacles that they might face. Of how the culture in parliament has yet to catch up with the rest of Australian society, which has become better at calling this behaviour out more often. The next group of women do not need to start with a blank page. They can learn from the successes and struggles of those who have preceded them.

As Julia Gillard told me, 'Women starting in the parliament now have got the fantastic benefit that they've seen this movie before. And when you've seen the movie before, your ability to think in advance about how you will react and what you will do if these moments come in your political career is far better than it's ever been. That is such a huge advantage.'

I have tried to explore more than just the shocking stories that made headlines. I spoke to women about some of the silent challenges they have faced. There are some genuinely interesting issues in the support women provide to each other, and the relationships that women have within their own parties and across the chamber. I was surprised by how many women spoke of the role that fertility choices, pregnancy and balancing work and family had played in their careers.

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My favourite were the genuinely uplifting stories of what makes it all worthwhile. Tanya Plibersek summarised this most bluntly: ‘It’s utterly worth it. I would put up with ten times as much shit if I had to.’

Strangely, this is the part of the story that has largely been left untold – why it is worth every second. Almost every woman I spoke to had zero regrets about entering politics. Every woman spoke of how rewarding their work had been. We’ve seen how women can change the nation firsthand. It is so important that we highlight and celebrate the issues that have been acted upon because women worked in the parliament to champion them. There are many programs that have been funded and rolled out because a woman stood up and fought for them, many policies that deliver daily improvements to the lives of millions of Australians, and which only exist because a woman spoke up at the cabinet table. These are the achievements that we should highlight and celebrate. These are the reasons I believe with every inch of my being that being an MP is good for the women who do it, good for the parliament and absolutely good for the nation.

Of course, the under-representation of women in our parliaments isn’t just about a lack of interest. It’s about the male-dominated structures of power that still control our political parties and our preselections. As Labor’s example with ambitious affirmative action rules shows, you need women involved to advocate and achieve reform. The Labor Party now benefits from the decades-long campaign by many women and some men to adopt rigid rules around increasing the number of

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women in parliament. This doesn’t just benefit those women, it begins to erode the male-dominated power structures and brings different voices into the decision-making process – something that is proven to improve outcomes in all industries.

I want to see more women in politics and I also want politics to be better for them. But not just for those women, for everybody. Our federal parliament sets the tone for the nation. It determines what the future of Australia looks like. I suspect many women in parliament would say, ‘It’s a tough job and it’s not everyone’s cup of tea but we will just get on with it.’ That is exactly what I would have said a few years ago. You become acclimatised to it. I now think differently. I’ve seen how much the culture in parliament is behind the rest of society. It is outdated, toxic and often unfair, particularly for women. That cannot be the right environment in which to set the laws that impact us all, and nor does it reflect our values.

A better parliament would mean a better Australia. That’s why it should matter to all of us.

CHAPTER 1

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT WASN'T always lagging behind the rest of the nation and in need of urgent change. Australia was once a trailblazer throughout the world for ensuring a place for women in our political system. Our nation has been home to some of the biggest achievements of women throughout the years. In 1902 we became the first country to give women the right to vote and also to run for and serve in federal parliament, following on from New Zealand, which was the first nation to let women vote in 1893. This was a major breakthrough, and a huge credit to the legacy of the suffragettes and others who had agitated for change. By comparison, the United States took a further eighteen years before allowing women the vote in 1920.

From here though, progress was slow. The time lag between women being allowed to run for federal parliament and the first women actually being elected was a staggering forty years.

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The first female state MP was Edith Cowan, elected to the WA Parliament in 1921, but it wasn't until 1943 that federal parliament had its first female MPs with the election of two trailblazers, Dame Enid Lyons for the United Australia Party and Dorothy Tangney for Labor. And we had to wait until 1976 before Senator Margaret Guilfoyle became our first female cabinet minister, serving in the Fraser Government.

In 1990, Carmen Lawrence became premier of WA, in the same year that Joan Kirner became premier of Victoria. Rosemary Follett had been chief minister of the ACT in 1989 and was again from 1991 to 1995. It felt like change was afoot, with a number of women in key leadership positions for the first time.

In 2010, a full 107 years after women won the right to run for public office, Australia finally had its first female prime minister in Julia Gillard. And there are firsts that still remain. Of the forty federal treasurers since Federation, not one has been a woman, with the nation's supreme economic decision-making role having been deemed a men-only affair throughout the entire history of our nation.

I suspect those women who fought so hard for the right to vote in 1902 hoped we would have come a bit further since then. In 2019, 51 per cent of Australia's population was female. After the May 2019 election, forty-six of the 151 seats in the House of Representatives were filled by women. That's 30 per cent. In better news, after the 2019 election, thirty-nine of the seventy-six senators are women, meaning the Senate has finally reached equal representation.

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It is worth noting though that this representation is not evenly spread across the major parties. As of December 2020 the number of ALP MPs who are female is 47.9 per cent, for the Liberals this figure is 26.1 per cent and for the Nationals 25 per cent.

For most of its history, parliament has been a boys' club, and boys' clubs are not in the business of going into voluntary liquidation. History shows us that the gains women have made have only ever been achieved as a result of protest and agitation, pressure and persuasion.

The role of Victoria's first female premier, the late Joan Kirner, in smashing down these barriers cannot be underestimated. As a prime mover behind the Emily's List organisation, which works to elect and support Labor women, Kirner argued that without set affirmative action targets, Labor's ability to do something meaningful about gender inequality would remain well-meaning talk with no real action.

The Labor Party's historical roots are in the union movement, whose leadership over the years has been almost exclusively male. And within the Australian Labor Party there are factions – highly influential groups with ideologies on either the right or left of politics – which have equally been male dominated. While the Labor Party operates as one party, most elected members align themselves with either the right or the left faction for ideological and organisational purposes. Kirner realised that, without the forced discipline of hard-and-fast rules, the Labor Party, like the Liberals today, could continue to see gender equality as something nice to aim for, instead of a non-negotiable.

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The hard-fought advocacy that followed the formation of Emily's List in 1996 culminated at the Australian Labor Party's national conference in 2015 when the party adopted binding rules that commit it to achieving equal gender representation by 2025.

The Liberal Party has yet to adopt this course of action. In 2019, the Coalition Morrison Government had six women of the twenty-three cabinet ministers, just one woman serving in the seven-member outer ministry, and only three women of the twelve assistant ministers – an embarrassing and inexcusable female participation rate of 23 per cent.

There was something sadly predictable about the October 2020 report by the Menzies Centre, the Liberal Party's research arm, into their poor performance in boosting female participation in our parliaments. For the first time, the party admitted that it had a problem, with the proportion of female MPs in the federal Liberal Party languishing at around 25 per cent. It felt like progress to read such an honest admission, but yet again, the party balked at the idea of quotas, still claiming that natural attrition, the targeting of seats for female candidates and the innate goodwill of sitting male MPs to vanish into the night could somehow boost female participation through a process of evolution. It hasn't worked so far, so on what basis do they think it will suddenly work now?

It will likely take dedicated advocates within the Liberal Party to start speaking up before real change will happen. Minister Sussan Ley has become one of the first to go on the record saying the Liberal Party should, in the first instance, adopt targets and then consider quotas.

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She explained to me, 'I was sitting in the last few months of the last parliament, and someone said to me, "I've been looking down at your party. Do you realise how few women there are and how unrepresentative of broader society that suggests that your party is?" I thought, I want more women in our party.' She remains ambivalent about quotas though. 'I feel like it is the outcome not the mechanism that is important. Should it be a quota? As soon as you say that, the next question is, how will it work? To that I would say, it's actually a matter for my party. And I would like my party at divisional level in New South Wales to consider it.'

Some baby steps, maybe.

Getting to Canberra is only part of the challenge for women. As almost every woman I have spoken to for this book attests, the next obstacle is being taken seriously, being heard, being promoted and being respected. Unfortunately women in politics don't always enjoy these rights as a matter of course. At its worst, to co-opt that infamous line from former right-wing shock jock Alan Jones, there is a view that letting women into politics simply results in them 'destroying the joint'.

Clearly, the problems female politicians have in the workplace are not unique to parliament, or indeed the Australian Public Service (where the 'marriage bar' still forced women to give up their jobs after marriage until 1966). Any woman who has worked in a male-dominated industry knows what sexism looks like. But while corporate Australia has made big strides in favour of equality on many fronts – like new policies promoting work-life balance, robust anti-bullying and sexual harassment

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policies, and an embrace of more flexible work – parliament remains stubbornly stuck in the past. Former foreign minister and deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop believes there is something innately sexist about parliament and that this can be traced back to its origins. ‘It’s the whole culture of the place,’ she told me. ‘The way it developed, the environment of parliament, the adversarial nature that was developed and devised at a time when there were only male parliamentarians and no, or very few, women. It was a male domain, and I think that culture remains. While men are in the majority, and women are in the minority, it will be harder to effect change.’

The sense that parliament is a male domain infects its processes, too. Politics is all about conversation. At the electoral level it is an ongoing conversation with your constituents about the issues that affect them, but at the policy level it is about your ability to champion and critique ideas. This can be when you are on the floor in the chamber of the House of Representatives when MPs gather during question time, or within caucus or your party room (where members of your political party hold meetings). And, if you are among the lucky female few who becomes a minister in charge of a particular department, like Defence, then this can happen around the cabinet table when you are meeting with other senior ministers.

The nature of male networking and male behaviour can mean that, at times, women’s contributions fall on deaf ears. One current sitting MP describes a world in which women’s ideas are invisible and unheard, only to be hailed as visionary when repeated by a male colleague. ‘It is all of the classic stuff, sitting

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in a meeting with six or eight people around the table and a woman saying an idea and nobody really acknowledging it,’ she said. ‘Then a bloke will say it five minutes later and everyone will respond: “Great idea. Let’s do that.” That happens to me a minimum of once a week. They just cannot hear a woman’s voice. It manifests itself in people taking credit for your work, for your ideas. People are really confronted if you challenge them on it directly.’

Double standards apply to the conduct of male and female MPs, which see men who become forceful or fiery as passionate advocates, while women who behave that way are viewed as typical irrational females flying off the handle.

Equally, men who make rare familial sacrifices are hailed as heroes, while women are dismissed as distracted or unfocused if they must adjust their work commitments to care for or accommodate a child. Perhaps it explains why, after Ros Kelly gave birth while serving in the House of Representatives in 1983, it took until 1999 for Anna Burke to become the second woman to do so. A male politician who puts family first is a role model, whereas a woman who does so is conflicted, unreliable, and probably suffering from baby brain. These stereotypes are not unique to parliament but are arguably more ingrained within a culture that is out of step with mainstream Australia on gender roles.

‘Men’s anger is treated in different ways to women’s anger,’ Tanya Plibersek said. ‘I can never lose my temper. Blokes do it all the time. And that’s just completely par for the course. And it’s forgiven. It’s acceptable behaviour. If a woman did

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it she'd be a hysterical bitch. I think I have to be better at my job than the equivalent bloke. I think if I say I can't come to a meeting because of family stuff, people mark that against you as proof that you're not up to the job. If a bloke says that they say, "What a great bloke, what a fantastic guy." If you're a bloke and you say you can't or won't because of family reasons you are commended for having got the balance right.'

True diversity, and even gender diversity, must run much deeper than just an even spread of men and women. In so many ways, our parliament is far from being representative of our community.

In the early years of my career, my experiences were shaped by my relative youth and all the stereotyped scrutiny that came with that. I was twenty-seven. The current average age of Australian MPs is fifty-one, and the average age of the Australian population is thirty-seven. So perhaps it's time for more young voices to be heard as well.

Then there are women who face the double, or even triple, whammy of being excluded or regarded differently (or unfavourably) on the basis of not only their gender but also their race, disability or sexuality.

While people with a disability make up a whopping 18 per cent of the Australian population they represented just 1 per cent of major party candidates at the 2019 election. Indigenous Australians represent 3.3 per cent of the Australian population, but fewer than 2 per cent of candidates in 2019 were First Nations people. Australia is one of the greatest multicultural success stories on earth, its development and growth made

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possible by successive waves of immigration, but less than 10 per cent of 2019 candidates were regarded as having a multicultural background.

Recent analysis showed that in 2019 our federal parliament was no more diverse than it was in 1988.

My fellow South Australian Labor MP Penny Wong finds herself in the unique and sometimes unenviable position of being an outsider across several key criteria, and has a hilariously awkward moment from a commercial television appearance to prove the point. 'I did this breakfast TV show once and one of the hosts said to me: "You're Asian, gay and a woman, that's the holy trinity!" And I was like, oh no.'

Penny admitted she has struggled with the burden of being someone who appears to be staging a one-woman exercise in smashing simultaneous barriers. But she's learnt to live with the role. After all, there is nothing she can do to change it. She has also accepted that her progress is meaningful to others in the same position as her.

'I used to resist notions of "trailblazer" or "role model" or those sorts of labels because I felt the weight of them,' Penny told me. 'But I remember early on in my career giving a speech at a university, where all these young women were coming up to me. A lot of them were kids of Asian heritage who had come to see me and they were really excited. I realised it had changed their perception of their own aspirations and their own possibilities. And I thought, well, that's actually why this does matter, because it's not about you, it's not about self-aggrandising, or thinking of yourself as a role model because you're great. It changes how

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people perceive their own possibilities and that is really important to social change. Thinking about it like that helps. But I found it hard at times, the personal weight of it all.’

It has been easier for Penny to deal with issues of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender than it has with the challenges brought by race and sexuality. ‘The gender stuff is shared,’ she said. ‘We know what that is, we know that patriarchy exists, we see that every day. It’s something shared and understood by other women.’

As the highest profile lesbian woman in parliament, Penny faced the ‘traumatising experience’ of carrying the expectations of the LGBTIQ+ community in the years leading up to the Marriage Equality Law Postal Survey in 2017. For someone who is portrayed as tough and tenacious – and sometimes, wrongly, as unemotional – she admits that the pressure came with an emotional toll, which only became obvious at the joyful moment the yes vote prevailed. Iconic footage shows Penny breaking down in tears of relief.

‘When we look back now there was lots that was wonderful – the win itself and the fact that the country was so affirming – but for many people it evoked a lot of pain, a lot of fear and a lot of their own grief over their own challenges about coming out,’ she said. ‘I remember at one point going to a pub in Brisbane and giving a speech, and people were really stressed. It was a pretty difficult point in the campaign. There’d been a lot of aggro. There were grown men and women crying. And I thought, I don’t know how to keep doing this. I have to keep projecting optimism and positive energy and empowerment

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and strength. But actually, I just felt overwhelmed. But I decided that I couldn’t let anyone see that. They needed to see me saying that we could do this.’

Penny had earlier become a target of critics who were blind to her long-term internal advocacy to change the party position on marriage equality and her work to achieve change from within.

‘There were times when people became personally aggressive. I remember one gay man accusing me of homophobia, and there were some pretty awful things written about me by the very group of people I was trying to represent. That was hard. But that’s life.’

There was another exchange Penny recalls that underscores a great hypocrisy in the expectations placed on women in senior political roles. While our parliaments have been filled since the dawn of democracy with male ministers who have no direct life experience of their portfolio, with female MPs the question is often asked: what would she possibly know about that? In Penny’s case, this once again became an issue not just of gender but of race and sexuality.

‘When I was first on the frontbench and was given employment services, a journalist asked me, “How can an Asian lesbian talk with any authority about the northern suburbs of Adelaide?” And I thought, wow, you would never say that John Howard as a white, wealthy man couldn’t represent certain people.’

There is further evidence of how slow parliament has been to be truly representative of the Australian community. It remains extraordinary to me that we did not elect our first Aboriginal

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woman to the House of Representatives until Linda Burney became the Member for Barton in 2016. It was the same election that brought our first Muslim woman to federal parliament in Anne Aly.

For Linda, being the sole representative of Aboriginal women was nothing new. ‘By the time I got into mainstream politics, I was used to being very often the only Aboriginal person in the room, and also very often the only woman in the room.’

Linda is passionate about her background, her purpose and ensuring that her perspective is heard. She acknowledges the role that her experiences as an Aboriginal woman have played in making her a successful trailblazer. ‘I also was in the Aboriginal movement. I was an activist, I had dealt with Aboriginal politics, which are complex and extremely difficult. That was a great grounding for me being a mainstream politician. I really felt that my Aboriginality was an enormous positive for me going into the political arena as a woman. I just saw it as a real strength, a real grounding. I knew where I came from. I knew what I stood for, and I didn’t have any of that angst.’

It also means that she carries more weight than most. She balances cultural issues and considerations with policy analysis and has extra work that is barely seen by the rest of us – meeting with Elders wherever she travels, showing respect and consulting on issues far broader than her own portfolios. She also helps her community far outside the borders of her own electorate.

‘They ring me when things get really hard. There’s not only the expectation within the parliament, but there’s the expectation within the community as well that I don’t think the parliament

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really sees. There are things that I had a responsibility for that probably other people wouldn’t have responsibility for.’

The weight of the Indigenous communities’ views and hopes continues to fall on the shoulders of a disproportionately low number of elected Indigenous MPs and senators, and our parliament is poorer for it.

We have to travel further afield than Canberra to find the story of another truly remarkable trailblazer who represented yet another desperately under-represented group of Australians. In 2010, Kelly Vincent was elected to the South Australian Parliament at the age of twenty-one, making her the youngest woman ever elected to any parliament in Australian political history. The Dignity Party MP is a pioneering campaigner for the rights of people with disabilities. Kelly had been second on the upper house ticket for the Dignity Party, which secured 1.2 per cent of the vote. Tragically, the party’s number one candidate, Paul Collier, died of a brain haemorrhage eleven days before election day, meaning Kelly won the seat.

For Kelly, entering politics wasn’t so much about overcoming the obstacles that had historically troubled women trying to enter parliament. It wasn’t even about her youth, at least not at first. It was a much more literal battle with the physical obstacles preventing her from even getting into the building. She has spastic cerebral palsy which affects both her legs and her left arm. Upon her election, works needed to be carried out to the South Australian Parliament House to modify the toilets and even the parliamentary chamber to ensure she could access it in her wheelchair. She, too, faced questions about whether as a

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21-year-old woman she had the required experience to serve as an MP. In an interview after her election she answered that she had ‘twenty-one years of life experience with a disability which, let me tell you, is twenty-one years more than anyone else in this building’.



Parliament is the highest office in the country, the place where decisions for the benefit of all Australians are made, ones that will affect everyone from an Indigenous person from rural Western Australia to a second-generation migrant from Brisbane to a woman with a disability in Adelaide. Our parliament must be reflective of our community, but right now the statistics, and our own eyes, show us that it is not. There are consequences of this: the disconnect between parliament and the people it should benefit, and a parliamentary culture that is not reflective of Australian society.

In November 2020 the ABC’s *Four Corners* aired a program titled ‘Inside the Canberra Bubble’ that pointed to deep cultural issues in parliament. The program centred around the revelation that married Morrison Government Minister Alan Tudge had engaged in a consensual affair with one of his staff members, Rachele Miller, and that following its conclusion she was basically blacklisted, moved on, and eventually moved out of her job entirely. Further sexual allegations were also raised about fellow married minister Attorney-General Christian Porter.

The program received an explosive reaction. The Morrison Government declared it an outrage and an intrusion on the male

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ministers’ privacy and sent off complaints to the Chair of the ABC. But it also elicited a huge private reaction from current and former female staff who found it deeply triggering. It was all too familiar.

I remember how I felt when I was hit on by a fellow MP. It was a crude approach rather than a romantic one; from his bombastic tone, it was clear he did not value me as an equal. I was shocked and offended but also scared. Though I awkwardly laughed it off and pretended it wasn’t a big deal, I wondered if there would be professional repercussions. Had I just made a powerful enemy? I was a federal government minister at the time, so I can’t imagine how it must feel for female staff who are subjected to this kind of behaviour much more frequently. The power imbalance is so much greater. MPs have the ability to hire and fire at will. They determine which staff will be promoted and whose careers will be left to languish. In many cases they determine who to mentor and support to be preselected. In other words, they choose the people who can become our future members of parliament.

One of the things that I found most concerning about the *Four Corners* episode was the reaction to the story from members of Canberra’s press gallery. Opinions on the merit and importance of the story were divided largely along gender lines. Many were asking, what is the public interest in this stuff? On what basis is the invasion of privacy justified? I would have thought the cultural issues presented provided a pretty obvious answer to this question.

Parliament should set the standard for the nation, showing us who we are and who we want to be. The laws made there

affect every single one of us, and the visibility of our parliamentarians makes them role models, for better or worse. Their behaviour sets the tone for our national discourse. Yet it's clear our national parliament – its members, its processes and its norms – is seriously out of step with Australian culture. And it isn't going to change by itself. Cultural change will only happen if we demand that it does. So let's start talking about what needs to change, and why.

CHAPTER 2

WEAPONISING SEXUAL GOSSIP

I HAD ONLY been a politician for a few weeks when I was approached in a Canberra bar and told, 'The only thing anyone really wants to know about you, Kate, is how many blokes you had to fuck to get into parliament.'

This statement was made to me by a then Liberal staffer who went on to be a senior MP, who interrupted a conversation I was having at the pub during one of my first sitting weeks. I had won a marginal seat from a popular, long-term incumbent Liberal MP in an election when my party was largely annihilated. But, sure, if that's how he thinks elections work. I had never spoken to him before and subsequently tried to limit our interactions over the next decade.

It was the kind of run-of-the-mill sleaze and innuendo which is so common it is almost unremarkable in the culture of federal politics.