Leadership in the Constituency Service of Women Labor Members of Parliament

Jackie Dickenson
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC. 3010
jackied@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract: This study explores the relationship between the local member and her electorate. Based on interviews with three women Labor politicians, the study discusses their approaches to constituency service within the context of popular perceptions that voters are more cynical now. It finds that the interviewees emphasised their altruism and public service above their personal ambitions. This reluctance to raise personal ambition might have important consequences for Australian political culture.

Keywords: political leadership, trust, constituency service, women, Labor Party

The activities of our political representatives in federal parliament are well known. We see them replayed each evening on television and the newspapers are full of their antics, good and bad. Political journalists, academics and commentators pick over these activities endlessly. Books are churned out, especially around election time, and every aspect of the political drama that is Canberra is given its moment under the microscope. The activities of these same representatives in their electorates – especially their constituency service – are less examined. Beyond the occasional report in the local press, there is limited interest in the humdrum events that help to keep an electorate ticking along between polls. Only at election time does the spotlight turn on individual electorates, and usually then only on a few highly marginal seats.

Paying closer attention to constituency service offers a fresh and potentially valuable perspective, especially in the context of increasing anxieties about voters’ contempt for and disengagement from politics. Commentators repeatedly raise the issue of trust in mass representative democracies, and there is broad consensus that voters today are less inclined to trust politicians than were previous generations. Despite this consensus, voters often trust individual members at the same time as they distrust ‘politicians as a class’, a phenomenon noted in 1978 by the American scholar Richard F. Fenno and since known as Fenno’s Paradox. Political trust in Australia then might be better understood by extending attention from the activities of political parties and political ‘players’ in Canberra, to the
interactions between representatives and the represented at the grassroots level.

Academic attention to constituency service has approached the topic from a range of perspectives. Studies have explored, variously, the importance of constituency service in the permanent election campaign; politicians’ motivations for privileging constituency service over representative policy-making behaviour; differences in methods of constituency service between political cultures; and the detrimental impact of constituency service on a politician’s vote in Australia. Most useful for this study is the identification by the British political scientist Philip Norton of seven roles that constituents expect their members of parliament to fulfil: information provider, safety valve, local dignitary, advocate, benefactor, friend in position of power and promoter of the interests of the area they serve. The first three of these are particularly relevant here as they pertain to a member of parliament’s intra-constituency activities, which are the subject of this chapter. Based on letters to the British Labour politician Tony Benn, Norton’s study found that writing to the local member of parliament could serve as a safety valve, ‘allowing citizens with a point of view about some aspect of public policy to express themselves in a way that might not otherwise be possible’. The local member of parliament is also an information provider because some constituents will approach her for advice on government policies or to ask where to take a particular problem. Finally, the member of parliament constitutes a local dignitary because election to parliament confers status, and it is common for the local member to be invited to official functions and other events within the constituency.

A significant feature of the perceived crisis of political trust is anxiety about a dearth of effective leaders in contemporary politics. This anxiety is usually concerned with political leadership at the highest level – of the nation and of parties – and ignores the leadership that takes place away from the spotlight, in the everyday interactions between politicians and voters. Developments in leadership scholarship are helpful here. It is widely accepted that leadership is a process that happens across time, but defining exactly what this process is and how it operates has given rise to a substantial literature. Weber’s conception of the legitimation of a leader as a social relationship with three key types – traditional, charismatic and legal – has been particularly influential. Recent scholarship posits that there is no single definition of leadership and emphasises the importance of examining leadership within the specific contexts in which it has been constructed. Particularly useful for thinking about leadership at the constituency level is the idea that leadership is an activity that takes place in the space between leaders and followers.
Leadership can be found in a variety of forms, at many levels of public life and in a range of contexts beyond the individual leader of a nation state or political party. Constituency service is a particular form of public leadership: elected representatives are successful leaders (at least for a fixed term) in that they have been chosen by sufficient followers to represent their interests in parliaments. Parliamentary representation is based on the premise that these chosen individuals will perform leadership through trusteeship rather than delegation, by acting according to their own judgement rather than on the instructions of their constituents, as outlined by Edmund Burke in his famous speech to the Electors of Bristol delivered in 1774.\(^9\) Representatives also act as community leaders in their work as local dignitaries, and are in a position to influence opinion and effect social change. The leadership of members of Parliament through constituency service is both relational and socially constructed in specific contexts. It is also gendered, and scholars recommend a feminist approach to leadership to unsettle the social norms that surround it, arguing that women should not be squeezed into the male, individualist and hierarchical leadership norm. Instead, notions of leadership should be reconceptualised to incorporate alternative styles, including those used by women, and attention should be paid to the gendered nature of the contexts in which leadership takes place.\(^10\) Given the problems of satisfactorily defining what leadership is and how it operates, the widely held notion that women are more likely to gravitate towards public service and men towards public leadership seems to be little more than semantics. What is clear is that the masculine ideal of leadership (in political representation and elsewhere) makes many women loath to claim leadership, but that does not mean that what they are doing is not, in fact, leadership.

Also useful for this study is the scholarship on the relationship between ambition and political leadership. The tension between personal ambition and political service lies at the heart of political mistrust. Voters identify disinterest as the most prized attribute of the trusted leader.\(^11\) But the motives of those standing for office are automatically mistrusted largely because, if successful, they will receive above average remuneration from the public purse for what should, in the minds of many voters, be altruistic service. This mistrust has a gender dimension: as well as being generally perceived as self-interested and unfair, ambition is also perceived as male. Although followers of both genders subscribe to the so-called ‘anti–big man theory’ – they do not trust self-aggrandising leaders and will act to bring them down – they tend to be more supportive of ambitious females, perceiving them as a counterbalance to unbridled masculine ambition.\(^12\)

This chapter examines the leadership through constituency service of three Labor women politicians within the context of their assessment of contemporary political relations. More women than ever before are now
engaged in constituency service in Australia. Of course, all women are not
the same and they do not act in identical ways (neither do all men), but there
is some evidence that women and men approach leadership through political
representation differently and that constituents perceive their service
differently. Sawer, for example, has noted that women are less comfortable
than men with the Burkan model of representation and tend to emphasise
their use of consultative processes. Based on interviews with three women
politicians, this chapter looks for similarities and differences in the ways these
women lead (or led) through constituency service. The politicians are all from
Victoria and have all represented the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The first
interviewee was Anna Burke, the federal member for Chisholm and Deputy
(presently Acting) Speaker of the House of Representatives. Burke joined the
ALP in the late 1980s and worked as a trade union organiser before winning a
seat in the Commonwealth Parliament in 1998. The second interviewee was
Ann Corcoran, the former federal member for Isaacs. A long-time ALP
member, Corcoran worked as an accountant before entering parliament in
2000. She lost preselection for Isaacs in 2007 after a bitter factional struggle.
Lily D’Ambrosio, the state member for Mill Park and, briefly, the Minister for
Community Development in the Brumby state government was the third
interviewee. D’Ambrosio also worked as union organiser before winning her
seat in the 2001 election.

The politicians were first asked about the broader context in which they
perform their representation, specifically the attitudes to representation in
Australia encountered in their constituency work. They were then asked to
comment on popular perceptions that voters are more cynical now and that
they are alienated from political processes. They were asked to describe their
constituents’ complaints, then asked what, in their opinion, are the chief
attributes of a successful local member. They were also asked to describe their
normal arrangements for meeting and interacting with constituents. Finally,
they were asked to discuss the role of the media in the relationship between
politicians and constituents. This essay is the beginning of a broader historical
study that will shed light on the methods employed by the successful local
member to build and maintain trust in her or his electorate between elections.
Although by no means comprehensive, it begins to identify the types of
themes that are likely to emerge from the larger study.

The cynicism of voters
The interviewees were asked whether they had noticed a change in voters’
attitudes towards politics since they first entered politics. Burke and
D’Ambrosio both said that people were not more cynical about politics today
but their theses differed. Burke argued that cynicism had declined, or had
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given way to complacency, but that this depended on the issue. She did feel that a cult of personality had taken over, in which people were more interested in Matt Preston or Jessica Watson and ‘pollies are superfluous to … people’s lives’. Politicians were now treated more as a class than as individuals, she said, and politics was becoming more presidential, observing that she did not want ‘to run on Kevin Rudd’s name’ in the (then) forthcoming election ‘because when they walk into the [polling] booth it’s my name I want them to find on the form’. People also seemed ‘more angst ridden about having to turn out’ to vote than previously and resented their Saturday being interrupted by having to vote. But this was not necessarily apathy, she felt, as they might still get involved in specific campaigns. She did think that civics education needed improving because of compulsory voting and migration: ‘a lot of people have never voted anywhere’. Burke offered planning permits as a classic example. People felt powerless over these and became ‘very alienated and very despondent’. For D’Ambrosio, cynicism was contextual: it ‘comes and goes with particular moments’. She also offered the example of Kevin Rudd who, as opposition leader, was able ‘to gather up a lot of latent hopes and aspirations’ and ‘articulate a new period of hope, of togetherness and working on key things for the future’. This was anything other than cynical, she suggested, but ‘it can turn around very quickly’, which had been demonstrated by Rudd’s swift demise in mid 2010. As Australians still had trust in ‘the basic building blocks of a democracy and the provision of services’, she did not believe they were more cynical now. If you asked them about something that did not affect them personally, she continued, they complained that politicians were all the same. But ‘if you drilled down you got a truer sense, it depends what level you want to engage on’. D’Ambrosio rejected suggestions that people today were more alienated from politics than previously:

Whilst there’s a trust that is ticking along well there is always an opportunity for good leaders to accentuate the positives not the negatives. The behaviour of politicians needs to reflect people’s trust in institutions. People just don’t ask the question about a traffic light. Generally speaking, the system works well but how do we add value to that? People might lose trust and become cynical. What politicians do with the building blocks or how we respond to crises, they’re the test.

Corcoran was much less sanguine about the relationship between politicians and voters. She believed that many politicians were out of touch with their electorates, especially those who did not conduct mobile offices. The electorate did not like ‘being fobbed off’, she felt, which was why they did not like what had happened to her in the 2007 preselection. She believed that such public stoushes ‘don’t help people’s perceptions of politics’. Corcoran also raised the ‘all politicians are bad but you’re okay’ paradox. She recalled a Bureau of Australian Women meeting at which a woman stood up
and said how untrustworthy politicians were, forgetting that Corcoran was in the room. Corcoran ‘got cross’ and responded firmly, and the woman was horrified that she had upset her. In Corcoran’s opinion ‘a lot of this (anti-politician) stuff is just rote’; in other words, voters say they hate these things because that’s what everybody else says in opinion polls and media coverage. She emphasised people’s ignorance of politics. Sometimes when she was visiting a school, a student would ask her how much she was paid. She always told them and it was ‘a big figure compared with most people’. But people did not know what exactly a politician actually does: ‘they think she does nothing, and must be playing cards all day. They think she must be in it for the money.’ Cynicism about politics was, she said, ‘a lazy response to things you don’t know anything about’. People failed to understand that politicians make decisions. The ‘cheap shot stuff has to stop’, she argued. ‘Media, politicians, the people – they all have to change.’

The complaints of constituents

Representatives are at the front line of politics, the first stop for voters with problems, concerns or complaints, and their interactions with constituents offer important insights into what people expect from their political leaders. D’Ambrosio said the people hate ‘the [party] line’, meaning that they prefer their representatives to act independently from the official party policy, putting the interests of their constituents first. Corcoran said that voters dislike the aggressive political culture. In her maiden speech, she had made a point of calling parliamentary question time a disgrace because she felt it was ‘unreal’, ‘like a footy match’, and disliked the confrontational style of government, which was the ‘heart of the problem’ with Australian politics. Politics was ‘all performance’ – ‘a game’ – and politicians could not see that the game repulsed people. She believed politicians were so deeply into the game that they had forgotten how people felt about it, or, perhaps, they simply felt ‘stuck with the game’. Burke discussed voting in parliament according to her conscience. ‘Don’t lie to people!’ she said. She found it ‘demeaning’ that people think all politicians lie. The electorate thinks politicians are getting ‘great pay, great perks, graft and corruption’, she said. ‘There are enough [politicians] who do it [cheat the system] and tarnish all of us.’ She admitted that politicians ‘get a good wicket compared with other people’, but they shouldn’t be compared to those on ‘obscene salaries’. She pointed out that she had worked through the previous weekend but ‘that’s my job … nobody made me do this job. I accepted doing this job then I had my kids, so I double-whammyed it.’ It had taken her a long time to work out what she didn’t need to do to be a good local member ‘but nobody made me’ do the job. ‘In fact I’ve scratched other people’s eyes out to get here. I’m not going to say “oh
woe is me” because I’ve achieved it.’ She also observed that most members of parliament wanted to make a difference to society, asking ‘why else would you do it?’ This is an important question to which I shall return.

The attributes of a good local member

The interviews supported previous research that found women representatives prefer to emphasise their consultative approach to leadership rather than claim a Burkean-style trusteeship. All three interviewees mentioned accessibility as a key attribute of the good local member. Burke and Corcoran told how they insisted that constituents called them by their first names. Burke said: ‘you need to be accessible’ so that voters ‘feel that they know you, like you are one of the family’. She ‘sells’ herself as ‘the mad aunt’: accessible, not scary. She believed that a good member had to listen to the community, and try to do something about people’s problems. ‘One of the things I think pollies forget is that we’re actually there to represent, not be in Canberra at committee meetings. People elect me to represent them so I have to be out there listening.’ Corcoran concurred. Voters ‘want to know they’ve been heard, not just brushed off: at least you’ve listened and they’ve been taken seriously and respectfully’. ‘You can’t be frightening’, she said. It is important that ‘you are yourself’. D’Ambrosio felt it was important that ‘what you see is what you get’, that a politician was ‘an ordinary person’. Burke and Corcoran insisted that they thought of themselves as ‘still the same person’ despite their public profile – Burke mentioned that as she is not a minister, she has no driver or housekeeper and ‘there’s always the washing’ to do – but they both seemed to feel that they were in fact regarded differently by their constituents.

All three politicians seemed to struggle with the ambiguities inherent in their position. They all said that constituents have to believe that the representative understands how the constituents feel, that they had to act sincerely and show empathy. They had to be approachable and ‘real’, yet their constituents regarded them as different. Burke emphasised the disconnection between the public perception of politicians and the reality of their lives: ‘You aren’t a person [to them] – and when you’re too personable they find that confronting too – [you] shouldn’t be that real.’ She recalled being in the supermarket looking ‘terrible’, and a woman seemed very surprised to see her there, looking so real. D’Ambrosio observed that being ‘real’ could have consequences for the politician’s privacy; that constituents could develop a sense of ownership of you, ‘as if they knew you’.

Listening and empathy are only part of the politicians’ task; they are also expected to achieve results for constituents. The interviewees spoke about the kinds of things they were asked to help with – mostly immigration and welfare. They spoke about managing the expectations of their constituents.
For example, D’Ambrosio said: ‘People want action and admire politicians who will make a decision and roll up their sleeves.’ When people were ‘navigating their way through the service delivery system’, politicians were the first point of contact. You could not tell them ‘you’ve come to the wrong door’. You had to help them open the right door. She explained that ‘you have to identify the steps whereby you can help and if you cannot, explain why it is not possible today’. It is ‘fundamentally important in the democratic process that we are accountable all of the time’, she argued. ‘You have to explain why you won’t always be able to help.’

**Connecting with constituents**

According to polling conducted in the United Kingdom, no more than 10 per cent of voters ever have any contact with their representatives. By far the majority of those that do will be from the professional classes and aged over forty-five years.\(^{18}\) Given that figures in Australia are likely to be similar, the representatives have to work hard at connecting with their constituents, especially those under forty-five. Burke and Corcoran used regular mobile offices at shopping centres to stay in touch with their constituents but, as a minister, D’Ambrosio no longer ‘did the shopping centre’, using instead a combination of appointments and ‘drop ins’ at her electorate office. An important part of constituency service was attending local activities like seniors’ morning teas and awards nights. Burke described herself as ‘in and out of community groups’. The previous Saturday she had attended an 8 am mayoral prayer breakfast, then spent two hours at her mobile office, followed by the Surrey Hills Swim School awards presentation. Sunday morning had been Buddha’s birthday at Federation Square then lunch at an aged care facility. D’Ambrosio spent every Friday out in the electorate, and attended lots of community events on weekends. Modern communications have freed politicians to pursue constituency matters without actually being in the constituency. This was most important for Corcoran who, despite having no factional duties, held a number of party positions within caucus during her time in parliament. She also had some policy committee work that involved meetings all over Australia in non-sitting weeks.

The representatives used a range of methods to communicate with their electorates. They all used newsletters. Burke distributed a regular ‘What’s Anna been up to?’ newsletter, and conducted regular surveys. Corcoran also did regular letterbox drops and produced two newsletters a year. D’Ambrosio sent out a newsletter three times a year and sometimes a ‘direct mail letter’ targeted at a specific community. All three received lots of email. Corcoran did not like email because it ‘can be distorted and flood around the world in minutes. Email can misrepresent you.’ The interviewees were unsure and
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ambivalent about using social media. Burke said Facebook was ‘dangerous’ and that she did not want to tweet. ‘How does it aid me interacting with my community?’ she asked. D’Ambrosio was on Facebook (her staff maintained the page) and she found it ‘not bad’ – she had ‘a few friends’. Younger people embraced the immediacy of social media, and it allowed her to describe what she was doing on a daily basis. This was important to D’Ambrosio because, like Corcoran, she believed that ‘most people don’t know what we do’. ‘Why should they?’ she asked. ‘It is not as though their neighbour is a politician: very few people are elected.’

The role of the media in the relationship with constituents

The relationship between politicians and most of their constituents is indirect, and largely contingent on the ability of the representative to gain media coverage for her work. This is never easy and if coverage is achieved there is no guarantee it will be favourable. This uncertainty was reflected in the representatives’ responses to this question.

D’Ambrosio sees the media ‘as a player in perceptions’ and stated that it is ‘outrageous if they say they are not’. She thinks they help to create cynicism among voters, although ‘some are more thoughtful’. She gave the example of the Labor MP Martin Pakula, who was criticised by the Herald Sun for buying a $30 nightlight for his car. ‘Give us a break’, D’Ambrosio commented, ‘scrutinise us but, for goodness sake, we’re not all in the gutter.’ She believes that the media has a responsibility in a democracy and need to reflect better on their role in society. Their approach ‘does serve a purpose for them’, but D’Ambrosio is not sure what it is. She sees the media as trying to promote one party over another but feels it is for other people to judge their motives. ‘That’s not to say that they shouldn’t form an opinion’, she clarified, ‘they just need to present the arguments in balanced way.’ She contrasted Australia with the United Kingdom, which had ‘more variety of opinion’. ‘A good headline sells papers’, she concluded.

Burke said she has a ‘great relationship with the local media’, but does not receive much coverage from them. They see her as part of Canberra rather than a local so they do not run stories about her activities. If a story with which she is connected makes it into the daily newspapers then it is judged not to be suitable for the local press, and she finds this very frustrating. Burke also pointed out that there was a high turnover of local journalists, and that as soon as she forms a good relationship with one of them they move on. As a backbencher she attracts little television coverage, although she did make it onto television and talkback radio from opposition. In the mid-2000s she had run the campaign for the Do Not Call Register, which allowed people to place their telephone numbers on a register so marketers would not pester them. As
a ‘terrific consumer issue’, the Do Not Call Register attracted a lot of media attention. Burke appeared on Channel Seven’s *Sunrise* program to promote the campaign and was ‘treated fairly’. She also mentioned a problem with a journalist from the *Age* newspaper over an internal ALP matter, and observed that you could ‘get caught up in things’ when you had not even commented. She said that she has not pandered to the media – ‘it’s just not me’ – but that this didn’t pay off ‘for your own personal promotional perspective’. Her job is to make sure the voter gets ‘another perception’ besides the media’s. ‘That’s my task, so it’s through their letterbox [using newsletters]. I can’t rely on the media … in a metro seat.’ Corcoran recounted a story of a field trip to research the army in the Northern Territory with a Liberal member of parliament and a journalist. The journalist tried to stir up a stoush between Corcoran and the Liberal MP, but was disappointed when the pair got on very well. With no conflict between them, there was no story for the journalist.

The representatives were not asked directly about gender as an attribute. They all spoke to some degree about ‘women’s issues’ such as problems with family allowances and child support, but they were less obviously concerned with cultivating the women’s vote than had been the subject of a previous study, the former Liberal MP Fran Bailey. This is possibly because as Labor MPs they are expected to have a greater commitment to social welfare (arguably synonymous with women’s issues) than their opponents. There is more work to be done on this. The parliamentarians’ engagement with gender in their style of constituency service emerged only through incidental anecdotes, such as those about the problems of shopping in their electorates, the use of their own experiences as women and mothers in acting empathetically, or the difficulties of organising their time around family commitments. Further research is required to see if and how these narratives of constituency service differ from those constructed by male Labor MPs.

**Conclusion**

All three women politicians displayed some concern about voters’ lack of political engagement but D’Ambrosio was more optimistic about the future of democracy in Australia than the others. All three identified similar problems in the relationship between politicians and voters, notably perceptions that politicians are self-interested, dishonest and insincere, and that voters have little knowledge of what politicians actually do. All three raised accessibility, empathy and ability to get things done as necessary attributes of the good local member. Their normal arrangements for meeting constituents were similar but varied because of the differing needs of their electorates and their own responsibilities. Their attitudes to the media also varied. Although all three were wary of the media’s power to misrepresent them and their parties,
D’Ambrosio and Corcoran were more critical of the behaviour of journalists than was Burke.

The narratives of the three politicians shared another characteristic. They all painted an idealised picture of their leadership through constituency service, preferring to emphasise their altruism and public service above their personal ambitions. Remember, Burke said that most members of parliament wanted to make a difference, asking ‘why else would they do it?’ Ambition is the obvious answer to her question, but with the exception of Burke’s extraordinary admission that she had ‘scratched others’ eyes out to get here’ ambition was not raised. Instead the politicians emphasised their altruism and service to the community. The reluctance of the politicians to raise their personal ambition suggests sensitivity towards the ‘anti–big man’ phenomenon and an understanding of the importance of perceived disinterest to maintaining healthy levels of political trust. It might also have important consequences for Australian political culture. No matter how empathetic, responsive and competent such politicians’ leadership might be, their silence about the personal ambition that is necessary for political success smacks of insincerity and might well be one factor in the public’s entrenched mistrust of politicians.

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Sawer, ‘Representing Trees’, 40.


19 See ‘MP Pans Rudd’s Faction Fiction’, Age, 19 June 2009.

20 Burke is now a regular contributor to the Drive program on ABC 774 in Melbourne.