22. Comparing Pathways to Power: Women and Political Leadership in New Zealand

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Introduction

There has always been a public fascination with women political leaders, primarily because there have been so few of them; they are indeed exceptional. Because political leadership has primarily been a male domain, arguably one of the last bastions of almost exclusive male power, watching a woman perform this role seems to attract significant interest. Most recently, the focus has been on two aspiring women leaders: Hillary Clinton, whose bid for the Democrat nomination was reported daily in newspapers around the world and, more tragically, the thwarted and fatal campaign by Benazir Bhutto to re-enter the Pakistani government.

In addition to Hillary Clinton, there appears to have been a rush of women political leaders elected to positions of power of late. We can think of Nancy Pelosi (US), Angela Merkel (Germany), Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Cristina Fernández (Argentina) and the thwarted French presidential candidate Ségolène Royal. Over a decade ago, Benazir Bhutto featured alongside Corazín Aquino (Philippines), Mary Robinson (Ireland), Kim Campbell (Canada) and Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway). Before that it was Margaret Thatcher (Britain), Golda Meir (Israel) and Indira Gandhi (India). While at any one time the number of women prime ministers or presidents may not be high, there has been an increase in the number of countries featuring women political leaders (Reynolds 1999).

There is a small body of work in the form of political (auto)biography that has focused on women political leaders and their entry into executive government. These biographies, and the edited volumes that profile particular women leaders, highlight the difficulties associated with being a woman with political ambition (Genovese 1993; Thatcher 1995; Klenke 1996; Edwards 2001; Clinton 2003). While many such women are portrayed by the media to have experienced a 'meteoric' rise, the reality is that access to the inner leadership group is obtained only with sustained commitment to building a political career.

For any politician, male or female, an enormous investment of time and energy is normally required to build a political career to the point where they have the capacity to influence directly the government's policy agenda, that is, to become part of the leadership group or the executive. Political leadership depends on

at least: selection to a safe seat to ensure incumbency over time; professional development through strategic service within party executives and caucuses; practiced performances in parliamentary committees and the debating chamber; party in government; intra-party political or factional machinations; and, possibly, the (in)visibility of one's own 'feminist' positioning. Thus, a mix of factors, individual, structural and politico-cultural, constrain and/or expand the opportunities for women politicians to enter the executive of government where there is arguably considerable potential to act *for* women.

Australia and New Zealand rarely feature in broader cross-national comparisons of women's parliamentary presence (for exceptions see Sawyer and Grey 2005; Sawyer, Tremblay and Trimble 2006) and New Zealand is more obviously absent than Australia in those that do encompass more than North America and Europe (Commonwealth Secretariat 1999; Outshoorn and Kantola 2007; Haussman and Sauer 2007). Yet both countries have histories of being leaders in areas of women's rights. New Zealand was the first country to give women the vote in 1893, while Australia was the first to give women the right to vote and stand for Parliament in 1902. Australia was a pioneer in the establishing dedicated women's policy machinery while New Zealand's women's policy machinery has become institutionalised despite the election of neo-liberal/conservative governments throughout the 1990s.

New Zealand and Australia are politically and culturally similar but there are some differences in how women's political representation has progressed. Most obviously, New Zealand has had two women prime ministers consecutively since 1997. In that year, Jenny Shipley took over the leadership of the governing conservative National Party to become New Zealand's first woman prime minister. In 1999, New Zealand experienced an election campaign where the two major parties were both led by women and most media reported that the 'gender factor' had been neutralised in New Zealand politics as a consequence (Curtin 1997). Helen Clark won the 1999 election and has gone on to become New Zealand's longest serving Labour leader. By contrast, Australia is yet to elect a woman prime minister. In March 2005, an Australian women's magazine published an article headed with the question 'Will Australia ever have a female Prime Minister?' and there was much pessimism in the feature's response (Loane 2005). Two years later, in October 2007, Australia elected a new Labor government and made history in that it included Julia Gillard as Deputy Prime Minister (who served almost immediately as Acting Prime Minister).

In this chapter I focus on two aspects of the women and political leadership 'question'. First, I explore some of the idiosyncrasies of the New Zealand political system that might account for women's success compared to their Australian counterparts in accessing political leadership positions. Second, I examine what women have 'done' as a result of their attaining executive leadership positions.

There is a burgeoning literature on women and leadership that suggests women have the potential to 'do' leadership differently (Sinclair 1998; Wajcman 1999) but very little of this discusses women's political leadership (for an exception see Rosenthal 1998). There is however, a scholarly interest amongst feminist political scientists in the substantive representation of women, that is, how women politicians act for women, or on behalf of 'women's interests'.

Some would argue that we should not expect women leaders to necessarily act on behalf of women, as if they were a sectional interest.¹ Certainly there have been a number of women leaders who no doubt support this position. But the election of Helen Clark did raise the expectations of many women's groups in New Zealand and shifts in the gender gap in voting behaviour suggest a substantial proportion of women in New Zealand wanted Helen Clark as leader (Aimer 1997; Curtin 2002). So in the second part of this chapter I explore, albeit briefly, whether we can expect to see women leaders acting for women. In doing so, I draw from literature on both representation and leadership in order to reveal the extent to which women political leaders might use their power to make politics and policy more 'women-friendly'.

Accessing leadership

The fact that women achieved national political leadership in New Zealand a decade earlier than Australia may be partly luck or a result of particular electoral fortunes of left-leaning parties, given they are more likely to support women's representation. However, a closer look also reveals the importance of party rules and norms, broader institutional constraints and, in particular, the various 'feminist' support mechanisms behind women's successful recruitment into cabinet.

In an attempt to explain the 'success' of Labour women in getting both elected and selected for cabinet (most often in comparison with Australia), much is made of the lack of formalised factions and the more secular Labour membership in New Zealand (Curtin and Sawyer 1996; Sawyer and Grey 2005). The New Zealand Labour Party has always had groupings on the left and right, probably mostly obviously evident in the lead-up to, and during, the term of the fourth Labour Government (1984-90), but these are not structured or institutionalised in the same way as in the Australian Labor Party. Moreover, in New Zealand it is quite possible for a Labour parliamentarian from the left group to become Prime Minister (a virtual impossibility in Australia). While trade unions were once the backbone of the New Zealand Labour Party, there was a recognition by some in the Party that this relationship was inhibiting growth and renewal; the Labour Party had become 'elderly, male-dominated and trade-union conservative ... and organisationally sclerotic' (Shields 2001: 125). The Party's reform movement that followed ensured the NZLP opened itself up to a broader membership base with more balanced voting rights at conference. Women in the Party were active

supporters of party reform and were able to use it to their advantage. The Labour Women's Council, along with the youth wing, were able to play a more significant role in party policy-making and internal party representation as a result (Wilson 1992; Shields 2001).

But this overshadows an earlier feminisation of the Labour Party created through the initiative of organising separately in order to advance women's political (descriptive) and policy (substantive) representation. When the Labour Party in New Zealand was established in 1916 the first executive of the Party included two women, one of whom was Elizabeth McCoombs, who went on to become the first woman elected to New Zealand's Parliament in 1933. Thus, from the outset, Labour women demanded the opportunity to organise separately, in ways that went beyond the traditional auxiliary function (Nolan 2002). As a result, women-only branches were established throughout the country, and still exist today. In addition, women activists who entered the Labour Party initiated the (re)invention of critical feminist spaces, most significantly the Labour Women's Council in 1975, an earlier version of the which had been disestablished as a result of Party centralisation in the 1930s (Nolan 2002). These two women-friendly initiatives differentiate the New Zealand Labour Party from its Australian counterpart.

The Labour Women's Council (LWC) was comprised of women elected from the Party membership, all women MPs, plus minority group representatives and the Party's Women's Organiser. It reported directly to the New Zealand Party Council, and women from the LWC were also elected to Labour's influential Policy Council. Its brief was to promote and support women into Party executive positions, including the Party Presidency as well as encourage and support women as parliamentary candidates. The issue of a party quota for women was hotly debated by the LWC during the early-mid 1980s but was rejected in favour of softer affirmative action measures that were already employed by the Council and retaining the reserved seats that women had on the Labour Executive.

Academic commentators have noted that by the mid-1980s, the LWC was very influential in its use of 'networking techniques, both to mobilise women outside the party and to coordinate the power of the women's lobby within it' (Gustafson 1992: 280). Michael Cullen (currently New Zealand's Treasurer) has also recognised the 'power' of the LWC to provoke Labour's leaders. 'He [Prime Minister Lange] could say some awful things sometimes about people. His love-hate relationship with the Labour Women's Council was a wonder to behold and gave some of us with similar mixed non-Politically Correct feelings a great deal of pleasure and joy over a number of years' (Cullen cited in Curtin 2008a). Certainly the success of the LWC cannot be underestimated. There have been three women elected as Party President since 1984, all of whom were members of the Labour Women's Council and all have gone on to become politicians. It

is not surprising then, that even before the shift to a proportional system in 1996, the proportion of women in Parliament stood at more than 20%; largely a result of the election of Labour Party women (McLeay 2006; Curtin 2008b). After the 2005 election, the proportion of women in the New Zealand Parliament had increased to 33%.

The feminisation of political leadership that has since become a feature of the New Zealand polity began in earnest 1993 when Helen Clark became leader of the opposition Labour Party after having been deputy leader from 1989. Then, in 1997 Jenny Shipley of the conservative National Party became the country's first woman Prime Minister, although she was the only woman in cabinet immediately following her rise to power. At the 1999 election, a Labour-led Government headed by Helen Clark was elected and Clark has been prime minister ever since. In 1999, seven women were given ministerial positions, constituting 35% of Clark's first cabinet (this dropped to 30% in 2006, with one ex-cabinet minister taking the role of first woman Speaker of the House).

Women leaders acting for women?

Those interested in the substantive representation of women have reengaged extensively with the work of Pitkin in order to theoretically extend and from this, empirically examine, the extent to which we can expect and/or see women representatives acting for, or on behalf of, women's 'interests' (Dahlerup 2005; Celis and Childs 2008). Most of this work to date has focused on women as legislators (not surprisingly, given the lack of women as members of the executive). Yet, just as the number of women elected to parliament may not in itself lead to an increase in the substantive representation of women's interests, nor can we assume that an increase in the number of women in political leadership positions, such as cabinet will do likewise.

In a sense, cabinet is equivalent to a 'black box' in our attempts to 'causally' link the descriptive and substantive representation of women. For example, it could be argued that women as backbenchers have some liberty to speak for women as a group, especially if the discourse of women's interests sits easily alongside their party's broader platform. However, once they enter the leadership group of the governing party, that is the cabinet, women come up against one aspect of the 'leadership dilemma'. For political leaders there is usually an imperative to speak for the public interest over private or sectional interests. But the definition of what constitutes the public interest is not an uncontested (or gender-neutral) process, and many have written of the way in which leaders should, or do, aggregate, deliberate, educate, and persuade citizens and/or represent a moral constituency (Ruscio 2004). Moreover, we cannot always 'see' the representation of women by women who are located within cabinet because they are bound by the secrecy and collectively responsibility conventions that bind the inner leadership group.

So, given that New Zealand has experienced a ‘critical mass’ of women in the executive of a Labour-led government, to what extent have these women leaders been able to capitalise on their leadership posts as progressive stepping stones to greater political influence (Baer 2003: 135-6) on behalf of women? The Clark government’s explicit commitment to women’s policy and women’s interests appears somewhat muted compared to Labour’s previous term in government (1984-90; for a more extensive comparison of these two governments see Curtin 2008a). For example, Grey has demonstrated that fewer overt claims were made by female politicians in New Zealand from 2000 to 2005, despite women’s representation in the House having increased (Grey 2006).

In terms of policy leadership, in its first term, the Clark government allocated the Ministry of Women’s Affairs portfolio to a minister from the junior coalition partner, the Alliance. And although employment equity had been important to both Helen Clark and Margaret Wilson in the 1980s, the Clark government did little to redress the issue during its first term. Subsequently, there was action with the creation within the Department of Labour of a Pay and Employment Equity Unit. However, unlike the fourth Labour Government’s legislative initiative in 1990, the policy instrument adopted in 2004 is much more voluntary in nature.

Margaret Wilson initiated labour market reforms which saw a reinstatement of the role of trade unions through the *Employment Relations Act* 2000 (ERA). The ERA did not return New Zealand to centralised wage bargaining but it did enable unions to negotiate collective contracts and required parties to bargain in good faith. In addition, commitments were made to incrementally increase the minimum wage. While union bargaining and minimum wage increases may disproportionately favour the low-paid, and thereby women, neither of these policy initiatives was ‘framed’ as addressing women’s interests in mainstream policy statements.

When ‘women’s’ policy has been implemented by the Labour-led government, the focus has tended to be on women’s labour force participation, which is viewed as providing women with economic independence. New policies directed at early childhood services, out of school care, retirement savings reform and paid parental leave have tended to be framed as ‘choices’ for women (and men) who are temporarily out of the labour market. Moreover, these policies are often couched within a discourse of serving the ‘national interest’ by the Clark leadership team (including several high profile, left-leaning women ministers such as Ruth Dyson and Lianne Dalziel), that is, contributing to economic growth, prosperity and moving New Zealand ‘forward’ as a highly skilled, innovative economy (Skilling 2005). Even the Ministry of Women’s Affairs reporting requirements under CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), and the various policy commitments that have

been promised, have been framed in terms of advancing New Zealand's national interest and identity.

Discussion

So, can we argue that women's increased presence as political leaders in New Zealand has led to anything more than enhancing the symbolic (read passive) representation of women? And does the lack of explicit 'representative claims' constructed by women political leaders on behalf of women voters indicate that women's political leadership does not matter? Part of the answer may lie in an unrealistic expectation that women leaders are able to pursue *openly* (my emphasis) a feminist agenda, when leadership requires the creation and representation of a national constituency. While some groups may be favoured by leaders (business is the oft-cited example), it is unlikely that the high number of 'feminist' women in cabinet would bode well for Labour's leadership had they chosen to vigorously advance the substantive representation of women in the name of women.

Moreover, the broader political context has changed since the 1970s and 1980s. The women's movement is considerably more fragmented than it was in the early 1980s. The Ministry of Women's Affairs had become institutionalised as the vehicle for ensuring gender audits occurred while a broader 'backlash' politics that had been evident elsewhere had begun to take hold in New Zealand – around Maori claims under the Treaty in particular – and was being extended to women. In 2003, the conservative opposition party Leader proclaimed that he did not see the need for a Ministry of Women's Affairs and would not be appointing a spokesperson for the portfolio. During the 2005 election campaign, suggestions were made that Clark's cabinet was part of a broader feminist mafia (Devere and Graham 2005). Thus it is not surprising that we see less 'speaking' for women by women political leaders.

There have been some specific policy gains for women and, while not all women within the leadership group position themselves similarly as feminists, the increased presence of women in parliament and cabinet has been important in embedding women's 'interests' as legitimate in the political and policy arena in New Zealand in a way that is not currently replicated in Australia. However, it is clear that women's policy interests are not always 'framed' in ways that identify women as the core 'interest' group being represented, especially in more recent years. Indeed, the constituency being created is almost purposively not a 'women's' or 'feminist' constituency (Saward 2006). Elsewhere I have argued in more depth that women in the Labour Party have other sites such as the Labour Women's Council where debate about women's policy interests can be freely pursued, while publicly there appears to have been a strategic decision to not 'speak for' women (Curtin 2008a).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should not read 'silence' in the political domain as a broader silence on women's policy interests and a lack of action for women by women members of the Labour executive. Nor should this silence surprise us. Paul Keating's thanks and commitments to Labor's 'true believers', a category that included women, came back to haunt him after 1993. Now, governing for 'all Australians', rather than specific sectional interests or particular groups within the community, has become a feature of the rhetoric of political leaders everywhere, Helen Clark included. This suggests that as scholars we need to think about the performance of leadership in more than 'transactional' versus 'transformational' terms and in conjunction with ideas about the performance of representation.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This question was asked of me at the 'Public Leadership in Australia and Beyond' Workshop, The Australian National University, 29-30 November 2007.