

Identifying Women Leaders in Twentieth-Century Australia: An Introduction

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How have the dimensions of women's civic leadership evolved since the emergence of a democratic Australia in 1902 when white women received political citizenship? Who were the women leaders of the twentieth century – and where, what and whom did they lead? These are among the many questions about leadership discussed in this collection, which is part of a wider research effort of historians and other scholars who seek new understandings of what women's leadership involves and where it can be found. The contributors view women's leadership as a historical and cultural process, evolving as changing social expectations and gender codes affected the conditions within which women were able to exert leadership and the boundaries to their search for equality. From 1902 when the Commonwealth Franchise Act extended political citizenship to white women, many formal barriers to women's education, employment and public participation increasingly diminished, but opportunities for women to achieve leadership positions in any but women-only organisations remained surprisingly rare. White men devised most organisations around the expectation that caring responsibilities would be undertaken elsewhere, by women, while the men took the authority to shape and lead the group. Moreover, women have been scrutinised against desirable gendered attributes, both in the past and today, and while there have been shifts in these attributes, femininity has seldom been aligned with the qualities associated with leadership.¹

The gendered logics of appropriateness made it difficult for women to succeed, and where women's leadership did occur it was often rendered invisible: labelled as community organising, perceived as a social activity rather than leadership or confined to women-only organisations that could be easily ignored – or ridiculed – by those outside the groups. As many of the

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contributors to this volume show, this lack of visibility has at times been exacerbated by women's commitment to feminist philosophies, including valuing non-hierarchical forms of organising; consequently, women have often viewed leadership as a shared process, building 'power to' rather than 'power over'. In *Carrying the Banner: Women, Leadership and Activism in Australia*, which she co-edited with Lorraine Hayden, Joan Eveline described the difficulty of persuading women to be named as leaders for what they see as collective achievements.² These are all factors in concealing when and how women have led throughout the century.

As the title *Seizing the Initiative* indicates, many chapters suggest that if women sought a position of leadership they often did so through identifying opportunities and then rising to the demands of the situation in ways that worked for them as relative interlopers. Few pursued the goal of leadership for its own sake, with the overt ambition to lead that can often be perceived in male leaders. Seizing opportunities as they arise can be construed as accidental leadership, but that does not mean the impact or influence of the women who did so was marginal. The conditions within which women could assume leadership, the ways they performed leadership in varying arenas at different times, and how they saw themselves as leaders require the close examination found in this volume so the intricacies of women's leadership can be brought into the light.³

After this introduction to the collection we place first a chapter written by Amanda Sinclair in which she looks at the construct of leadership itself, its history and recent popularity as an area of research. She does this both with an academic overview of the topic and through an account of her own journey around the term 'leadership'. Centrally for this project, leadership has, in most cultures including Australia, been defined as something that men do. She proposes a feminist reconceptualisation of leadership that goes beyond women performing against pre-existing criteria. This article offers an accessible introduction to academic discussions of women's leadership by means of a clear definition of key terms; an attempt to trace patterns of argument and debate over several decades; documentation of the strongly masculine nature of most earlier approaches; and a critical analysis of the way in which 'leadership' has become a recent corporate fad. It is a fitting framing chapter for the collection, highlighting the broader themes of modern leadership for women, while providing an understanding of how dominant ideas about leadership have often ensured women's public activities have been ignored or interpreted as something other than leadership. Significantly, Sinclair examines how concepts of leadership might be remade by scholarship, which can help 'shift the focus from women as the "other" who needed to "learn the ropes" of leadership, to documenting how organisations

and leadership were set up to maintain a gender order where masculinities were privileged’.

In the following section titled ‘The New Dominion’, six writers rework issues first heralded in the colonial period that continued to have significance for the newly federated country. These include the role of the women who filled the Vice Regal office through one detailed case study of the wife of the third governor general. Two chapters consider leadership in the most prominent social movement of the early century, the women’s movement, including its evaluation of the appropriate place of women in a modernising age. Three chapters complicate debates on non-Indigenous women from humanitarian backgrounds who assumed, with very mixed outcomes, the task of moderating the harsh treatment that settler administrations meted out to Aboriginal Australians.

The colonies of Australia, federated as the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, were linked to the Mother Country partly through the office of the governor general, representative of the monarch. The first governors general and their wives could be crucial figures in binding the new Dominion together. Elizabeth Taylor demonstrates the leadership of Lady Alice Northcote, wife of the third governor general, Lord Harry Northcote (1904–1908), through the first Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work in Melbourne in 1907. Taylor argues that Alice Northcote exercised her leadership creatively within her own sphere, taking initiatives within the constraints imposed upon her as the wife of the governor general, but pushing the boundaries gently to bring her scheme to fruition.

The establishment of the new Dominion coincided with the efforts of suffragists and social reformers to press for women’s political rights in the states where women were not yet enfranchised and, in the wake of their enfranchisement at federal level in 1902, to bring a critical voice to the aspects of modernity they saw as threatening to social order. Deborah Jordan considers the leadership of a committed labour activist, Emma Miller. Jordan argues that Miller, the ‘grand old labour woman of Queensland’ who was president of the Queensland Women’s Equal Franchise Association from 1894 to 1905, was a transformational leader, holding to a belief system of core values at the intersection of both the women’s and labour movements. Ellen Warne focuses upon the strategies of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in gaining the vote for women by advertising ideas and influencing the voting public. She argues that they ‘welcomed and manipulated the glare of publicity ... seeing as they did that women should take a central role in the shaping of policy on critical modern issues’. The union adopted a range of strategies to achieve its goal; it had a publicity department and different sections of the organisation tackled specific issues.

Warne shows that the group not only led in the movement for women's franchise, but also trialled new ways of campaigning for social change.

The following three chapters focus upon the very different initiatives of three women, Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz, Daisy Bates and Mary Montgomerie Bennett, to improve the lives of Aboriginal women and men. Katharine Massam explores the dilemma that Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz faced in 1904 when she arrived in the New Norcia mission in Western Australia to become director of the 'new college' for Aboriginal girls. Working alongside the Benedictine monks and with six other 'Teresian Sisters' (members of the Missionary Company of St Teresa of Jesus) she was caught between the expectation that she would exercise leadership and the reality that she had no institutional authority. Her actions within such circumstances, particularly her involvement in the attempted separation of a young child from her family, point to the difficulties of identifying the quality as well as incidence of women's exercise of leadership. These complexities of interpreting women engaged in humanitarian endeavours are further explored by Ann Standish. Her chapter considers the diverse routes by which Daisy Bates promoted herself as a leader in knowledge about Aborigines in the first half of the twentieth century: a fictitious family and educational background, living in a tent among Aborigines and claiming the right to describe Indigenous culture and advocate government policy. Bates acted independently, with no connection to a group or organisation, in what might be classified as a masculine 'heroic' mode, but did this make her a leader? It is an essay that exposes some of the problems of identifying white women's 'leadership' in a society based on settler colonialism, and shows not all claims of women to lead can be celebrated.

In comparison, Sue Taffe examines Mary Montgomerie Bennett's different approaches when she sought to develop, popularise and implement a set of ideas concerning the human rights of Aboriginal Australians. Taffe also asks us to consider whether in fact Bennett was a leader and, if so, how her leadership was expressed. Although Bennett was unsuccessful in changing the circumstances in which Aboriginal people lived in Western Australia in the 1930s, she became a strong advocate and guide for the Aboriginal rights movement that developed in the 1950s and, by consistently advocating the rights of Aborigines as 'human beings', provided a forceful voice in the area.

The next section focuses on 'The New Woman Citizen'. These chapters demonstrate the expanding spheres in which women exercised their leadership as the twentieth century progressed. The contributors show the resilience of women who persevered in assuming rights and pushing boundaries during World War I and the decades of the 1920s and 1930s: two women who were war nurses (one of whom moved into medical research), two who stood for parliament, and others who became prominent in public life and entered

professional work. The diversity of their occupations and their approaches to them illustrate further the dimensions of ‘seizing the initiative’; through the limited opportunities available for women of this time – nursing or teacher training, for example – women could obtain positions of leadership and influence, even if these were undervalued by peers at the time and sometimes by observers since.

Anne Prince explores the transformation of Miss Beryl Campbell, raised on a remote Queensland cattle station in the 1890s, into Matron B.A. Campbell, in charge of a military hospital in Salonica, Greece in 1917. She was decorated for her war service by the British and French governments, and became a member of a commanding group of Australian women. As a leader in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) in World War I, Campbell travelled widely in the Middle East and Europe, assumed responsibility for the lives of many young men, and faced death herself on a number of occasions – but for all this, was modest, if not silent, about her achievements, even in letters home. Kirsty Harris reveals the vital role of another one-time nurse, Fannie Williams, in the field of medical science in Australia. By tracing Williams’ activities from her early days in Adelaide to her long career at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Harris makes a case for Williams to be more widely recognised as a leader in medical science and, as the first female to undertake some of her activities, a trailblazer for other women. She also rectifies some misconceptions within the historiography of Australian science that have obscured Williams’ leadership.

Bridget Brooklyn engages with the variations of maternalist feminism during the 1920s as she considers how these differences were reflected in the careers of two women, Dr Mary Booth and Millicent Preston Stanley, who both participated in non-party women’s organisations. Stanley represented the National Party in the NSW Parliament for one term, while Booth was an unsuccessful political candidate. As Brooklyn shows, politics, one of the key arenas where leadership can be performed and policy influenced, was theoretically open to women from early in the twentieth century and the women’s movement of the time strongly supported women’s parliamentary involvement. Despite this support, and the opportunities that presented themselves in the 1920s, female representation remained sparse. It is a chapter that resonates with those in the final section of the book that discuss the experiences of later women parliamentarians.

Karen Fox uses the example of Cecilia Downing, who was appointed MBE in 1950 at the age of ninety-two for her service to the community, to pinpoint the inbuilt bias against recognition of women in the Australian honours system that led to an undervaluation of women’s contribution to public life. Cecilia Downing was federal president of the Housewives Association from 1940 to 1945. She was also state president of the WCTU in

the early years of World War I, state and federal president of Travellers' Aid in the late 1930s and 1940s, and secretary of the National Council of Women of Victoria from 1928 to 1936. Undoubtedly an influential community leader over a considerable period of time, her position in women's groups did not make her an obvious choice for an official honour. These tended to be awarded for leadership roles in politics, the public service or business rather than for leading housewives. Did the award to Downing signal a shift in understandings of community leadership, Fox asks.

Deidre Michell examines the experience of two influential Australian women who were raised in the Christian Science tradition: Betty Archdale (1907–2000), principal of a leading private girls' school in New South Wales and Kylie Tennant (1912–1988), prominent author. Michell argues that despite their conversion to mainstream Christianity, Christian Science theology and praxis influenced both women throughout their lives as they assumed their different places as leaders. Although Christian Science membership was never large, Michell argues that the religion, founded by a woman in the nineteenth century, had considerable influence in producing an unexpected number of early feminists. She explores what it was about the creed that proved formational for some women who became leaders.

Deborah Towns makes a strong case for May Cox to be acknowledged as a leader, focusing on Cox's educational and patriotic activity in the Victorian community before World War II. When she was appointed Organiser of Swimming and Lifesaving for the Victorian Education Department in 1910, Cox became one of the first women teachers to work in the head office of that department. She combined that role with the management of the Education Department's patriotic activities during World War I. Her fight to be recognised on equal terms with and receive pay equal to that of her male colleagues, notably Frank Beaurepaire, was long but ultimately successful; this, and her late marriage (which took place only after she had retired and obtained her superannuation payout) points to the additional social and financial restrictions that could impede women's leadership, and the strategies some used to resist or accommodate them.

Later, during the post World War II decades, many more women began to break into professional work after completing tertiary education. Some of the leaders among such women can be found in the chapters in the section 'Making a Mark in the Professions'. Despite a social environment stressing dependency, there were some women who through talent and determination broke into male professions or assumed leadership positions against the tide of social expectations. With admirable drive and persistence, these women made the most of all opportunities that arose and often helped create more opportunities for those that followed.

Alison Mackinnon argues that early women graduates, those who attended university before 1920, were particularly influential in the education of women and girls, and in the areas of economic participation, health and politics, often venturing into areas where no women had previously worked, such as public hospitals or legal practices. She concludes that while few of these women identified as leaders, as a cohort these early graduates 'demonstrated leadership in establishing new ways of working, being and living'. Patricia Grimshaw and Rosemary Francis address a later generation of women scholars, many of whom may have benefitted from the influence of that earlier cohort. They explore women's postwar research leadership through the identification of fourteen women elected to one of the four learned academies formed between 1954 and 1976 (the Australian Academy of Science, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian Academy of Technical Sciences). Diverse in their disciplinary interests, these academic women were alike in their determination to push the boundaries of knowledge and in the generosity with which they engaged with academic and non-academic audiences. Women such as Hanna Neumann, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Jacqueline Goodnow made the most of their own educational opportunities and were conscious of ensuring other women were able to do the same.

Gill Mathewson, Naomi Stead and Karen Burns explain the aims of their research project 'Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work and Leadership', which aims to map women's participation in the architecture profession. They seek to understand why women are underrepresented at senior management level despite having been an active and highly successful part of the architecture profession in Australia for more than a hundred years. The chapter suggests that the reasons women are prevented from undertaking leadership roles are often not the expected ones of family responsibility taking precedence over professional ambition.

Louise North provides an overview of the rise of women and women leaders in the Australian print news media and outlines aspects of the profession of journalism that continue to hamper women's career progression. She presents strongly researched findings about the continuing obstacles of discrimination and sexual harassment that women encounter in the 'blokey' culture of the Australian newsroom today, and argues that far greater steps are needed at the level of undergraduate training to ensure a change in attitudes takes place. It is this, rather than affirmative action measures alone, that will work to change the male attitudes and culture that exclude women from senior news media positions.

In the final essay in this section, Jane Carey shows the path taken by the eminent scientist Elizabeth Blackburn to win the Nobel Prize in 2009. Covering the years from Blackburn's early education in 1950s' Hobart,

through graduation from the University of Melbourne, to research positions in the United Kingdom and the United States, Carey charts the determination with which Blackburn pursued her scientific research career. Carey also uses the example of Blackburn to look at how issues around 'girls in science' are portrayed in the media, arguing that the media insistence on Blackburn's 'hard time' as a female scientist is part of an inaccurate and counterproductive assessment of the professional experiences of women in science.

While some women, like Blackburn, rose to the top of their professions others continued, as women have always done, to work in a volunteer capacity and join or form associations to pursue their goals. The six chapters grouped under 'Volunteers and Activists' examine women's leadership in disparate areas including non-government organisations in which women's participation has been crucial. The writers' contributions range from the Anglican Church; a society to assist women breastfeeding their babies; an Indigenous historian, writer and activist; urban reform activists; a worker for radical drama; and an organisation offering refugee assistance.

Anne O'Brien examines women's leadership in the church and explores the deeply ingrained misogyny reflected in the comment made by the Reverend Ian Herring, the Anglican Vicar of Bundoora (a Melbourne suburb), on the subject of the ordination of women during the 1980s. He expressed the view that 'ordaining a woman was analogous to ordaining a meat pie on the altar of God'. This extraordinary comparison is used to illustrate the hostility directed not only towards women actively seeking ordination but also to those working within church organisations more generally. O'Brien charts the actions of women who worked within the hierarchy of differing Christian dominations, to uncover the 'forms of resistance and accommodation' they employed to achieve leadership despite the strong male authority behind the organisations.

Karen Twigg and Jill Barnard explore some aspects of the early years of the Nursing Mothers' Association up until 1974. They focus particularly on the crucial part the organisation's co-founder, Mary Paton, played in developing the system of local groups that proved such a successful way of operating the association. Mary Paton's leadership and ideas attracted many women to the group, which they often then worked for in turn. As well as promoting the benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and babies, and retrieving some of the power over child-rearing knowledge from the medical profession, working for the NMA could give participants the experience and confidence to take their skills to other organisations and into the paid workforce.

Patricia Grimshaw examines the importance of Ruby Langford Ginibi's leadership as a historian of the lives of her Bundjalung people from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. Grimshaw shows how Langford Ginibi's writings and speeches informed a wide range of people about the

difficulties Aborigines faced in Australian history that continued into the late twentieth century. Her book *Don't Take Your Love to Town* was and remains a powerful and influential depiction of contemporary Aboriginal life, in both outback and urban Australia. Grimshaw highlights Langford Ginibi's portrayal of the central role of Aboriginal women in maintaining Indigenous family livelihoods and acknowledges Langford Ginibi's leadership as a writer of alternative Indigenous narratives of Australian history.

Renate Howe examines the women activists who were members of Melbourne's inner-city residents' associations in the 1970s and explores the ways in which involvement in the residents' associations opened up wider opportunities and leadership roles for these women. The urban activists challenged the plans of Melbourne's infrastructure authorities and contributed to a new and important model of women's urban and suburban leadership based on public participation in planning, building neighbourhood communities and creating a sustainable future. Within these groups, they found the power to influence politicians and policy and proved themselves adept at exerting pressure on behalf of their inner-city community.

Ann-Mari Jordens highlights the activities of the Rural Australians for Refugees networks, which three women, Helen McCue, Anne Coombs and Susan Varga, established in a New South Wales country town in 2001 as a result of the federal government's inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. Members of this group helped asylum seekers ease their transition from detention centres into the broader society. Networks grew quickly, as groups were established in rural areas all around Australia. Jordens argues that the 'highly devolved, collaborative and egalitarian structure of this organisation reflected a distinctly feminist style of leadership' in a chapter that points to the effectiveness of rethinking leadership from a feminist perspective.

Julie Evans focuses upon how Liz Jones, CEO and artistic director of the La Mama Theatre in Melbourne, has led the development of community theatre. Evans attempts to broaden the concept of leadership through an analysis of Jones' capacity as a teacher, performer, administrator, board member, employer, entrepreneur, social justice advocate and manager of an iconic theatre company. The chapter combines a detailed profile of Jones alongside a theorised argument to validate the original and different kind of leadership that she embodied. In particular, Evans draws on Amanda Sinclair's theories about the influence of childhood experience on leadership execution and style, providing a very human case study that does much to illuminate the field.

The chapters grouped in the final section, 'Gender and Politics', indicate that for women, leadership in businesses and parliaments has been and remains an obstacle race. The contributors consider the gendered character of

women's political leadership in the highly visible and potentially powerful arena of Australian parliaments.

Casey Northam and Danielle Miller examine the *Queensland Speaks* website, which includes interviews with former and current women politicians from both sides of politics. They draw on the stories of these women to highlight the efforts that women have made to make Queensland a fairer and more representative democracy and to demonstrate the educational potential of such a resource. The website provides valuable first-hand accounts of the experiences of women in Queensland's parliament and public service, greatly enhanced, the authors argue, by listeners being able to hear the tone and tenor of the women's voices.

Madeline Grey explores women's political leadership through the perceptions of a range of women members of the Parliament of Victoria. Interviews with women MPs from the major political parties provide a fascinating snapshot of their personal views on the 'complexity of representation' inherent in women's political leadership. The concept of 'representational burden' – the expectation that because of their gender, women MPs have a particular responsibility to represent the interests of women in general – is examined through their views on power and leadership and the issue of whether women MPs lead differently. In comparison, Jackie Dickenson focuses upon the relationship between the female local member and her electorate. She defines constituency service as a particular form of public leadership. Based on interviews with three women Labor politicians – Anna Burke, Ann Corcoran and Lily D'Ambrosio – Dickenson discusses their approaches to constituency service within the context of popular perceptions of a more cynical electorate. She finds that the interviewees emphasised their altruism and public service above their personal ambitions. Dickenson considers whether this reluctance to raise personal ambition might contribute to the widespread distrust politicians engender in the voting public when the women MPs' 'silence about the personal ambition that is necessary for political success smacks of insincerity'.

Kathy Gooch takes a different approach to the topic of women in politics, as she explores a connection between the cultural discomfort with the participation of women on the front line of war and the continuing challenges faced by women in positions of political leadership. She suggests that unease with women in war translates to politics through the pervasive use of war metaphor in political discourse. If politics is understood as war and the popular belief is that women do not belong in war, the conclusion, Gooch argues, is that despite official policies of gender equality there exists a cultural discomfort with women in the front line of politics.

We believe this collection offers an important contribution to the project outlined by Sinclair in her foundational chapter. In this introduction we have

sketched the diverse ways women have achieved firsts, blazed trails, influenced public opinion and grappled with authority to lead others over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The chapters explore in some depth the different paths taken by individual women and women's groups and the various initiatives these women seized when presented with them. They illustrate the lengths that personal drive and persistence enabled them to go. But among these diverse paths are some notable similarities. Many contributors point to paucity of records relating to these women, having difficulties sometimes even in establishing their correct place of birth or given name. While such problems have plagued women's history in general since its inception, it is worth pointing out that most male leaders have left copious records of their achievements. Another similarity, which no doubt is in part responsible for the first, is that almost without exception, the women who are the subjects of these chapters did not define themselves as leaders.

Contributors to this volume have selected women based on the impact of their leadership on Australian society or in the development of international norms. They have explored the effectiveness of their example as models for aspiring women leaders and identified innovative strategies by which women leaders redress or bypass the constraints imposed by male-defined leadership assumptions. The collection reveals how women negotiated leadership not only in formal politics and political lobby groups, but also at work, in business, in communities and in religious and cultural arenas. Together, the chapters place women's leadership within the broader setting of historical change in Australia during the twentieth century: first and second wave feminism, the world wars, growing educational opportunities and increased workplace participation. In traversing the century from colonial concerns to corporate life, the contributions illustrate the many advances made by women and the barriers that still stand between women and leadership roles. It is a collection that uncovers the diverse ways women have performed leadership and confirms that broader understandings of leadership have much to gain from this knowledge.

¹ There is a dearth of scholarly studies of women's leadership. Internationally, see the work of Alice Eagley, for example, 'Female Leadership Advantage and Disadvantage: Resolving the contradiction' in *Leadership* Vol IV: 2005–2009, ed. D. Collinson, K. Grint and B. Jackson (London: Sage, 2011), 251–72; Joyce Fletcher, for example, 'The Paradox of Post Heroic Leadership: An Essay on Gender, Power and Transformational Change', *The Leadership Quarterly* 15: 652 and Jean Chin, B. Lott, J. Rice and J. Sanchez-Hucles (eds), *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2007). Australian educational scholar

Jill Blackmore has made a major contribution in the area of women's educational leadership, for example, *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999); Jane Wilkinson and Jill Blackmore, 'Re-presenting Women and Leadership: A Methodological Journey', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21, no. 2 (2008).

² Joan Eveline with Lorraine Hayden (eds), *Carrying the Banner: Women, Leadership and Activism in Australia* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1999). Other studies of women and leadership in Australia include: Marian Sawer, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008); Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999); Madeline Grey, *Challenging Women: Towards Equality in the Parliament of Victoria* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009); Marian Simms, 'Women's Politics and Leadership in Australia and New Zealand', *Signs* vol. 34, no.1 (2008); Fiona Davis, Nell Musgrove and Judith Smart (eds), *Founders, Firsts and Feminists: Women Leaders in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre, 2011).

³ Amanda Sinclair's work on gender and leadership has been influential for many writers in this volume. See her chapter in this volume (15–34) and also Amanda Sinclair, *Doing Leadership Differently: Gender, Power and Sexuality in a Changing Business Culture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 1998), *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007) and Amanda Sinclair and Valerie Wilson, *New Faces of Leadership* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).