MODERNISING THE PARLIAMENTARY LIBERAL PARTY BY ADOPTING THE ORGANISATIONAL WING’S QUOTA SYSTEM FOR PRESELECTIONS

Introduction

Women comprise just over 50 per cent of the Australian population. Yet this reality is not adequately reflected at executive levels of leadership in politics, industry and business. In federal politics, concern is no longer about a lack of progression, but arresting a slide to regression. It is a very real possibility that after the next election, the number of women in the Federal Parliament may actually decline for the first time since Federation.

While still far from the Holy Grail of equality, Australian industry has mapped a path focussed on practical measures that help to identify, mentor and promote women into roles of responsibility and leadership. Businesses are taking active steps to increase the number of women in senior roles of leadership because they understand the tangible benefits that follow.

The residual disproportion of women in parliament should not be seen as a women’s issue alone. It should be viewed as a challenge concerning every Australian as it goes to the heart of representative and responsible governance of this nation.

Certainly the existing mechanism for getting more Liberal women into parliament is not working. Clearly this is something we need to address.

As a Liberal Party Senator representing Victoria for 17 years and before that as a Female Country Vice President of the Victorian Division of the Liberal Party, this is a trend I have witnesses with concern. The purpose of this policy paper is to briefly set out the current challenge, and propose a remedy that may be considered for implementation by the Liberal Party at least initially in my home division of Victoria.

Sincerely

Judith Troeth

Senator the Hon Judith Troeth
Overview

Australia can rightly pride itself on being an early achiever in the democratisation of equality for women. Yet while Australia became one of the first countries to give women the right to stand for election to parliament (alongside the right to vote) in 1902, it was among the last to finally get a women elected in 1943, 41 long years later.\(^1\)

The slow delivery of progress may be why Australian parliaments have not developed to levels reflective of the broader composition of our society. Britain and New Zealand have elected female prime ministers, and the United States progressed to a woman (Hillary Clinton) making a competitive bid for the presidential nomination of her party.

Australia deserves accolades for our own set of firsts. Among them are the women deputy leaders of both major parties, a woman as governor general, women as senior cabinet ministers and shadow ministers and several women as state government premiers.

But by 2010, Australia should be beyond the unique nature of parliamentary firsts, and accustomed to parallel representation. This should be continuously developed by the many capable women progressing through party preselection to parliament and beyond. Unfortunately this is not the case.

While still having a way to go, industry and business seem years ahead of their political contemporaries. Andrea Grant, a senior business professional with an accomplished background and current head of human resources for Telstra, illustrates this well.

As the first female director on the board of General Motors Holden in Australia, Grant says when she was first appointed; I felt like I had a green face and two antennae. The chairman and managing director were passionate about diversity, so by the time I left there were five women on the team. It’s always about choosing the right person for the job, but if you get women on to the candidate list, then they at least have the opportunity to be selected.\(^2\)

The custom defence against quotas is the ‘what about merit’ argument, as if to be for quotas you must be against merit. Like the charge of tokenism, it eventually fails the test of reason after sitting in a parliamentary party room for nearly 20 years without seeing a progressive increase in the cohort of women members. As if those handful of women members who are there were the only ‘women of merit’ who put themselves forward for preselection.

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It’s become increasingly apparent that the existing arrangements are insufficient at identifying and encouraging more women of merit to put their hand up and win Liberal Party preselection. This needs to change.

Where we currently stand

Among the 1421 candidates who nominated for the 2007 federal election (1054 HoR candidates and 367 senate candidates), 407 were women. After the election, 26.7 per cent of members of the House of Representatives were women, while (as at 1.7.2008 intake) on the latest count, 35.5 per cent of senators are women. Contrary to Paul Keating’s remark about unrepresentative swill, it would appear that the Senate is the chamber most representative of broader community demographics.

Women account for 32.5 per cent of the parliamentary Labor Party in the House of Representatives, while 21.8 per cent of Liberal Party MPs are women (with 10 per cent of National Party MPs women). Of the current House of Representatives, around 70 per cent of the 41 women MHRs sit on the Government benches. While the number of Liberal women elected to parliament rose between 1993 and 1996, the gears of change have since been left to rest in idle. It is my view that the Liberal Party has to do better in this regard because Australia needs and expects us to do better.

During my time in the Senate I have been able to observe a number of trends in this respect. It is my view that to achieve real progress in the number of women entering parliament, change needs to be made at entry level – preselection and mentoring of prospective female candidates.

I believe this is important for two reasons. The first is that better policy outcomes are achieved with input and collaboration from women representatives. The second is that with more women members of parliament, there will be a greater cohort of prospective ministerial and leadership candidates coming through.

Unlike the ALP’s Emily’s List, I am not concerned about the specific ideological persuasion of prospective Liberal women candidates, other than embracing the same broad philosophical values and aspirations as espoused by the Liberal Party.

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Australia needs the input of women in legislative decision making. Women have the capacity to make personally informed decisions on issues like paid parental leave, welfare reform, migration, legislation affecting indigenous Australians, agriculture, and the economy among other issues.

The status quo on quotas

Both major Australian political parties have their own system of quotas. The Australian Labor Party has a formal system of quotas for their parliamentary intake, where 40 per cent of candidates selected for preselection by 2012 must be women.\(^6\)

While the ALP also has the Emily’s List forum which provides fundraising, networking and support for women candidates, it insists those candidates agree with the policy platform of Emily’s List, such as being pro-choice. In the Liberal Party, individual conscience is a strongly held freedom whether or not one agrees with the person exercising it. A replica of the Emily’s List model would not be acceptable to Liberal women or the wider Party.

The Liberal Party has always proudly reserved fifty per cent of positions within our internal structure for women\(^7\). The parliamentary wing is the only platform of the Liberal Party that does not embrace a quota system. Even with the recent radical reform of the Victorian Division’s internal structures, the positions of party vice presidents down to individual branch positions, along with state administrative members and electorate conference delegates are equally divided between male and female office bearers. The Federal Executive of the Liberal Party even has a position reserved exclusively for the Chair of the Federal Women’s Council.

They are the same equal conditions that Dame Elizabeth Couchman fought for and won in 1944 as chair of the Australian Women’s National League, where she negotiated with Sir Robert Menzies for the League to join with the Liberal Party on the basis that there would be equal representation of men and women.

The comparison to the parliamentary wing could not be more stark. Whereas the number of women participating in the organisational wing has remained consistent with the number of men, the same cannot be said of the parliamentary party, where the number of women has not been able to grow at a consistent level through successive elections.

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\(^7\) *Ibid*, page 59
At different times four women have led the Victorian Division of the Liberal Party, with the first woman state president, Mrs Joy Mein OBE, elected in 1976. An inaugural component of the Liberal Party, the internal quota system has ensured women take an active participatory and leadership role at all levels of the organisational wing.

While the Liberal Party has existing forums that perform a valuable role in the development of a selection of future candidates, in their current format they have not sufficiently increased the number of successful women candidates. What is missing from these important structures is an outcome of change.

Moving forward

Quotas have been a part of the Liberal Party of Australia since its formation. To ensure equal representation in internal party positions, the women who joined with Sir Robert Menzies’ vision for a progressive and truly representative party insisted on it.

This paper advocates the introduction of a quota system for the Victorian Division of the Liberal Party of Australia to endorse women for preselection in a minimum of 40 per cent of its seats for the federal election held after 2010/2011.

I am further recommending that this quota be increased to 45 per cent within a period of five years after that election. In regard to training and development, I am also advocating that the future candidates training forum become aligned with other internal structures by adopting a fifty per cent quota of women participants.

Recognising that part of the implementation of this proposal needs to be incremental, the quota portion would be staggered over two terms of federal parliament, between 2013 and 2017. For the Victorian state parliamentary party, I suggest an implementation date be set prior to the 2014 election and increased in time for the 2018 election.

This paper recognises that getting women into parliament is not means to an end. Once elected, it is hoped that women can progress further into additional roles of committee, party, portfolio and leadership responsibility. But getting more women into parliament is an important achievement in and of itself.

This paper should be received in the same good faith that it has been written. It is based on the experience that equality of representation informs good policy and effective outcomes because it better reflects the community we seek to govern. It is founded in the belief that a stronger Liberal Party means a stronger Australia. Because at our best there is no other political party more attuned to the Australian people, and more prepared to lead them well.

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