The Nature of Women’s Political Leadership: Women MPs in the Parliament of Victoria

Madeline Grey
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC. 3010
greym@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract: This chapter explores the nature of women’s political leadership through the perceptions of a range of women MPs in the Parliament of Victoria. In-depth interviews with women MPs from the major political parties provide an interesting snapshot of their personal views on the ‘complexity of representation’ inherent in women’s political leadership. The concept of ‘representational burden’ is explored through their views on power and leadership and the issue of whether women MPs lead differently.

Keywords: women MPs, politics, Parliament of Victoria, representation, political leadership

Political leadership in Australia has historically been male dominated in structure, culture and style. Women’s underrepresentation in the political legislatures has meant they have struggled to find a leadership style that is neither ‘maternal’ nor ‘quasi-male’. The increase in the number of women MPs in parliaments over the past few decades to a critical mass of 30 per cent, the minimum percentage at which they can, according to political scientists, potentially influence and make a difference to the culture and practice of politics, has offered new opportunities for women to develop their own political leadership style. A key focus of this chapter is the question of whether women MPs lead differently and whether different expectations are placed on them as female political leaders in terms of political representation. These questions are explored through in-depth interviews with a range of women MPs in the Parliament of Victoria carried out as part of a doctoral research project on women’s political representation conducted over the ten-year period from 1994 to 2004. The MPs’ perceptions of the concept of power and whether they used it differently, their views on the increased public expectation of women MPs and whether they imparted a better style of political leadership are explored here.
Women’s leadership

Historically, women in leadership positions have had limited choices of leadership models to follow: ‘the conversion of femaleness within the dominant discourse into radical extremism (feminism) or frivolous ineffectiveness (femininity), leaves women with few ways of describing their womanliness that are not liabilities from a leadership perspective’. Critical leadership studies have challenged the traditional construct of leadership as owned and carried out by men in powerful positions. These include studies in the area of business and management such as Amanda Sinclair’s work in ‘Sexuality in Leadership’, Doing Leadership Differently and Leadership for the Disillusioned, and feminist historical scholarship in the area of gender and women’s leadership such as Founders, Firsts and Feminists: Women Leaders in Twentieth-Century Australia. Such studies are helpful for exploring and understanding the issues that women face in male-dominated fields such as politics. Feminist scholars of leadership have worked to reconceptualise leadership as a quality that goes beyond women emulating the male model to laying the groundwork to challenge and change the existing dominant concept and model of leadership. As Sinclair states in her chapter in this collection, ‘Not Just “Adding Women In”: Women Re-making Leadership’: ‘Our interest in Australian women’s leadership should change understandings of what is recognised as leadership: not just “adding women in” but shifting public images and imagination about what good leadership is.’ The first critical mass of women elected to the Parliament of Victoria in 1997 contributed to this endeavour. They are the focus of this chapter.

Women in the Parliament of Victoria

Women have only had a significant presence in the Parliament of Victoria since the late 1980s. In 1972 there was one female member, by 1997 there were twenty-six and by 2012 the number had increased to forty-two. Of these, thirteen are legislative councillors in the Upper House and twenty-nine are members of the Legislative Assembly in the Lower House. There are currently four women ministers in the cabinet. In addition to senior political leadership positions such as deputy premier and premier, women have now held the Parliament of Victoria’s most senior parliamentary positions as speaker of the Legislative Assembly and president of the Legislative Council. The increased numbers of women MPs has had many positive outcomes; for example, new role models of women in public life have been created, some aspects of political culture have been changed and overt resistance to female candidates and politicians has been removed.

The strategies put in place by the major political parties to increase women’s political participation and representation have been assisted by a
Growing acceptance of female political leadership in the community. Australian author and journalist Anne Henderson has argued that the support of women electors is critical if women are going to achieve equality of representation and succeed in politics. She claimed that in the 1980s, Australian women began to accept female leadership and she put this down to ‘global social change, free tertiary education and the work of women MPs and their supporters’. This coincided with the federal Hawke Labor government’s appointment of Senator Susan Ryan as Minister for Women’s Affairs from 1983 to 1987. Senator Ryan put women’s issues on the political agenda, beginning with a section in the Labor Party’s election platform on women and then, once in government, the introduction of equal opportunity legislation including the Sex Discrimination Act, 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act, 1986. She also instituted a women’s budget process, which assessed the impact of budget proposals on women in every department. Growing community acceptance of female political leadership began to be seen. As Henderson pointed out: ‘A younger crop of women are taking seats in Parliament as parties begrudgingly recognise the hunger in the electorate for more female representation.’

Both major political parties, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Liberal Party (LP), have actively implemented strategies to achieve increased party and parliamentary representation for women. The ALP introduced a specific affirmative action plan in 1981, followed in 1991 by the ‘Half by 2000’ campaign and in 1994 a formal quota policy was adopted at the ALP National Conference. The policy stipulated that by 2002, 35 per cent of the Labor Party’s parliamentary representatives were to be women in safe (or winnable) seats. In 2002 the target was increased to 40 per cent. While the LP does not support affirmative action measures or quotas it has introduced ‘merit-based’ systems such as training programs run by the women’s section of the party for aspiring candidates, targeted recruitment through the establishment of a register of prospective female candidates, and the provision of informal support networks including mentoring by senior party women.

Interviews with women MPs from both parties revealed that they were supportive of the idea that increasing the number of women in politics can break down barriers and change the public perception of politics and of women’s leadership roles in general. They agreed that an important reason for increasing the number of women in parliament was to broaden what was seen as acceptable and send a message to people in the party and the community that women can be political leaders. Having more women in parliament, particularly in senior leadership roles, provides an example to other women of what is possible. As Liberal MP Rosemary Varty said, ‘I think it’s an important signal to other women that you’re there being part of the decision making process’. In her farewell speech to the Victorian Parliament on
retirement in 1994, former premier Joan Kirner stated: ‘To have been the first woman Premier of Victoria was not only a great opportunity but also a great chance to say to the young women of Victoria, Liberal or Labor, “You can do it, too”’. 9 Liberal MP Marie Tehan, in her tribute to Joan Kirner on her retirement from politics, endorsed Kirner as a role model: ‘She has certainly placed the role of Victorian women on a pedestal in terms of achieving the ultimate distinction of political and parliamentary life and no doubt many women will seek to follow in her footsteps’. 10 Labor MP Lynne Kosky believed that she had a responsibility to provide a role model for women, particularly women with young children. Being a visible young woman in parliament with young children also challenged the stereotype of the female MP that one had to be older with grown-up children. She wanted to challenge the stereotype of political leadership that you could not be both a mother of children and an MP: ‘I figure that I’ve actually got a responsibility to do things a bit differently so that it makes it easier for women in my position or younger women who may want to have children or you know who are thinking, well, I’d like to have children at a later stage and it just won’t fit in’. 11

**Women’s political leadership**

Women’s political leadership is distinct from women’s leadership in other fields in that it is carried out in a highly visible, public and traditionally male domain. It also carries with it a level of expectation that is not as prevalent for male political leaders. While up until the mid 1990s the focus was predominantly on increasing the numbers of women in politics, this has now shifted for women in both the community and in politics to a more complex view of women as representative agents. The interviewees expressed a level of ambivalence around the nature of women’s political leadership within the masculine environment of politics. They acknowledged that it was a privilege to represent women and of genuine interest to them, but felt it could also be a burden. Their feelings were echoed by Susan Ryan. She said, in commenting on her dual role as an MP and an advocate for women:

> We have heard of the double burden of the working mother. I suggest the double burden concept also applies to the woman member of parliament … because she has two jobs. The jobs have synergy and reinforce each other, but there are two jobs nonetheless. You need to respond to, take up, defend and advocate the special interests of women; and you need to demonstrate that in fulfilling this role you are not taking away from your capacity to contribute to other vital areas of policy; you are not engaging in special pleading, and you are not asking someone else to shoulder your burden. 12

The responsibility to represent women was often an expectation perceived as imposed on the MP by women in the electorate, rather than the MP’s specific
personal choice. A 2004 survey of 215 Victorian women found that women expected female politicians to speak up for women.\textsuperscript{13} The Labor MP interviewees were aware of the extra burden that this expectation placed on their shoulders. Whether or not women were specifically elected to represent women’s interests was sometimes an issue that was taken out of their hands, as once women were elected to parliament they were often sought out by women in the community. Political scientist Marian Sawer examined the extra burden that being one of a small number of women in parliament carried, in the pressure to represent women in general, not only from their own electorate. She found that women tended to seek out female MPs because they were perceived as more sympathetic to concerns that women may have arising from their gendered life experiences. Sawer labelled this the ‘representational burden’. Labor MP Caroline Hogg acknowledged the responsibility to provide additional assistance to women on the grounds that there were so few women in parliament. She explained that as soon as she was elected to parliament, women in the community specifically sought her out to talk about ‘difficult, sensitive, female issues – sexual harassment, for example, discrimination … things I’d really probably rather not have heard about but they sought me out and I realised quickly that I had a special responsibility’.\textsuperscript{14} While she acknowledged her traditional delegate role of representation and clarified that her obligation as an MP also included a particular responsibility to talk to students and the general community about her experience of being in government, she reiterated that she felt a keen responsibility to other women.

Analysts of the importance of numbers in group life have recognised the severe constraints imposed on women MPs by their relatively small numbers and refer to them as ‘token representatives of difference’.\textsuperscript{15} If there were only a small number of representatives they were usually marginalised and eventually succumbed to the pressure of conforming to the values and priorities of the dominant (male) group. A more noticeable female presence in the party room or cabinet, however, made it harder for the men to ignore or dismiss the women’s viewpoints on an issue as ‘tokenism’. Increased numbers of women also help achieve a more balanced decision-making and leadership process. All the interviewees shared the opinion that even a few more women made a big difference in taking the intense pressure and focus off their gender. Some women felt the burden more keenly than others, particularly with the added demands of holding a ministerial portfolio. Labor MP Caroline Hogg articulated the angst she felt:

When you’re one of relatively few women in parliament and also when you’re one of almost no Ministers, you’re so identifiable. I mean you lose any anonymity you had. You become public property and that’s horrible. I can’t tell you how horrible that is. That was a huge downside as far as I was concerned.\textsuperscript{16}
In 2001 Sawer and Zappala explored this issue, which they labelled ‘the complexity of representation’.\(^7\) Their research found that the pressure on women MPs to balance a range of representational roles was heightened when women’s presence was below a level of critical mass. This finding was supported by my interviews with women MPs. The situation for those elected after 1996 appeared to have improved with the increased number of women in parliament. The experiences of the women who were elected later to parliament suggest that they did not feel the same level of alienation. For example, Labor MP Judy Maddigan commented that:

> Even in 1996 for me there had been lots of women here beforehand so that probably made it a bit easier. Some of the women you’ve spoken to who were elected in 1972 were probably the ones who really noticed how hard it was because they really had a struggle. By the time I got here, women might not have been welcome but they were accepted anyway. So I think they’re the ones who really would have found it difficult and really are the ones that made it easier for us I guess.\(^8\)

When there were only small numbers of women in parliament, all the attention was focused on them and they bore the burden of high expectations. When there were more women in the parliament they could then be seen as individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses, just like the men in the parliament. Further, it was argued that increasing the number of women was important because it allowed a more representative range of good, bad and mediocre leadership performances rather than a few extraordinary performers. It allowed women the luxury of not having to be exceptional. Liberal MP Rosemary Varty said: ‘Jan Wade made an interesting comment at one stage saying “We will be able to say we have equal representation when there are just as many useless female politicians as there are useless male politicians”’.\(^9\) Van Acker suggested that ‘As the number of participants increases, pressure decreases and women too can have different voices’.\(^10\) Liberal MP Lorraine Elliott articulated this point further: ‘I think the increased number of women has meant that it’s easier for the women to set and work at, develop at, their pace’.\(^11\)

**Women’s political leadership style**

The question of whether women MPs had their own political leadership style elicited a level of bipartisan support from the interviewees. Labor MP Lynne Kosky considered that, on the whole, women had a less confrontational political style and, in parliamentary debate, focused on the issue rather than attacking the person. She said:

> I think that women on the whole have a different style. Not all women though. But they tend to not go for the person and that’s not to say that all male
Liberal MP Louise Asher acknowledged that ‘even the most aggressive of female performers are still seen to be more conscious of society’s needs. She said she did not know any female politicians who played ‘personality politics’ or the ‘blood sport of politics’. She believed that women got into politics on the whole ‘from a general public policy perspective ... I think that women are far more issue-based, policy-based and intent on getting a policy outcome’.  

The community expectation that women MPs would make parliament a nicer, less confrontational place elicited partisan responses from the interviewees. The Liberal women were not comfortable with this expectation, and emphasised the importance of individual contributions, rather than contributions ‘as women’. Lorraine Elliott believed that while women brought an important perspective to policy development in parliament, she did not agree that women should be regarded as moral gatekeepers:

I think that’s far too heavy a burden to bear. They’re not there to make parliament a nicer place. It seems to me they’re there to make their own individual contributions to the welfare of this state or this country, whichever venue, arena of politics they happen to be in.

Liberal MP Rosemary Varty also believed that women MPs were no different from the men and all MPs were representative of the total community. She reiterated the party line that representation was on the basis of merit, but she believed that ‘all of our women members are much better, in my view, in their skills, their political abilities than most of the men’. This apparent contradiction could perhaps be explained by the possibility that while she was happy for women’s influence on the parliament to occur naturally and as a matter of course, she was not happy to have this expectation forced on them. The Labor women MPs were more inclined to believe that women were improving the parliament. Caroline Hogg believed there should be more women in parliament:

Because it will eventually make public life a bit better. A bit better. I’m not saying that women are, as Carmen Lawrence once said, all knowing, all wise and all good. They’re certainly not. But it just adds that bit of balance. Basically I think that women do do things differently. I don’t think they’re as confronting and as harsh and I think anything that brings a bit of balance and gentleness into public life has to be a good thing.

**Power and political leadership**

Alongside the expectation that women MPs will change and improve the culture and practice of politics is the prospect that they will lead and use power differently. One of the main reasons advanced by feminist political scientists for women’s absence from political theory in the past has been
because power was deemed to be held only by those in the public sphere: namely, men. Women supposedly occupied the private sphere and therefore did not wield power. Since the second wave of the women’s movement, however, women have begun slowly but steadily to shift the balance of power and simultaneously move into the ‘powerful’ public sphere while politicising the private sphere. As a result, power has been redefined by feminism and feminists. In 1992 political scientist Valerie Bryson viewed political power as a fundamental part of her definition of feminism, which she referred to in broad terms as ‘any theory or theorist that sees the relationship between the sexes as one of inequality, subordination or oppression, that sees this as a problem of political power rather than a fact of nature, and that sees this problem as important for political theory and practice’.27

Political scientist Iva Deutchman reinforced Bryson’s emphasis on the importance of power in political analysis: ‘power is often seen as one of the most important concepts for political analysis. Indeed, many political scientists would define politics as concerned primarily with the allocation and distribution of power.’28 Deutchman suggested that men and women conceptualised and used power differently and that women used political power in a ‘less confrontational and more co-operative’ way than men.29 She argued for a feminist approach to power that was ‘non-essentialist, structural and historical’.30 She further argued that all power relations were gendered: ‘women define power as empowerment or power to, whereas men see power as domination or power over’.31 She suggested that men and power were associated with control, dominance and imposition, whereas women and power were associated with concepts of empowerment, transformation, creative capacity, cooperation, non-hierarchical, shared and delegate. Deutchman contended that ‘because power is intimately connected to political participation, the argument follows that women’s increased political participation opens up the possibility that both politics and policy would change substantially in the future’.32 She cautioned, however, that ‘empowerment’, while embraced by feminist theorists, was not a purely ‘feminist’ analysis of power: to subscribe to the theory that women defined and used power differently from men was to risk being essentialist. It encouraged an argument that suggested men and women were inherently different from each other. ‘Thus, the argument that men see power as domination while women see power as cooperation has an essentialist component, making it both politically and philosophically problematic.’33 Deutchman raised a problem that women often confronted when entering established patriarchal institutions:

Feminists who use ‘power over’ in order to achieve ‘power to’ may, in the final analysis, no longer have a feminist consciousness. But if they don’t use ‘power over’, they are going to be political losers, in no position even to articulate
alternative political frameworks ... How long an outsider consciousness remains uncorrupted by praxis is a perennial question in political analysis and a crucial one, which needs to be considered in arguing for an alternative conception of power.\textsuperscript{34}

The way the women MPs talked about personally using power highlighted the ideological difference between the two political parties and also informed their leadership styles. While they all agreed that power was essential to making changes, the language the women used to describe power tended to diverge along political lines. For example, the Labor women MPs talked about changing ‘power structures’ for the purpose of changing the political culture and process to benefit women, a more feminist model. The Liberal women MPs tended to speak about power on an individual level as a personal tool for obtaining an outcome within the established political structure, a more traditional model of leadership.

Labor MP and former Victorian premier, Joan Kirner, referred to changing the ‘power structures’ a number of times and explained that the key to change was changing the power structures (the rules) and changing the culture. She referred to power as a collective endeavour such as ‘the power of decision making’ or ‘working together’. Kirner believed in and used a specific type of power which she called ‘collaborative power’ or ‘sharing the power’. She did not believe in the exclusion of people or the use of ‘hierarchical power’.\textsuperscript{35} She thus was regarded by many in the Labor Party as a leader who used her power and led in a ‘feminist’ way. Dimitri Dollis MP, the ALP member for Richmond, paid tribute to Joan Kirner on her retirement from politics in 1994 and said ‘Very few people in this chamber have done as much to change the style of politics: to bring about a stronger, tougher yet gentler, kinder, more intellectual, competent and intelligent way of debating issues’.\textsuperscript{36} Labor MP Sherryl Garbutt, Member for Bundoora, also mentioned that ‘having a woman Premier was different’ in that she was not ‘loud and aggressive’ but rather had a style that was consultative, respectful, community-based, inclusive and principled.\textsuperscript{37}

Gender presented itself as a factor, and being a woman did seem to influence the way the women MPs viewed and used power. While most interviewees viewed power as positive, not all of them felt comfortable using it. Labor MP Caroline Hogg believed that while power had the potential to corrupt, it was less likely to corrupt a woman because the women she knew were not, on the whole, interested in power. Despite her length of service in the Victorian Parliament and the senior roles she had held, she claimed to be ‘very uneasy with power’. She admitted that she felt much more comfortable with influence. However, as a minister the use of power was unavoidable and she had to learn to deal with it: ‘I had to learn to use power when I was a minister and I tried to use it terribly, terribly responsibly. I probably didn’t use
it adventurously enough; but I used it very very lightly’. These views are reflected in Sinclair’s research conclusions on the way women lead, with ‘an interest in using their power and influence to give voice to the interests of those who are less powerful. Leadership is not treated as an end in itself but a means to clearly articulated social and political purposes.’

**Critical acts of leadership**

Discussions with women MPs in the Parliament of Victoria revealed that while increasing the number of women in the legislature is important and has the potential to make a difference to the culture and structure of the parliament, numbers alone or just achieving a critical mass is not enough to ensure women lead in a way that guarantees women’s interests are represented. It is how elected representatives use their position to lead in a way that consciously supports ‘acting for’ women and performing deliberate ‘critical acts’ that are important factors in improving women’s representation within the parliament and society in general.

For example, many of these factors were at play when on 19 August 2008 the Abortion Law Reform Bill 2008 to decriminalise abortion in Victoria was introduced in the Parliament of Victoria. The introduction and passage of the bill is a significant example of a large number of Victorian women MPs consciously ‘acting for’ women, demonstrating a commitment to empowering women, exercising a feminist understanding of issues, and mobilising the resources of the political systems to improve their own situation and that of women in the community. It is evident that without consistent lobbying and the cross-party support of a majority of female MPs, together with the support of feminist activists outside the parliament, it would not have been introduced.

**Conclusion**

An increase in the number of women elected to the Parliament of Victoria has given female MPs the chance to develop their own leadership style and in the process lay the groundwork to transform the existing leadership model. While women’s political leadership is complex, an increased number of women allows for an increased range of role models and leadership opportunities for women as seen by the electorate. It also allows more space and opportunity for individual differences and possible leadership styles among women MPs. In relation to the issue of power, while the interviewees from both parties viewed power as an important part of political leadership, they tended to use it differently from men. The interviewees’ perceptions of power revealed a strong party political divide between the women MPs. The ‘complexity of representation’ inherent in women’s political leadership and the concept of
‘representational burden’ impart a level of expectation that women MPs will lead differently. Increased numbers and reaching a critical mass has had important implications for women’s political leadership, but it is a commitment to ‘critical acts’ that challenges the nature of political leadership. This commitment, while it is limited by the strong party political loyalties of our system of government, has allowed women MPs to challenge the status quo and implement ‘critical acts’ to influence and ultimately change the structure and style of parliamentary politics and political leadership. This in turn has defined the nature of women’s political leadership as women MPs are conscious of and responsive to the expectation that they will ‘act for’ women.

1 Marian Sawer, ‘From Motherhood to Sisterhood: Attitudes of Australian Women MPs to Their Roles’, Women’s Studies International Forum 9, no. 5 (1986): 532. Sawer researched the tradition of feminist women in the Australian Parliament and noted a shift away from the ‘maternal feminists’ who had dominated the early years of women’s parliamentary participation towards a more overt feminist identification.

2 The interviewees were Louise Asher, Maree Davenport (Luckins), Lorraine Elliott, Caroline Hogg, Joan Kirner, Lynne Kosky, Judy Maddigan, Jean McLean, Jeanette Powell, Rosemary Varty and Jan Wade.

3 The issue of women’s political style and whether or not it differs from men’s is addressed by, among others, Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, A Woman’s Place: Women and Politics in Australia, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), chapter 6.


8 Ibid., 111.


16 Caroline Hogg interview.
17 Marian Sawer and Gianni Zappala (eds), Speaking for the People: Representation in Australian Politics (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 281.
18 Judy Maddigan, interview by author, tape recording, Melbourne, 14 July 2003.
19 What Jan Wade actually said was: ‘I think that we will know that women will have won real equality in the parliament when the mediocre amongst us attract as little comment as the equivalent mediocre male ... we will have a fairly reliable indicator of a good equality rating when there is as little media and public scrutiny, and the public has as low expectations of women MPs as they do of their male counterparts.’ Wade defined this comment as a qualitative rather than a quantitative measure of real equality in public life. Victoria Women’s Council, Inaugural Annette Bear-Crawford Lecture, Queen’s Hall, Parliament of Victoria, Monday 6 March 1995.
20 Elizabeth Van Acker, Different Voices: Gender and Politics in Australia (Melbourne: MacMillan Education Australia, 1999), 198.
21 The Hon. Lorraine Elliott MP, interview by author, tape recording, Melbourne, 28 November 1996.
22 Lynne Kosky interview.
23 The Hon Louise Asher MP, interview by author, tape recording, Melbourne, 5 December 1996.
24 The Hon. Lorraine Elliott MP, interview by author, tape recording, Melbourne, 28 November 1996.
26 Caroline Hogg interview.
29 Ibid., 4.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 5.
32 Ibid., 7.
Kirner later expanded on her definition of power and her belief that women need power to make a difference in her book co-written with Moira Rayner, *The Women’s Power Handbook* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1999).

