

## **The Forty-second Australian Parliament: increased threat to male dominance?** by Tony Smith

*Australian Policy Online, www.apo.org.au, 4 February 2008*

In December the sex discrimination commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, welcomed the record number of women in leadership positions in the new federal government line up.<sup>1</sup> Following Labor's victory over the Coalition on 24 November, Kevin Rudd broke with Labor tradition by claiming the right to choose his ministers. Commissioner Broderick said the increased number of women in both Cabinet and the outer ministry was to be applauded.

There are seven females among the 30 ministers and three among the twelve parliamentary secretaries. Four of the 20 members of Cabinet are women.<sup>2</sup> Ms Broderick said:

Nearly 24 per cent of leadership positions are now held by women, almost half way to reflecting Australian society. With a female Deputy Prime Minister as well as a female Deputy Opposition Leader, I am confident that the future will bring an increasing number of talented women into leadership roles on merit as they deserve.

Veteran writer Anne Summers quickly detected the quality as well as the quantity of female ministers.<sup>3</sup> She argued that the appointment of Penny Wong as climate change and water minister signalled the burial of institutional racism and noted the minister's positive reception around the region. Summers mentioned the pride that all women felt as Rudd's deputy Julia Gillard was acting prime minister, and the immediate effectiveness of Nicola Roxon in health.

Prior to the election, it seemed as though the campaign was unfolding as the traditional masculine festival.<sup>4</sup> As fifteen of the sixteen seats likely to fall should there be a change of government were being defended by Coalition males<sup>5</sup>, election night also promised to be entertainment for Don's Party<sup>6</sup> rather than Donna's. Under these circumstances then, has Prime Minister Rudd rewarded Labor women too richly? Should Labor men feel disappointment based on their contribution to Labor's return to power after twelve years in opposition? Should voters care about the gender ratios in either the elected parliament or the executive chosen by the prime minister?

### **The new House**

While some ministers are senators, most are from the House of Representatives. The Westminster theory of responsibility holds that governments are formed in the lower house. Senators are parliamentarians, but by convention, the term "MP" here stands for "MHR." In the 41st Parliament, males held 113 of the 150 House seats or some 75.3 per cent seats. In the 42nd Parliament, 110 are held by men, a fall to about 73.3 per cent (See Table 1, below).

**Table 1: Male and female MPs, before and after the 2007 election**

	Before election				After election			
	Female	Male	Total	Male per cent total	Female	Male	Total	Male per cent total
Labor	20	40	60	66.6	27	56	83	67.5
Liberal	15	60	75	80.0	12	43	55	78.2
National	2	10	12	83.6	1	9	10	90.0
Independent	0	3	3	100.0	0	2	2	100.0
Total	37	113	150	75.3	40	110	150	73.3

Source: Parliamentary Handbook: Historical Information on the Australian Parliament, [http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/historical/women\\_number.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/historical/women_number.htm)

The main changes in personnel were occasioned by a 5.31 per cent swing to Labor in two party preferred terms. Formerly holding 60 seats (66.6 per cent male) Labor had a net gain of 23 seats, taking it to 83. Fifty-six Labor MPs are males (67.5 per cent). So, while Labor has never had so many female MPs, it is a slightly more masculine party after the election than before. Senate numbers reinforce that image. Twenty-seven of the 76 Senators are female (35.5 per cent) and that number will be the same when the newly elected Senators take their seats. In Caucus from mid year, Labor will have eight new Senators to replace four retirees. It will gain one female Senator but three extra males.

The increased masculinity of Labor seems odd given that the House as a whole (110 males or 73.3 per cent male) is now slightly less male dominated than previously (113 males or 75.3 per cent). The decline is certainly not explained by independents, who at three previously and two today are 100 per cent male, nor by the Nationals, whose male numbers fell from ten to nine but whose female membership was halved, from two to one, so that 90 per cent Nationals MPs are males. Liberal men were the biggest losers. They went to the election with 60 of the party's 75 seats (80 per cent) and emerged with 43 of 55 (78.2 per cent). Pre-election, the Liberals had over half the men in the parliament (60 of 113), but emerged with well under half (43 of 110). A loss of seventeen Liberal males among 60 is over a quarter, while the loss of three women of fifteen is a fall of only a fifth.

### **No critical mass effect**

The consistency between the House's overall gender ratios pre- (75.3 per cent) and post-election (73.3 per cent) suggest that there is something natural about them. This is depressing news for those who look to increased female representation for reasons of justice or hopes of an improved parliament. The optimism generated by theories of critical mass and self-generating growth is difficult to sustain given the fluctuations in women's numbers. While the trend is generally upward, there have been falls in the proportions of female MPs and rises in males (See Table 2 and the Chart below). In 1995 the female proportion fell from 10.2 per cent to 9.5 per cent, but that was due to a by-election in a seat held by the Labor government. In 2004, the proportion fell from 25.3 per cent to 24.7 per cent. While each of these falls involved the loss of just

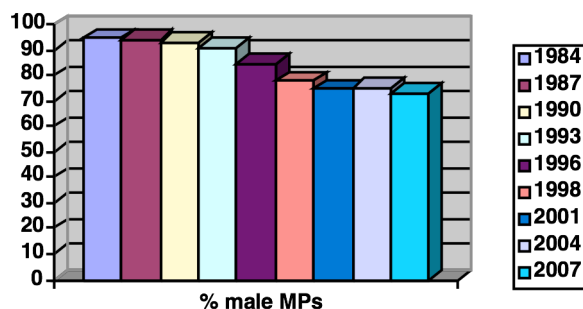
one woman, they disturb the upward trend enough to cast doubt on the critical mass hypothesis.

It is sometimes argued that women's numbers will increase so long as Labor numbers remain high, because the party has mandated opportunities for women. However, the biggest upsurge in women's numbers occurred in 1996, a year of Coalition victory and a net gain of 14 seats for Liberal women, and in 1998, a year of recovery for Labor women, when they gained 12 seats. Because Labor is in Government after 2007 and has 27 of the 40 female MPs, a loss of seats for Labor could see a high proportion of seats held by women lost, and the overall percentage of seats held by women decrease.

**Table 2: fluctuations in the proportions of seats held by males, 1984 to 2007.**

Year	Male MPs per cent all MPs
1984	94.6
1987	93.9
1990	93.2
1993	91.2
1996	84.5
1998	77.7
2001	74.7
2004	75.3
2007	73.3

**Chart: males as percentage of all MPs, following elections of 1984-2007**



### Candidate success rates

It is informative to examine the success of candidates by gender. Table 3 below shows that only some 14.2 per cent of candidates were successful. Many candidates are flag wavers for minor parties with no chance of election. They nominate for House seats to ensure that their parties are represented at polling booths in order to boost their Senate campaign. In so doing they add to their experience and credentials and boost their chances of securing nomination in a winnable situation in the future. The Greens ran 114 lower house candidates, the Democrats 86 and Family First 129. The 329 flag wavers for these three parties included 211 males and 119 females.

Independents have a better chance of election than minor party candidates. Two were elected among 102 candidates. Neither is female, although fifteen women ran. The high proportion of males among Independent candidates (87 of 102) might be explained by the siting of about two-thirds of Independent candidates in New South Wales (38) and Queensland (26).<sup>7</sup> These are the strong National Party states and many independent candidates represent a rural rebellion against the Nationals. That party's own domination by males suggests that a masculine culture prevails in many areas where independents might have a chance of winning. This could discourage female candidates in those areas. At least one male Nationals candidate suggested that the rural electorate for which he nominated presented extra difficulties for his female Liberal opponent. The female candidate, "Charlie McKillop," was defended by the retiring MP as "one tough bird." The male Labor candidate won the seat anyway.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 3: Candidate success rate by gender: House election 2007**

	Number	Successful	Success rate
Candidates	1054	150	14.2
Female	272	40	14.7
Male	782	110	14.1

Source: AEC Virtual Tally Room, <http://vtr.aec.gov.au/HouseResultsMenu-13745.htm>

Table 3 above shows that female candidates performed better than males. Of 272 female candidates 40 were elected, so 14.7 per cent succeeded. Of 782 male candidates, 110 were elected, a success rate of 14.1 per cent. This may be a slight difference, but it suggests that female candidates were more successful than male. Table 4 below suggests that the difference is attributable to the greater success of Labor females relative to Labor males.

**Table 4: Candidate success by gender and party**

Party	Candidates	Elected (per cent)	Females	Elected (per cent)	Males	Elected (per cent)
Labor	150	83 (55.3)	45	27 (60.0)	105	56 (53.3)
Liberal	132	55 (41.7)	31	12 (38.7)	101	43 (42.6)
National	24	10 (41.6)	6	1 (16.7)	18	9 (50.0)
Independent	102	2 (1.96)	15	-	87	2 (2.3)
Other	652	-	-	-	-	-
Total	1054	150 (14.2)	272	40 (14.7)	782	110 (14.1)

In the major parties, success rates vary. Labor ran 150 candidates and secured 83 seats, a success rate of 55.33 per cent. Of 45 female candidates, 27 were elected, a rate of 60 per cent. Of 105 males, 56 were elected, or 53.3 per cent. The Liberals endorsed 132 candidates of whom 55 were elected, an overall success rate of 41.7 per cent. It ran 31 women, of whom 12 (38.7 per cent) were returned. Of its 101 male candidates, 43 (42.6 per cent) won. Before the election, males held 80 per cent Liberal seats, and after, held 78.2 per cent. The National Party ran eighteen male and six female candidates and secured nine seats (50.0 per cent) and one seat (16.7 per cent) respectively. The post-election composition of the Nationals reflects the performance

of male and female candidates but for Labor and the Liberals the electoral performance of males and females seem to have had contradictory effects on party composition. This discrepancy is attributable to the base numbers involved.

### **Defenders and challengers**

The disposition of males and females within the ranks of candidates is significant. One interesting comparison is between the outcomes for seat defenders and challengers. The figures are complicated somewhat by the effects of the redistribution in NSW, where Labor, Liberal and Nationals all gained seats notionally. In Macquarie, the former male Liberal incumbent was regarded as a challenger. In Parramatta, the former female Labor MP was a challenger. In Calare, the former male member for Parkes was considered to be the incumbent.

As the swing was towards Labor, it is interesting to consider the success of that party's defenders and challengers. Tables 5 and 6 below show that while most Labor candidates were successful, it was better to be a defender than a challenger. Of 60 candidates defending seats (41 male, 19 female), only two lost. In WA, one was lost by a male MP and one by a new female candidate. One seat among 19 is a higher proportion than one seat among 41, but the statistics are tiny and unreliable.

Among Labor challengers in 90 seats, 25 (27.8 per cent) succeeded, giving Labor its net gain of 23 seats. Of 26 female challengers, 9 (34.6 per cent) succeeded. Sixteen males among 64 challengers succeeded (25.0 per cent). So female challengers outperformed male challengers. It is possible that more Labor men than women contested unwinnable seats. This could in turn reflect Labor's policy of ensuring that women are not disproportionately preselected as mere "flag wavers" but have a chance of winning. In the ten safest Coalition seats, eight (80 per cent) of Labor's challengers were male, which is a higher proportion than males' 70 per cent of all candidates.

**Table 5: Labor candidate success rates**

	Number	Successful	Success rate
Candidates	150	83	55.3
Female	45	27	60.0
Male	105	56	53.3

**Table 6: Labor defender and challenger success rates**

	Number	Successful	Success rate
Total defenders	60	58	96.7
Female	19	18	94.7
Male	41	40	97.6
Total challengers	90	25	27.8
Female	26	9	34.6
Male	64	16	25.0

## The “Class of 2007”: projecting the future

There are 42 “freshers” in the Forty-second Parliament. Thirty four of these are from Labor, seven from the Liberal Party and one National MP. Only two Liberals have won seats from Labor, but a party need not win any new seats to have regeneration. The new National and six of seven Liberals are male. The only non-Labor female to enter in the “Class of 2007” is the new MP for Forrest in WA.

Labor had some regeneration occurring before the election. Ten of the new MPs are in seats retained by Labor (including Macquarie which became Labor notionally after the redistribution although the sitting member was a Liberal). These ten MPs include eight males. In one high profile example, a male union official won preselection for the seat of Charlton when the sitting female MP was accused of ineffectiveness and scandalous personal behaviour. The 25 seats won from the Coalition bring 24 new MPs to parliament (Parramatta was made a notional Liberal seat although the sitting member was Labor, so Ms Owens is not a new MP). Of the 24, sixteen are male. Overall then, 24 of the 34 new Labor MPs are male (70.6 per cent).

When the numbers of males and particularly their proportion among new MPs is placed alongside the data in Table 1 for the current gender ratios in parliament, it seems clear that male domination is not at all threatened. Table 7 below shows that the Class of 2007 is – very slightly – more male dominated than the parliament as a whole.

**Table 7: Males in the Forty-second Parliament and the Class of 2007**

	Males	per cent whole	Fresher males	per cent Class 2007
Labor	56 of 83	67.5	24 of 34	70.6
Liberal	43 of 55	78.2	6 of 7	85.7
National	9 of 10	90.0	1	100.0
Independent	2 of 2	100.0	-	-
Total	110 of 150	73.3	31 of 42	73.8

## Candidate success and voter behaviour

There is little evidence that male candidates across the parties performed better than females. Indeed, the clearest standout is the success of Labor female challengers. However, the scattered nature of candidate fortunes suggests that the most important factors remain the national swing and the nature of the seats for which candidates are nominated.

Assessing candidate quality is problematic when so many variables operate. Candidates rely upon a professional national campaign by their parties, local saturation by voluntary workers, fair media coverage and voter attitude. Surveys of public attitudes usually find that most voters think that more women MPs would improve parliament’s performance, but a paper by Andrew Leigh and Amy King, “Bias at the Ballot Box: Testing Whether Candidates’ Gender Affects Their Vote,” suggests that voters do not favour female candidates. The paper says that female

candidates score some 0.6 per cent lower than males and in a tight contest this could be critical.<sup>9</sup>

In McEwen where Fran Bailey was threatened by the male Labor challenger and the contest was so close that a recount was ordered, 0.6 per cent would have been handy. However, it is difficult to believe that a male Liberal candidate would have done 0.6 per cent better than a sitting female member when so many variables operate. Even with notional statewide swings, it is difficult to estimate how much of any candidate's vote is personal and how much of the swing is attributable to local factors.

Some journalists were pre-occupied with Michelle Cornes' relative lack of success in Boothby (SA). But it is dangerous to speculate about what might have been. Some journalists suggested that Cornes would have won had she secured the state average swing to Labor. Had she secured such a swing, then it would no longer have been the state average. The fact that the Liberals retained two other seats more marginal than Boothby and won two held by Labor seems to have eluded some commentators. After the election, Ms Cornes' campaign manager, a state MP, apologised for letting her down.

Some centuries ago, J.J. Rousseau commented that while men can forget that they have gender, women cannot. Women are constantly reminded that they are distinct, while men are able to assume that they are truly representative of all human beings. In the Forty-second Parliament, male MPs can feel relaxed that no revolution threatens their presence or their power. An equitable outcome for female MPs would be for them also to be able to approach their roles as MPs first and then as women. Many of the 40 female MHRs will feel however, that they must raise women's issues. Many will also feel a duty to help increase the numbers of women in parliament, because the 2007 election results suggest that voters are interested mainly in which party forms government. The fact that candidate gender remains a secondary consideration entrenches the gender status quo. Elections, the main official source of recruitment to positions of political power, reflect the de facto influences of parties. The enthusiasm for women holding almost a quarter of leadership positions ignores the fact that women hold almost a third of Labor's House seats. Overall, the 2007 election shows that parties control the gender ratios among MPs and that they are content to see masculine domination continue.

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<sup>1</sup> *Web Feedback*, 3 December 2007, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

<sup>2</sup> Official Website of the ALP, [http://www.alp.org.au/download/now/ministry\\_list.pdf](http://www.alp.org.au/download/now/ministry_list.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21–22 December 2007

<sup>4</sup> "The election as a masculine festival," *Perspective*, ABC Radio National, 1 November, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/perspective/stories/2007/2077512.htm#transcript>

<sup>5</sup> "The boys hold their own: candidate gender in the 2007 federal elections," *Australian Policy Online*, 23 November 2007,

[http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/comment\\_results.chtml?filename\\_num=181543](http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/comment_results.chtml?filename_num=181543)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/09/22/2040613.htm>

<sup>7</sup> "Struggling Independents, but lots of them," *Unleashed*, ABC, 23 November 2007,

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/stories/s2097769.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22597854-5012863,00.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/pdf/BiasBallotBox.pdf>;

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Female-candidates-get-fewer-votes-study/2007/11/21/1195321833897.html>