

Gender and power in Australia: The world is watching

By Dr Clare Wright / Oct 12, 2012 9:24AM

This week in Melbourne, Australia has been hosting the annual conference of the International Alliance of Women, an organisation that has been mobilising the global interests of women since 1902. Monday night also saw the 40th anniversary of the Women's Electoral Lobby, a national, independent, feminist lobby group dedicated to creating a society where women's social and political participation is unrestricted, valued and rewarded. Thursday was the inaugural International Day of the Girl Child, an event aimed at raising the status of and educational opportunities for girls worldwide.

And what a week it has been to focus issues of gender on a former penal colony in the deep planetary south. For this week we have witnessed some potentially game-changing action in our parliament. In the same media spin cycle that saw retrograde broadcaster Alan Jones lose his commercial sponsorship due to offensive remarks about our first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard herself delivered a blistering attack on the Federal Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, labelling him a misogynist and forensically dissecting his appalling track record of sexist comments in parliament and elsewhere.

This is the moment that so many of us have been waiting for. Gillard is a smart, tough, canny, intelligent woman, but she has seemingly drowned herself in the quicksand of obsequiousness and deference to the scripts and agendas of electoral conservatism. She stays on-message, feathers unruffled, voice unmodulated, in the face of the most vile provocation.

This week, she seems to have said, 'Bugger it. Enough's enough'. Earlier this month, Anne Summers, in her well-publicised expose of the sexist barrage of abuse hurled at Gillard on a daily basis in the online and commercial media, challenged us all to say 'It stops with me'. This week, it stopped with the Prime Minister, and some would

argue it's the first time that she has shown the moral compass of true leadership.

The fact that Gillard's gloves-off approach might just be a political game-changer in the global war against sexism is demonstrated by the fact that her mesmerizing parliamentary performance has been reported worldwide. The full speech has been downloaded from YouTube a staggering 400,000 times. According to the ABC's website, overnight 'Gillard' was one of the world's top trending words on Twitter, 'her Question Time tirade' making headlines in the US, Britain, India, South Africa and Canada.

In outing Tony Abbott's double standards and moral hypocrisy, Gillard has apparently touched an international nerve. Abbott will be just another faceless man in a grey suit to most people outside of Australia, but for this very reason he is Every Man: every man in power who has used his privileged position not to advance the cause of equality and justice, but to subtly and not so subtly devalue and denigrate the woman who sits opposite him, or next to him, or god forbid above him on the social, institutional, corporate or political ladder. And Julia Gillard is every woman who has every wanted to call that man on his insulting behaviour but has held her tongue for the sake of propriety.

This week, Julia Gillard stripped away the veneer of clean-shaven dirty politics. And the world has been watching the demolition job precisely because every country has its Abbotts. The American-based online activist organization, Ultra-Violet, has for months now been running a campaign to expose the inherent, and often blatant, sexism at the core of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. The *New Yorker* ran an online article on Tuesday, reporting the remarkable scenes in our Federal Parliament and quoting in-your-face lines like this one: "If he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he doesn't need a motion in the House of Representatives, he needs a mirror."

The fact that Prime Minister Gillard used imagery usually associated with female vanity and superficiality – a mirror no less – to focus

attention on an issue of critical importance to our civic life and democratic traditions is telling. The author of *The New Yorker* article, Amelia Lester, took the metaphor of reflexivity one step further, wondering what President Obama – another 'first' chief executive - might learn from the sudden and seismic shift in adversarial politics, when a political leader who also represents a so-called 'minority', stops trying to appease and comes out swinging. "After his performance last week", writes Amelia Lester, "supporters of President Obama, watching Gillard cut through the disingenuousness and feigned moral outrage of her opponent to call him out for his own personal prejudice, hypocrisy and aversion to facts, might be wishing their man would take a lesson from Australia".

This line is arresting precisely because the notion seems so absurd. What could the leader of the free world learn from a redhead from Downunder with her knickers in a knot? Here's where we can take a lesson from history.

Obama is not the first American President to look upon an Australian woman as a case study in political innovation.

Australia, it should be remembered, was the first country in the world where white women won full political equality with men: that is, the right to vote and to stand for parliament. This groundbreaking social and legislative feat occurred in 1902, in the first, formative years of our nation and the very same year that the International Alliance of Women was founded.

It was also in 1902 that Victorian-born freedom fighter, Vida Goldstein, travelled to Washington DC to represent Australasia at the International Woman Suffrage Conference. The leader of the American Suffrage Society, Carrie Chapman Catt, summed up Goldstein's sold-out lecture tour of the United States like this: "Australia, associated in our memory of childhood's geography as the abode of strange beasts and barbarians, sends us a full, up-to-date representative woman, widely alive to all the refinements of life, and fully cognizant of all the rights of her sex."

President Roosevelt was equally enamoured by this exotic creature, inviting her to the Oval Office. 'I am delighted to meet you', Roosevelt shouted, pumping Goldstein's hand in a vice-like grip. 'You're from Australia; I'm delighted to hear that'.

With that enthusiastic embrace, Vida Goldstein became the first Australian to meet an American President at the White House. It would take another fourteen years before any Australian Prime Minister was granted the privilege.

In the very moment of its creation, Australia had instantly become a world leader, the envy of the enlightened world. Roosevelt, as he told Goldstein at their meeting, would be "keeping [his] eye on Australia". He thought it was "a great object lesson", this Australian experiment in sexual equality.

It was arguably the first, but after this week's performance by Julia Gillard, possibly not last time that the antipodean tail has wagged the top dog.

Let's hope that what the Prime Minister's stand achieves is the end to the sort of civic incivility that has made cat-calling, dog-whistling, chaff-bagging and all other manner of barnyard brutality a daily staple, replacing it with the level of human dignity that we all, by now, should be able to take for granted.

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This is an edited extract of a speech delivered to the International Alliance of Women conference in Melbourne on 11 October