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Women’s Politics and Leadership in Australia and New Zealand

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Leadership has always presented a challenge for women’s movements, whether this challenge has taken the form of Jo Freeman’s (1970) concerns about the “tyranny of structurelessness”—namely, that social movements do not require leadership but instead collective action—or whether it is manifested in the unfairness of women’s absence from public life. These debates were imported into Australia and New Zealand during the second wave of feminist activism in the 1970s.

Such tensions remain unresolved today. Some feminist scholars continue to seek explanations for the relative absence of women from positions of political power, while others remain ambivalent about those few women who are relatively successful in mainstream politics. Some studies (see Tremblay 2005) have distinguished between women politicians and feminist ones, according feminist politicians accolades and arguing that their endeavors should be supported.¹ Others (see Childs and Krook 2006) make a parallel argument that critical mass theory and other statistical

¹ See Simms (2005) for an application of this model of feminist politicians to Australia and New Zealand. Briefly, it argues that key feminist individuals were critical in translating grassroots demands into policy.

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models do not provide satisfactory explanations of policy innovation and social change. Instead, they argue, key individuals, often operating in small groups, have been important change agents.

Following the 1970s social movement approach, with its preference for collective as opposed to individual action, the 1980s saw the beginning of a trend toward leadership studies. Interesting research on women has emerged from this strand, notably that which incorporates the study of the body. Amanda Sinclair (2005), for example, argues that successful women and indigenous leaders utilize their bodies to differentiate themselves from mainstream leaders to increase trust in their particular organization.

Serious commentators decry the cult of the celebrity that has been fostered by codependent media and public relations staff, arguing that it has devalued serious political discussion. Yet recent work on leadership (see Collinson 2006, following Burns 1979) reminds us that leaders require followers in whose eyes success is reflected. Deliberately eschewing the so-called leadership traits approach, which specifies a shopping list of attributes for good leadership, “followership” studies understand leadership in a relational way. Such models are potentially applicable to the public political arena. They echo existing studies that seek to examine the role of gender identity in responses by voters. Such frames have rarely been applied to explain the successes of women political leaders, however. Given the paucity of women political leaders, much feminist research has been directed toward explaining the barriers and constraints they experience rather than their successes. Often the media are castigated for regurgitating tired old stereotypes about the gendered nature of leadership.

Australia and New Zealand provide fascinating case studies of the barriers to women’s leadership and of women political leaders’ strategies for success. These nations share histories as white settler societies that promoted egalitarianism and social democracy; women gained the vote in national elections in New Zealand in 1893 and in Australia in 1902 (see Sawer and Simms 1993). In other words, we are comparing like with like. Paradoxically, both nations also waited over thirty years after women won the vote before they saw women elected to the national parliaments, with little occurring in women’s political representation until the reemergence of feminist activism in the 1970s. After the 1980s, the paths for the two nations sharply diverged. In Australia strong feminist politicians were edged out of the National Cabinet at the same time as the number of women politicians gradually increased. In New Zealand, feminist politicians fought their way into the inner circle of power, alongside an increase in the numbers of women members of Parliament (see Simms 2005).

Traditionally, politics has been a gendered occupation in Australia and
New Zealand. Party leaders were seen as the fathers of the nation. It was no accident that the few early women politicians in both countries were depicted as parliamentary mothers. This was in addition to the first women parliamentarians being political widows and/or parliamentary daughters. Research on barriers to political achievement in Australia has ascertained that most senior party officials saw the ideal candidate for parliament as “tall, dark and handsome, a good father who attends church” (quoted in Sawer and Simms 1993, 66). Women were rarely mentioned as first-choice candidates. When prompted, one party official suggested “the local television weather girl” as a possibility (quoted in Sawer and Simms 1993, 66). This and other research indicated that women candidates were not valued in a system in which candidate selection is both located within and firmly based on highly centralized, tightly organized political parties.

In New Zealand, Helen Clark rapidly rose to prominence in her thirties during the Labour government of the 1980s. She was elected to the cabinet in 1987, holding various ministries. She was elected party leader in 1993 and consequently became the prime minister when the Labour Party was elected to government in November 1999. Her government was reelected in 2002 and 2005.

Three features are striking about Clark’s leadership role. First, she has actively carried her reputation as a supporter of women’s issues and indigenous politics with her into the top job. Second, her long period in office has coincided with a values shift in New Zealand domestic and foreign policies so that, for example, the center-right opposition party has been forced to adopt a no nuclear ship policy and has tiptoed around the issue of supporting the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq. Third, her role as a politician motivated by values complements a carefully crafted image of pragmatism and common sense.

This values shift reflects Michael Saward’s view that the challenges of globalization potentially provide spaces for national political leaders to draft “proactive” policies that “go beyond” simple adaptation (1997, 33). The Clark administration has shifted the role of the state in domestic politics back to the center after a decade or more of extreme experiments with neoliberal policies. Remarkably, Clark has renationalized industries such as the railway system (2004), overseen a recentralization of the public sector (2002), and reinstated a kinder welfare state.

Clark has also generated positive media treatment over her dealings with other prominent women and over her response to complaints about sexual assault by police. The first case saw Clark taking a high-profile role in the ceremonial burial ceremony for the deceased Maori Queen. Clark was photographed with high-status relatives of the Queen, and this image was re-
layed to national television news programs and was front-page news throughout the country. The second case saw the prime minister establish a judicial inquiry into police misbehavior following newspaper allegations of systematic sexual assault on young women by police in Rotorua in the North Island of New Zealand, conducted in a culture of cover-up. Clark said, “my hair stood on end [with] what was sent to me” regarding complaints made by two women about historic cases of systemic police sexual assault (Venter, Andrew, and John 2004, 1). She immediately established a commission of inquiry to explore “prevailing attitudes” and “tolerance levels” toward allegations of police sexual misconduct within the force and more generally into the “general propriety and conduct of sexual matters.”

Given the lack of credence normally given to sexual assault complainants, the prime minister’s role was welcomed by feminist organizations and by ordinary women, as reflected in letters to the newspapers and on blogs.

In terms of Sinclair’s (2005) gendered bodily image approach, Clark has presented herself as a regal, heroic figure standing for integrity and decency, thus highlighting aspects of women that transcend sexuality. She has turned a media negative—being a female politician—into a positive. That these events have occurred after two terms in office is clearly relevant. Clark has also shifted social welfare policies back to the center after previous experiments with neoliberalism and retained the previous Labour administration’s anti-American foreign policy stance. In other words, her regal role differed from that of Margaret Thatcher, whose regalness was associated with traditional sex roles and militarism. Clark also differs from recent successful male social democratic leaders such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, who successfully utilized the media to articulate triangulation strategies of retaining conservative economic policies and projecting centrist nationalism.

In contrast, women politicians in the Australian national arena have been struggling with a media culture that promotes traditional sex roles (see Stanhope 2007). However, there are recent signs of change with the election of a government with a female deputy prime minister, Julia Gillard, on November 24, 2007. Gillard was regularly attacked in the lead up to the election for her lifestyle as a single person who was childless by choice. Her election suggests that Australian voters are now willing to

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2 The prime minister was the first woman invited to speak at the marae, a Maori community house, during such a ceremony, called tangihanga (Stokes 2006).

3 Commission of Inquiry into Police Conduct, Order in Council No. 18, New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, February 20, notice no. 1082, published as Hansard Supplement 20/02/2004, 379.
accept women in leadership positions in spite of media trivialization. It will be fascinating to watch her career unfold.

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