

# Has Julia Gillard's tenure made it easier for the next woman?

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## Introduction

A striking paradox of our democracy is that while we were one of the first countries in the world to enfranchise women more than a century ago, the passage of women into our parliaments since has been slow and fitful.

My mother, born in 1920, had to wait ninety years before she experienced the joy of seeing a woman become prime minister of Australia. Julia Gillard's elevation to the highest office of the land, in June 2010, was a singularly historic, new chapter in Australia's political narrative. But it was a short one, dominated by belligerent and vengeful politics, sexism and sexist abuse. On her demise, after Rudd's Pyrrhic victory, Gillard reflected that her experience would make it easier for the next woman and the woman after that and the woman after that. Will it really?

Prime Minister Gillard successfully negotiated the formation of a minority government, the fourteenth in our history. Against the odds, with a slim majority on the floor of the Lower House, she led the government for a full term and oversaw the passage of close to 500 pieces of legislation, including significant nation-building reform in water policy, welfare and education. On her watch, the economy was the envy of the world – low unemployment, low interest rates, low inflation and triple-A credit ratings. Despite these accepted measures of political success, within and beyond the parliament, Gillard was subjected to a ferocious campaign trying to break her resolve, a campaign that became fiercer the more she remained resilient and composed.

Gillard was an especially talented, dedicated, highly skilled and hard-working politician. Like all politicians, she made errors of judgement. Like all the prime ministers before her, she had to learn on the job. Like all the leaders before her, she was more popular with some of the population than with others. So why did she draw out such hostility and visceral hatred like no one before?

Many of the key dimensions to her leadership and the performance of the minority government have been canvassed already in several published accounts. No doubt more are on the way. What is missing in the public discourse so far, however, is an explicit recognition that having a woman as prime minister revealed a great deal about us as a nation.

If the first woman prime minister could be subjected to such double standards and treated so shamefully, what does it say about us as a society; what does it mean for the future of women in politics; and the achievement of gender equality more broadly?

The experience of the first female in the nation's top job shook Australia up.

Like the curate's egg, there were good bits and bad bits. A significant component of the public response to Gillard was, and remains, strongly positive and bodes well for the future.

Another component, however, brought to the surface deep seams of sexism and sexist abuse, which became part of the political weaponry.

This ugly cultural reality will need to be countered and changed if Gillard's hopeful legacy – that she has made it easier for the next woman – is indeed realised.

Gillard's term in office was followed by an Abbott cabinet of eighteen men and one woman, the lowest female representation since 2001. Further exclusion of women has occurred as the raft of significant public appointments made since have almost solely comprised older, white, conservative men with business or law backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> This swift reversion to a traditional male-dominated political regime suggests the story-book on women in politics has been snapped firmly shut and may well be for some time to come. But has it? Is it possible for Australian women in political life to hold high office without being greeted with vicious sexism and misogynistic pushback?

### **A breakthrough moment in our history**

In 1903, a Victorian woman, Vida Goldstein, became the first female in the British Empire to stand for parliament. A World War passed, followed by the Great Depression and still no women were elected to the national parliament. It was not for want of trying. Finally, mid-way during the Second World War, Enid Lyons entered the House of Representatives and Dorothy Tangney took a seat in the Senate.

By now, Australian women were achieving higher levels of secondary and tertiary education, joining the paid workforce and entering professions in significant numbers. They were also breaking new ground in many areas and endeavours – in science, medicine, law and business – but this was not translating to anywhere near the same degree into significantly increased numbers of women in our body politic. The progression continued at glacial speed.

From the time Enid Lyons took her place in federal parliament in 1943, two more decades elapsed before a woman would hold a federal portfolio (Annabelle Rankin, Housing, 1966) and a further two decades for a woman to hold the senior parliamentary office of Speaker (Joan Child, 1986) or lead a political party (Janine Haines, Australian Democrats, 1986).<sup>2</sup>

It took more than a century for a woman to become an Australian prime minister. No wonder so many people, especially women, saw Julia Gillard's ascension to prime ministerial office as the historic breakthrough of their time.

### **An unbroken line of men doing politics**

Over this long, long period, Australia's political leadership has been almost completely the preserve of men. From 1901 until 2008, all twenty-six prime ministers, all thirty-eight opposition leaders and all twenty-four governors-general have been men. Maleness (as well as being white) has been the deeply entrenched norm, the 'natural' order of things.

Men have been doing all the governing. Generation after generation have unconsciously absorbed male voices, male suits, male views and male appearances. We have come to associate authority with maleness – army generals, naval commanders, business leaders, bishops, rabbis, football coaches and prime ministers. Subconsciously we have defined commanding leadership by the performance of men.

This has been the case with our politics. We are steeped in, and utterly familiar with, the hurly burly of political life as played out by men. We watch the manoeuvrings and take as 'normal' the adversarial culture of our parliaments. Ambition and combative temperaments are 'normal'. We shrug at their foibles, their womanising, the 'colourful' characters, the appearance at a strip club and other larrikin ways.

When Gillard became prime minister in June 2010, generations of Australian voters, male and female, had simply never heard a female voice in the top job, never seen an Australian woman head of government striding to the podium to hold a press conference, never seen a female head of state address the US Congress and greet an American president.<sup>3</sup> We were not used to seeing a female prime minister walking through a shopping mall or photographed in a hard hat and fluoro vest. We were strikingly unfamiliar with the notion of a woman taking the party leadership away from a man.

That men wield the political power has been our constant reality – throughout our lives and the lives of many generations before. It is unremarkable in the true sense of the word. Only when the unbroken line is broken does it become remarkable.

The day that Julia Gillard took her place at the head of the political table marked the start of a concerted overt and covert push back from those who could not cope with the idea and the reality of a woman in other than a subordinate or domestic role. This push back was not confined to the conservative side of politics either. Women might be allowed to serve, but they could not control.<sup>4</sup>

For the future's sake, we need to try and make sense of the hostility that swirled around Gillard and try for an honest, if uncomfortable assessment of the role that gender played in judging her and in determining her political fate.

We also need to do this largely by drawing on our own wits. One of the striking features of the Gillard period was the incapacity of the mainstream media to analyse with any sophistication the role gender was playing in political life at the time. As a poor substitute, the gender debate was trivialised and dismissed as non-existent. Gillard was accused of 'whining' and 'playing the gender card'. Some seasoned members of the press gallery, male and female, used gender as a weapon of belittlement and criticism.

## Double standards come into play

'Whatever a woman does or is, she is criticised. The most innocuous qualities could be twisted to show her in a bad light...if she is vivacious and enjoys social life she is a 'flirt' or a 'gadabout'; if she is quiet and of a more serious turn of mind she is 'withdrawn' or 'stupid'. Through such sneers in conversation, writings, jokes and cartoons, contempt for women was handed down from one generation to the next...it was time...for some systemic analysis of this constant crusade of the newspapers here in Sydney and all over the civilised world...habitual belittlement leads women to mistrust themselves and silently tolerate jests against womankind.'<sup>5</sup>

This acute observation about the double standards applying to women was made in 1891 by Louisa Lawson, newspaper proprietor, suffrage campaigner (and mother of Henry Lawson). She would have been anguished if she could foresee these same double standards being applied to the first female prime minister over a century later.

A double standard is a set of principles that allows greater freedom to one person or a group than to another.<sup>6</sup> For women, as Bette Davis reminds us, there is an unwritten code of sexual behaviour that permits men more freedom than women: 'When a man gives his opinions, he's a man. When a woman gives her opinions, she's a bitch'.<sup>7</sup>

Double standards applied to Gillard on a number of levels, from personal appearance to questions of political character, authority and leadership. Moreover, they were applied to Gillard by women as well as men.

They appeared soon after she became Prime Minister only to disappear once she left the office. With men now back in their 'rightful place' as political heads of the Government and Opposition, gender is now irrelevant in assessing political performance.

### **Double standard No.1: unwed and 'deliberately barren'**

Gillard's personal appearance and life choices were scrutinised in ways not deemed relevant to male leaders. As an unwed, single woman, Gillard the career politician defied traditional views of womanhood which was unsettling for many.

In July 2012, immediately after Julia Gillard became Labor Leader and Prime Minister and under the banner headline of 'An unmarried PM's not ideal', The Daily Telegraph reported on its Perfect PM online poll of more than 12,700 voters which asked whether it mattered whether a prime minister was single.<sup>8</sup>

Would the Daily Telegraph conduct a poll with the question of whether it mattered if a male prime minister was married? Years earlier, Senator Bill Heffernan jumped the gun by declaring Gillard unfit to govern: 'Anyone who chooses to remain deliberately barren....they've got no idea of what life's about'.<sup>9</sup>

Prime Minister Abbott is the more reassuring figure, married and a father with three daughters, a theme reinforced during the 2013 election campaign with the many public appearances of his wife and daughters. Gillard lived in the Lodge with a de facto partner and endured constant speculation about the relationship. Abbott lives in Canberra while his partner remains in Sydney. This is of no particular interest. Gillard was deemed by male journalists to have behaved 'coquettishly' and 'flirtatiously' with Barack Obama.<sup>10</sup> Have we read recently about Abbott being boyishly infatuated with the US President Obama or Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister of Canada?

### **Double standard No.2: appearances count**

Janet Albrechtsen, commentator with The Australian, criticised Gillard for 'showing a bare home and an empty kitchen as badges of honour and commitment to her career' and for not knowing how to meet 'the needs of a husband or partner'.<sup>11</sup> Does she now dare to suggest that Abbott, a male career politician for twenty years and away from home for months every year, doesn't know how to meet the needs of his wife or children?

Gillard's appearance was constantly remarked upon in sniping tones. Her suits were ill-fitting. Sydney racehorse identity, Gai Waterhouse, said Gillard needed a makeover.<sup>12</sup> Feminist Germaine Greer told an ABC national television audience that Gillard 'had a big arse',<sup>13</sup> which titillated the host and fellow panellists and provided the public at large with further sexist licence. Reference to Abbott's daily preference for blue ties is tame by comparison.

People were quick to identify when Gillard's hair colour and style chopped and changed. Abbott's receding hairline passes without comment. Gillard started wearing glasses, for 'marketing effect', while Abbott's, it goes without saying, are used for reading. Gillard's ear lobes were big. Abbott's pass unnoticed. Gillard's speech was wooden. Abbott's growling, repetitious 'sound bite' delivery warrants no comment.

### **Double standard.No.3: men do leadership and authority thank you**

Double standards permeated media commentary about Gillard's leadership, legitimacy and authority. Cheryl Kernot pinpointed this early in the piece:

Certainly the manner in which she came in has caused her difficulties, people don't expect women to do those things, which is kind of bizarre when you think about it, because Paul Keating knifed Bob Hawke, Bob Hawke knifed Bill Hayden, it's kind of the way of Australian politics. It's on both sides...but women for some reason when they do it, cop an enormous level of abuse, and I know this personally. If Bill Shorten had moved Kevin Rudd on we wouldn't be talking about it the way we are today.' [14](#)

Previously Gillard was portrayed as a loyal deputy to Rudd. But this changed swiftly to perceived disloyalty and deceit when she took over the job from the male prime minister, despite unambiguous evidence of his unfitness to govern. Relentlessly, media commentary reminded the public at large that Gillard, in true Lady Macbeth style, was an 'assassin' who heinously removed a Prime Minister. There were no reminders from seasoned political commentators with research files and long memories that previously three Australian male prime ministers had been removed while in office by other men.

Her 'seizing' of power by the 'knifing' of Rudd was played out ad nauseum for the following three years. By contrast, decades of corrosive and bitter leadership tussles between men were conveniently airbrushed. With these previous former contests, everything settled down with the new leader allowed to get on with the job within days.

To allege that a political leader lacks authority is a potent and damaging claim. In February 2012, Gillard won one of the most decisive ballots in 50 years, beating Rudd 71–31, yet she was said to lack authority. Abbott won the leadership of his party by one vote (presumably his) but this slimmest of margins was not interpreted as a dent in his authority.

Prime Minister Gillard drove complex negotiations during three years of minority government but was still described as lacking authority. Prime Minister Abbott has been forced to modify, and then shelve, his controversial parental leave scheme. This inability to carry one of his signature policies is not judged as a lack of authority within his party or more broadly.

Gillard was relentlessly portrayed as a deceitful breaker of promises. Her introduction of the carbon-pricing scheme was depicted as the greatest breach of trust ever to be perpetrated on the Australian people. Yet, the political record is full of examples of male leaders breaking pledges, modifying their positions quite legitimately after the fact or adopting different policy responses when responding to changed circumstances. [15](#)

Menzies lied to the Australian people about Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War; Hawke pledged there would be no Australian children living in poverty; Keating reneged on the promise of tax cuts; John Howard reneged on his pledge not to introduce tax increases; Howard introduced to the political lexicon the concept of 'core' and 'non-core' political

promises; Rudd shelved his carbon pollution reduction scheme despite branding climate change ‘the greatest moral challenge of our time’; and Abbott has broken numerous pledges within his first year as prime minister.[16](#)

#### **Double standard No.4: say what you like about a woman**

Double standards were evident in the use of abusive and violent language. Before Gillard became prime minister, our political discourse had developed a nasty or toxic edge, with declining respect and civility in language and behaviour. This extends beyond parliamentary chambers. Patrick Baume, group communications manager for Media Monitors, observed recently:

Talkback radio is becoming increasingly aggressive and politically polarised. My impression from five years of (listening to) talkback is there does seem to be more violent words being used... (The hosts) will say something like: ‘We have to politically beat them up’. But it’s not framed as actual violence. They will immediately say, ‘Of course, I don’t mean literally’.[17](#)

Former Democrat leader Cheryl Kernot admits her jaw dropped when she heard a man in the public gallery calling Gillard a ‘lying scrag’.[18](#) She wouldn’t have been the only one. Women especially, winced when the head of one of Australia’s biggest agricultural companies, David Farley, called the female prime minister a ‘non-productive old cow’.[19](#) Satirising John Howard’s inept slow bowling action or television news footage of him jogging in a daggy green and yellow tracksuit is not in the same park as the menu at a Liberal Party dinner which featured a quail dish named after the female prime minister because it comprised ‘small breasts, huge thighs, and a big red box’. Delahunty rightly notes that this ‘lark’ represented the public shredding of Gillard’s dignity where she was denied the most intimate privacy.[20](#)

The abusive commentary referred to earlier by Baume ramped up after Gillard, became the first female prime minister. Sexist abuse, with a violence theme, emerged on a scale like never before.

High-profile men led this vitriolic attack. Commenting on Gillard’s intention to introduce a carbon price, Alan Jones said the legislation would be her ‘death warrant’. Jones suggested Gillard ‘was off her tree and quite frankly they should shove her and Bob Brown in a chaff bag and take them as far out to sea as they can and tell them to swim home’.[21](#) Acclaimed National Rugby League player, Robbie Farah, responded to a Triple M radio host, Mark Geyer who had asked what would people buy the PM for her birthday – ‘A noose’, he replied.[22](#)

Graeme Morris, prominent political lobbyist and former chief of staff to John Howard, appeared on a Sky News panel discussion in April 2012 and suggested that ‘they ought to be kicking her (Gillard) to death’. This violent imagery gave way to more explicit gendered attack. Tony Abbott, Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Mirabella stood in front of placards that said ‘Ditch the Witch’ while referring also to the prime minister as ‘Juliar’ and ‘Bob Brown’s Bitch’.

Sexist smear was taken to another level by former Fairfax and News Ltd cartoonist Larry Pickering. Bombarding the internet with puerile depictions of Gillard with a dildo, Pickering was also part of a hunting pack making wild and unsubstantiated allegations about Gillard’s behaviour as a young lawyer and her connection to the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU). He may well have been, in Gillard’s own terms, a ‘nut job’ but his widely circulated

cartoons and website ‘homilies’ pushed buttons of deep-seated prejudice and hostility towards women in power.

Pickering enjoyed the active support of high-profile men also bent on destroying Gillard. One of these, News Ltd columnist, Andrew Bolt, praised the cartoonist as having ‘a courage that shames the many journalists who have run dead on this (AWU) scandal’.<sup>23</sup> Michael Smith, 2UE radio presenter and another member of the hunting pack, wrote in one of his blogs in November 2012, that he held ‘a special contempt in the whole of my being for Miss Gillard, the lying, thieving, conniving, home-wrecking common offender’.<sup>24</sup>

Many Australians saw right through these double standards and the vicious politics of personal destruction. No matter how hard the pack hunters tried, and despite the barrage of media critique posing as quality journalism, they understood the sexism for what it was and sensed the absolute unfairness of Gillard’s treatment.

### **Tapping a deep vein of support**

When Julia Gillard became prime minister in June 2010, I shared with many people the excitement of finally seeing a woman in the nation’s top job. What I did not expect to see, however, was how quickly things changed.

At first, I thought it might simply have been a reflection of the political frenzy caused by the formation of a minority government of Labor, the Greens and Independents which had after all, denied the political prize to a belligerent and aggressive political opposition leader, as well as deeply disappointing Abbott’s cheer leaders across sections of business and media, especially News Ltd and opinionated radio presenters.

But it was much more than this. I began to watch more closely, reading the major print media, watching television news, listening to radio talk-back and checking in on many social media sites. A subtle, and not so subtle, hostility was threading its way through political commentary and public expression. The hostility was unmistakably gendered and directed squarely at Prime Minister Gillard.

In late 2011, I went to my Board of the Victorian Women’s Trust with the question – were we as women prepared to stand by and watch this malevolent and sexist attack on a female prime minister without any contestation? The answer was a resounding ‘no’ and the Board provided the endorsement for me to research and write *A Switch in Time: restoring respect to Australian politics* which was published in September 2012.

The public response to this publication was extraordinary and illuminating. Apart from a small amount of predictably anonymous and hate-filled feedback, the overwhelming sentiment was positive and powerful. It seemed that a great many people had been watching too, noticing the same trends underway and recoiling with horror.

Nine months later, when a nervous and fractured caucus permitted Kevin Rudd to satisfy his personal revenge and replace Gillard, the Victorian Women’s Trust, backed by a small number of female donors, took out on 5 July 2013, full-page advertisements in *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Herald Sun* and a half page advertisement in *The Australian*. It was entitled *Credit Where Credit is Due*.

The advertisement articulated a simple message. While we made it clear that we did not support some of her policies, including asylum seeker, reduced economic support for single

mothers and same-sex marriage, we saluted former Prime Minister Gillard for getting on with the business of government for us, the people; for the skilful negotiation, resolve and the leadership to maintain the confidence of the Lower House; for steering the government through a full term; for enabling close to 500 pieces of legislation to be passed; for introducing significant and visionary reforms that will deliver great benefit to the Australian people in the time to come; and for remaining strong and poised when everything bar the kitchen sink was thrown at her.

We paid tribute to the male and female colleagues who had worked with her on the nations' behalf, respected her capacity and gave her the loyalty she deserved. We also paid tribute to retiring Independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott for their true independence, their courage and hard work in upholding democratic values; and for enduring with dignity, the threatening abuse aimed at them, their partners and staff.

The public response to our office was even greater than it had been with the publication of *A Switch in Time*. For days and weeks on end, we were privy to a huge outpouring of raw sentiment flowing in from all around the country – emails, letters, phone calls and cards. In gratitude, many sent unsolicited donations, which amounted to thousands of dollars. 'Thank you ladies' wrote Max, a ninety-year old war veteran, in a note accompanying his donation of \$200. These combined donations were enough to have the advertisement translated into Italian, Greek and Mandarin and published in four other papers – *Il Globo*, *La Fiamma*, *Neos Kosmos* and the *Sing Tao Daily*.

Sensing the need to provide a mechanism for people to acknowledge their respect for Gillard and her performance as prime minister, the Victorian Women's Trust organised a tribute event for her at the Melbourne Town Hall in November 2013. The 3000 seats sold out in four hours. In retrospect, we probably should have gone ahead and booked the relatively costlier and vastly bigger Myer Music Bowl.

The significance of this public feedback is three-fold. In the first instance, it provides a useful barometer of the mood of many Australians during the life of the minority government under Gillard's leadership, a mood that was not detected or given legitimacy in the prevailing political commentary. Second, over forty per cent of the feedback we received came from men around the country, giving lie to the claim by some in the media that Gillard supporters were a small bunch of diehard feminists:

'I do not recall seeing the likes of her before, the extraordinary depth of her capacities, her remarkable composure, matched with the centrality of her concerns....Perhaps we were not ready for such a person – and also a woman – to hold the highest office in the nation. She is, in my view, thoroughly decent. I very much admired her'. Male doctor, NSW.[25](#)

'In my life time I can't recall any Prime Minister having to contend against such 'warfare' on so many fronts. More credit to her'. Rod, after reading the advertisement placed in *The Australian*.[26](#)

'I have all my life been a Liberal supporter (regardless)...I broke this tradition, and voted for Julia Gillard, and was most pleased to see her form the minority government. I have been appalled by the way she has been treated and have been continually saying in my circles that she has not been given the Australian 'fair go'. Thank you for taking the effort in giving the lady support, for she has mine'. Larry, Brisbane.[27](#)



Finally, as a positive counterpoint to the sexism and gendered attack on Gillard, this feedback suggests there are deeply rooted cultural differences among Australians that set them apart from one another on key questions surrounding women in politics and the broader march of gender equality.

## People poles apart

Rather than heed the detail of opinion polls, seasoned press gallery journalists made sweeping generalisations suggesting ‘the public’ had stopped listening to the Gillard government. They failed to understand that the Australian community was in fact deeply divided. The advent of a woman in the top job created simmering tensions, with people poles apart in accepting a woman as prime minister. These very different worlds are captured in several cameos created from the research and public feedback to the Credit where Credit is due advertisement outlined earlier.

‘John’ hated Gillard, from the time he set face on her. It wasn’t even about her policies, although he had no time for Greens and other rabble that he now saw in government – he simply couldn’t abide the woman. His description of the prime minister was always in demeaning terms.

He thought her speech about Abbott and misogyny was ‘absolutely f—king pathetic’ and ‘typical of the ‘dumb-arsed piece of work that she was’. When he read in his daily paper that Gillard had argued against a pension increase, he thought ‘what would she know’! He reckoned that they would find out any day now that she was in it up to the eyeballs with that ‘slush’ fund stuff. To him, Gillard played the gender card when it suited her and the sooner she quit the scene, the better.

‘Jenny’ despised Gillard too, wouldn’t have a bar of her. If you asked her why, she would screw up her face and say, ‘I just hate her’. Whether it was Gillard’s single status (‘as for that boyfriend of hers’...) her atheism, her voice, her ‘charmed career’ or whatever, Gillard was not ‘Jenny’s’ idea of a woman. Gillard unsettled her. The fact that she cruelly ‘knifed’ Kevin and took his job discomfited ‘Jenny’ hugely. She took every opportunity to remind her friends and neighbours about Gillard the ‘assassin’ as well as vehemently slag off about the prime minister on everything else.

‘Mark’ developed a grudging respect for Gillard. Although he had some real issue with particular policies of the minority government, he thought she was doing a pretty good job in a demanding environment. ‘Mark’ reckoned she was coming in for some unfair treatment as a woman that often left him feeling disgusted with the state of things. He also had two daughters and he expected better from his country in enabling them to take their place in the world.

‘Liz’ had quietly rejoiced when Gillard became prime minister. She thought she would never see the day. ‘Liz’ thought that Gillard’s elevation to prime minister showed we had come of age in our democratic culture. ‘Liz’ was a swinging voter and even though she had some misgivings about the formation of the minority government, she delighted in the way Gillard managed to shine through. She was really irritated by the way the media seemed to be in constant pursuit of Gillard and putting her down all the time. ‘Liz’ and her friends would have lots of chats away from others – it was almost as if they belonged to a secret Gillard admirers club.

Throughout Gillard's tenure, substantial sections of the mainstream media were in symbiotic relationship with 'John' and 'Jenny'. Eschewing accepted standards of quality journalism, they constantly called her performance and leadership into question. By reminding readers about Rudd the victim, describing Gillard's performance as dysfunctional, trivialising her appearance, and failing to focus on her policy delivery and achievements on the international stage, this political commentary fanned people's gender prejudices.

Despite the frenzied political climate, the opposition mantra, the Rudd treachery and prevailing negative media messages, the two-party preferred opinion polling results during Gillard's tenure consistently showed that more than four out of ten voters remained supportive of the Gillard-led minority government. Yet the media interpretation of 'the public at large' reflected the 'Johns' and 'Jennys' of this world, whose negative vibes were absorbed as proof positive that Gillard was indeed a dysfunctional leader of a dysfunctional government.

Conversely, 'Mark' and 'Liz' felt totally alienated from the dominant media narrative that had formed around Gillard and the minority government, a narrative which persisted despite conventional measures of success. They were angered by the antics of the media pack trying to hunt the prime minister down over a twenty-year old story about her time as a young solicitor acting for a union. They understood the legislative program that she was carrying out and were mostly in agreement with the priorities that she was articulating. 'Mark' had no time for Rudd and reckoned that he should desist from his treachery and let Gillard get on with governing. 'Liz' was outraged by what she saw as clear-cut evidence of sexist prejudice across the media. She pumped the air at the prime minister's now famous misogyny speech and was bemused by the media's negative verdict of it.

Both 'Mark' and 'Liz' heard various friends and colleagues sound off about Gillard in belittling terms and harsh tones. Contrary to the angry voices and the hateful sentiments directed against Gillard that were fanning out over mainstream and social media, both fiercely rejected the negative characterisations of Gillard, the swirling sexism and the incessant questioning of her character and capacity. They saw it for what it was. They were shocked and horrified by the full force of the torrents of sexism that were unleashed when Gillard became prime minister. They thought their country was better than this. They recoiled with horror. Many despairingly beat a retreat.

The ferocious and sustained attack on Gillard across the mainstream media and social media was simply not shared by many women and men around the country. The opponents to Gillard and her government did their best to portray her leadership in the worst possible terms. Many Australian men and women were simply not prepared to buy it.

This deep division of opinion in the community went unnoticed by many media people perhaps because they were so caught up in the media group think and the need to sustain at all costs their negative narrative about Gillard. But in broader terms, it actually represents a significant moment in our democratic culture for it signals something important about the possibility of achieving increased representation of women in politics. It also suggests we can hold out some hope for achieving a greater embrace of gender equality more broadly.

## **Onward ever onward**

On the question about women in politics and the embrace of gender equality, there are right now, two Australias – very divergent cultures that are in tension. There are men and women in large numbers who resisted, kicked and scraped at the idea of a woman in power, a woman

who had broken away and shattered traditional representations of womanhood; and there are men and women in large numbers who accepted, endorsed and embraced enthusiastically the leadership of Julia Gillard as the country's first female prime minister.

If we focus narrowly, and remember only the sexist prejudice and abuse that surrounded Gillard, the media group think and belligerent oppositional politics, the picture looks bleak and the prospects for achieving greater equality remain problematic. But if we widen our understanding and acknowledge that many men and women relished the sight of Gillard in power and maintained their support for her against considerable odds, there is in fact a huge reservoir of good intention and moral support that can be tapped to bring about a greater level of female representation in politics as well as changes that achieve wider equality.

But this agenda will not materialise by magic or simply by the passing of time. Our self-image has been considerably diminished and our international reputation harmed. After the sledging, the destructive sexism and by any measure, a deeply damaging time in Australian politics, something has to give.

Sexism has no place in a civil society. Our political parties need a change of attitude towards women in the ranks. Without deep cultural change that pushes back and reduces sexism and gendered abuse, the issue of double standards will resurface with another woman in the nation's top job. Blokes rule, OK? Current Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, never sees the way she is treated through 'the prism of gender'.<sup>28</sup> If she was to walk into the top job right now, odds on these same double standards would start applying to her.

The sexism toward Gillard was allowed to be downplayed and trivialised. She was even blamed for contriving it. Many in the mainstream media, female and male revealed an inability to deal with sexism with any sophistication. They forgot about political neutrality and fair treatment – two qualities vital to a robust media in a healthy and strong democracy.

Few others publically stood up for Gillard. Apart from a handful of men, including Wayne Swan, Craig Emerson, Bob Brown, Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott, the sexist treatment of Prime Minister Gillard went without challenge or contestation by leading men within the Labor Party itself, as well as within the Liberal and National parties.

Is it too much to ask those in leadership positions in our political parties, whose values embrace respect, civility and gender equality and who privately found her treatment distasteful, to stand up and be counted – to put aside party differences, name the sexism and declare it unacceptable?

Is it too much for the ALP to reflect on the fact that there were men in the party so intent on bringing Gillard down, that they were even prepared to subvert good public policy? Narcissistic revenge and factional plays aside, their hostility was also framed by an inability to countenance a woman in the top job.

Significantly, these men have not been held to account for white-anting Gillard. Indeed, some of the worst offenders are now shadow ministers in the ALP Opposition.

It should not be left to women to defend the indefensible. Sexist attitudes might be entrenched but they can shift, especially with the right signals and large doses of public leadership.

Imagine the positive and powerful ripple effect across the community if a barrage of high-profile decent men in the 43rd parliament, such as Malcolm Turnbull, Andrew Wilkie and Mark Dreyfus, and Greg Combet, had come out and railed against the sexist attacks on Gillard.

Imagine the positive, rippling effect on the broader community if the then Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, made it plain that he found the 'Ditch the Witch' placards so offensive that he would not address the No Carbon protest rally until they were removed.

The best antidote to institutionalised sexism and white, male political hegemony is to have so many women (and non-white men) in politics and senior positions that gender has no bearing as a constraining factor in women's participation in political life.

Our male-dominated two-party democratic system is in trouble. There is a sense of institutional decay. Younger people especially are turning away in droves and disengaging from politics. From a national policy perspective, there is too much at stake in managing the increasingly complex policy demands, such as climate change, to witness yet another generation of wasted female talent and capacity. Do we really want to wait another century before gender parity is achieved in our national parliament?

In April 2014, almost a year after Gillard was deposed, the French government introduced its new Cabinet – fifty per cent were women. Countries, like France, enfranchised women well after Australia and are now racing ahead. This is the time to test the mettle of our political parties on the introduction of quotas that concertina the movement of women into politics and transform our parliamentary system for the better.

It is also time to test the mettle of our political parties on key issues that stand in the way of equality for women; challenging them to adopt cut-through policy and practical actions that address major issues affecting the status of Australian women – safety from violence, pay inequity, the unfairness of the existing superannuation system, the economic insecurity of older women, sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and the inadequate representation of women in the senior echelons of business, community and government.

Has Julia Gillard's tenure made it easier for the next woman? Yes, but only if we do the changing.