

# Senator Sue Boyce

Senator for Queensland

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I was recently having drinks at the end of fairly tense Senate session with colleagues when one (male) senator earnestly explained that his wife hadn't come along to the hotel in order to give him some "bloke" time.

I looked at him for several seconds before he realised—I was the only woman, senator or spouse, there. "Oh yeah, but you're an honorary bloke" he said happily.

I reflected then – quietly – that he would have been terribly offended if I had described him as an "honorary sheila". Presumably, in his eyes, I was being given a compliment.

Now he could just as easily have said his wife hadn't come along because she would have been bored by all the "shop talk"—the reanalysis of the tactics of that week in the Senate and thoughts on future strategies.

But for him, and many others, a drink with other senators is not a debrief with work colleagues after a heavy week—it's "bloke time".

The theory says that with sufficient numbers of women becoming members of Parliament there will be a "tipping point" and I would have thought we should be there by now.

On Coalition side 10 women senators out of 37—27%.

Queensland certainly lets the side down. I'm the only woman out of 7 senators from the Coalition—14%. In fact I'm only the third ever Liberal woman from our fair State to sit in the Senate.

But I've got some pretty awesome predecessors—Dame Annabelle Rankin and Kathy Martin-Sullivan.

On Labor side 14 women out of 32 senators—44%.

But when it comes to the Ministry neither side has much to be proud of in the Senate.

The Coalition has one woman Shadow Minister, Senator Helen Coonan from NSW, out of 7 and Labor has one Minister, Senator Penny Wong from SA out of 8.

Of course, raw numbers don't tell the full story and, in fact, my contention is that the superior numbers of Labor women make very little difference to how the boys' club operates.

Currently, Parliament is about theatrical contest—not just the contesting of ideas and values which are a good thing—but the contest of tactics, strategy and one-upmanship.

Often a perfectly satisfactory compromise will be ignored for hours so that this clash can go down to the wire.

At times like this, Labor women backbenchers mutter just as darkly as I do about the “boys”.

So sheer numbers of women aren't going to change anything.

Currently the Whips for both major parties are men, the managers of Government business—who are responsible for tactics in the House—are both men and the Ministers, as I said earlier, are overwhelmingly men. And it's still the boys' club.

However we have one new and important first for a woman coming up. In December, Dr Rosemary Laing will replace the redoubtable Harry Evans as Clerk of the Senate.

Dr Laing who has a doctorate of philosophy from Oxford and is currently the Deputy Clerk will be the first woman appointed to the position.

It will be interesting to see how she tackles the many modernisations and family-friendly changes that need to occur in the running of the Senate.

Sarah Hanson-Young incident with her daughter.

The imbalance between men's and women's power is even more pronounced when considered in the context of our State population – latest official figures from the Queensland Government's Office of Economic and Statistical Research shows that females outnumber males by about 35,000 in a population of four million.

Not only do we outnumber males, it seems that we are somewhat brighter overall – or, at least, more dedicated to study.

More females than males participate in both full-time and part-time university and TAFE study; our school retention rates are significantly higher.

We are far more likely than men to have qualifications in management and commerce and, since 2000, the number of women admitted to practise law in Queensland has outpaced men – and at a growing rate.

While we would wish that our Parliament represents people from diverse backgrounds, one would think that people with qualifications in law, management and commerce would be ideally suited for parliamentary office.

It would seem that is not the case on both sides of politics if that person happens to be a woman.

Perhaps other statistics tell the reason for that – females are far more likely to care for children and the elderly, provide help to a person with a disability, undertake unpaid domestic work and volunteer for an organisation or group.

Women are far more likely to be sole parents.

Women who have actually made it into Parliament, having overcome all of the obstacles, still face discrimination – it's a discrimination against women by some when they achieve prominence in any area.

If they are seen to be tough then they are unfeminine harpies; if they are seen to be weak then they can't stand the heat and should get out of that particular kitchen and, presumably, back into an actual one.

Because of family and other responsibilities, women often come to politics later than men. There are also cases of young women who, having come to politics, give it up again because of family responsibilities.

Coming late or leaving early is not a recipe for success and promotion.

Just about everything in politics depends on seniority – you have to serve your time, demonstrate your loyalty and make your mark.

There are exceptions on both sides but they are quite exceptional exceptions.

Having been an advocate for a female quota system, I'm beginning to have my doubts.

While The Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard may be a product of the quota system, the "blokes' club" in the Senate hasn't changed even with 44% women.

Frankly, if the men who run political parties don't have the wit and the wisdom to recognise that half of the population might feel it is a good idea that more of them should be candidates, then that party can hardly blame anybody else if their share of the female vote drops.

And if battling preconceptions held by some men isn't enough, all too frequently some women can be their own worst enemies – witness the fact that some women who considered themselves pure feminists were not just dismissive of Margaret Thatcher but positively hostile.

Yet Margaret Thatcher achieved seemingly against the odds in the hugely male-dominated British Conservative Party thirty years ago what so many women in politics can only dream of achieving in Australia today – despite protestations of progressive enlightenment.

Whatever you might think about Margaret Thatcher consider this – if she had a personal positive view about some issue and if that view was official party policy and if every opinion poll showed that the huge majority of the population supported it, do you think she would have hesitated so much as a nanosecond to introduce it?

Of course not.

Now, roll on twenty years to Queensland and consider Anna Bligh and the issue of abortion. In this case, her personal view, her party policy and public support are all aligned yet there is not just a nervous reluctance by Ms Bligh to make necessary reforms, there is a clear hostility to the idea because of real or imagined fears about upsetting the vociferous minority.

That is not leadership in the Thatcher mould, is it?

The fact is that if women scornfully adopt the view that there are “women” and there are “women” in politics, then we can hardly blame some men for not showing a sincere enthusiasm for positive change.

They could always use the convenient excuse that they couldn’t be sure of picking the “right” woman.

And, before I be accused of being just a little critical of male politicians, let me assure you – as if you need that assurance – the image of women generally in contemporary Australian society is still less than ideal. And, once again, it is very often women themselves who contribute to that.

Only a few days ago, the Federal Minister for Youth Kate Ellis received an important report entitled ***Proposed National Strategy on Body Image.***

Developed by a national advisory group chaired by former Cosmopolitan editor Mia Friedman, the strategy – among other things – included a voluntary code of conduct for the media to help counter the unhealthy epidemic of negative body image.

It is an important strategy and one which should be supported and endorsed although it begs the question as to why in 2009 such a strategy is considered necessary – and, make no doubt about it – it is necessary.

Launching it, Minister Ellis said she hoped it would encourage advertisers, the media and the fashion industry to promote more positive body images.

It recommends that realistic and natural images of people be used and that disclosures be made when images of people have been changed – “enhanced” is the industry term, I understand.

I wish the voluntary code every success and, to be encouraging and positive, I’m sure recommended changes will inevitably happen.

However, it is not just sad to reflect that change - if and when it does happen - will only be incremental. It is an appalling disgrace.

It is the 2009 equivalent of a report which could have been written in 1879 advocating votes for women – something that will happen but to quote a cosmetics ad, won’t happen overnight.

Sarah Murdoch, a member of the national advisory group, subsequently appeared on the front page of *The Australian Women's Weekly* and in what seems to have been some sort of seismic shift in attitude, her photograph was untouched.

It is nothing short of amazing – and frankly pathetic – that this decision by Ms Murdoch, a decision I applaud, was considered revolutionary, daring and brave.

What it shouldn't be considered is setting a precedent – and that is the view of the magazine editor who has been quoted as saying that she – note the “she” – could not “possibly commit to that” and she was a “realist” and that, and I quote, “There are real business imperatives why magazines have gone this way. It's a very competitive industry and I'm at this stage just taking a little baby step and seeing how this goes for now.”

One little baby step by the *Weekly* hardly suggests progress on the voluntary code will leap ahead in seven league boots.

Editors, publishers, advertising executives, the fashion industry and everybody else in the body image business should ask themselves why there are “real business imperatives” to try and present women as little more than thirteen year old stick insects.

Why should so-called fashion and women's magazines resort to cheap deception?

Is there a business imperative that has to make women feel inadequate?

Is there a business imperative that has as its intent and consequence self-doubt, depression and unhappiness?

What sort of business imperative includes the intention of driving impressionable young women – and some men - into self-loathing, anorexia, plastic surgery and ultimately futile and vastly expensive quests to find the mythical “skeleton of youth.”

This isn't a business imperative; this is pandering and opportunism. It needs to be exposed and condemned for the shoddy disgrace that it really is.

More than fifty years ago, the distinguished American playwright, editor, journalist, congresswoman and ambassador Claire Boothe Luce – a right-wing Republican who was as much a trail-blazer as she was a social conservative – once observed that because she was a woman she had to make unusual efforts to succeed.

She observed: “If I fail, no one will say, ‘She doesn't have what it takes.’ They will say, ‘Women don't have what it takes.’”

It's the same pressure that I feel and that my female colleagues, Liberal and Labor, continue to feel – inside the boys' club.

Thank you.

**ENDS**