Women and the 2010 federal election

MARIAN SAWER

There have been two weeks of debate about the seemingly unfamiliar prospect of minority government - despite all those minority governments at state and territory levels over the past 20 years. Meanwhile something else has completely slipped below the radar.

Neither the Coalition nor the ALP appeared to produce a women's policy for the federal election or any overall plan for achieving gender equality, despite Australia's international commitments. In one of the best-kept secrets of the election campaign the ALP did actually release a women's policy on the day before the election. They didn't tell anybody and it is not to be found under 'Policies' on the ALP website. Nonetheless, it can be tracked down and is called 'Equality for Women'. It even addresses in general terms one of the key issues not debated during the campaign.

The issue is the kind of budget increases needed if the current test case being run by the Australian Services Union is to result in equal pay for women. The community services industry, where the workers are over 80 per cent female, has suffered from feminised rates of pay. The current equal pay case, the first under the Fair Work regime, seeks to bring pay rates into line with those for work of comparable value in a male-dominated industry.

From the secretive Labor women's policy we learn that "The Gillard Labor Government has committed to work through the funding implications of any increase in wages awarded as a result of the Australian Services Union's national pay equity case..." This is somewhat short of a commitment to funding the increases - but would an Abbott government fund them?

In Norway one of the objectives of gender equality policy is to value care for people as highly as responsibility for technical and economic tasks. Is this the policy of our major parties? Why weren't we able to debate this during the campaign?

Low pay is just one of the factors contributing to gender inequality and poverty in old age. The skewed distribution of paid and unpaid work is another, with women still far more likely to have interrupted careers in the paid workforce.
Men are in the paid workforce for an average of 39 years, women only for 20 years.

Countries like Norway and Sweden have well-defined goals for their gender equality policies, which include the same opportunities for financial independence for men and women and, the other side of the coin, shared responsibility for care of home and children. Is Australia ready for this? It takes more than paid parental leave; it requires a holistic approach to policymaking.

Complex issues arise from the intersection of paid and unpaid work in the community and its skewed gender distribution. Just for a start, there are potential conflicts between the encouragement of labour force participation (to reduce dependence on income support from government) and the availability of family members to provide care work.

Despite the failure to produce an overall policy on gender equality, rather than bits and pieces, both the ALP and the Coalition are normally quick to stress their commitment to the presence of women in public decision making. Indeed, the ALP not only had a woman Prime Minister at this election but also a policy to increase the proportion of women on public and private sector boards. But what will the actual outcome of this election be?

Already we know that the number of women in the House of Representatives has fallen from 41 to 37. This is largely due to the swing to the Coalition - women make up 32 per cent of Labor members of the House of Representatives but only 19 per cent of Coalition members. The overall percentage of women in the House of Representatives is now 24.7 per cent.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union maintains a very useful ranking of countries by the representation of women in the lower or single house of the national parliament. Even before the election Australia had slipped from 15th (in 1999) to 34th place on this ranking, sharing the 34th place with Afghanistan. It will now slip below Afghanistan and also below nine other countries including Kyrgyzstan. It will come in just above Lesotho.

One of the problems with allowing the number of women in parliament to slip is the reduction in the pool of women available for entry into ministerial positions. Australia already has a smaller proportion of women in its national Cabinet (21 per cent in the current Gillard Cabinet) than any comparable democracy apart from the new UK government (17 per cent). In some countries such as Finland and Spain women are a majority of Cabinet members, while they are about half in Norway and Sweden, 37 per cent in Germany and a third in France and New Zealand.

Fortunately this grim picture does not extend to the Senate, where from July next year women will make up 38 per cent of Senators (up from 35.5). The increase is due to the Green Senators (women will be six of the nine of them from July 1). It's reassuring to know that at least the 'house of review' will have a reasonable presence of women.

Hopefully what has just happened in the UK couldn't happen here. According to a gender audit conducted by the House of Commons Library, women will shoulder almost 75 per cent of the burden of the UK's emergency budget, even before the cuts to public sector employment are factored in.

It shouldn't be up to women in parliament to notice the disparate gender impact of public spending cuts. But somehow the presence of women, and the fact that women's advocacy groups make a beeline for them, does seem to make a difference. It helps legislators to remember that more than half of those affected
by laws and policies are women, and that the effects on them are unlikely to be just the same as for men.

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143 Comments

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- DocMercury :

06 Sep 2010 6:25:03pm

If I were to seek a career as sex worker then I wouldn't be paid as much as a woman, at least not one below 30, and I'm more likely to hear "show me the money!" instead.

To protest gender wage inequity, women could try a general strike action involving withdrawing all sexual service, and then see how long it takes for claims to be heard before male loose cannons become dangerous to themselves.

After all, the oldest profession has only one handicap, and that is that too many people give it away for free.

Am I joking or am I serious? Who can really tell, not I, but there is a kernel of truth in context nonetheless.

Too much for all of the weak and wobbly on politically correct street? Guess I'll know by midnight before the moderators go to sleep for the night. :)

(selling yourself doesn't necessarily imply sex marketing, it can also mean selling your time)

- Doug Quixote :

07 Sep 2010 8:19:52pm

Strange that it is called "selling yourself" when what is involved is a fee for services or a short term hire!
What is more surprising is the lack of reaction to your post. Maybe they're all still in election mode and there will be a late rally.