

Gillard's rise: 157 years (and some trailblazing) in the making.

Dr Clare Wright, a Research Fellow in History at La Trobe University, writes: **ALP LEADERSHIP**

In the miles of newsprint reporting Julia Gillard's overnight ascendancy to her role as Prime Minister of Australia, I've lost count of how many times I've read of her "historic" position as the first woman to hold this distinction.

But how much do we know of the history behind that much-abused, headline-grabbing word "historic"?

The blinking marvellous fact is that Gillard's victory is truly the culmination of a political aspiration that began on the Victorian goldfields more than 150 years ago.

The social and political upheavals brought about by the Australian gold rush are usually associated with the iconic miners' rebellion staged at Ballarat in late 1854. But the Eureka Stockade was simply the pointy (and bloody) edge of a revolutionary wedge that pitted an oppressed majority of disenfranchised outliers against a privileged minority of powerbrokers and property owners.

Women, disenfranchised the world over, could not help but see the potential for power sharing that existed in the popular movements for democratic change that started with Bendigo's Red Ribbon Rebellion in 1853.

The gold rush pioneers dreamed big dreams, and women were front and centre among the idealists and visionaries.

Caroline Dexter, an educated English rose turned supreme rabble rouser, arrived in Australia just a few weeks after the massacre at Eureka. Her husband, William, was already at Bendigo, advocating universal suffrage -- votes for men and women -- to crowds of red-ribboned protesters. Caroline stepped off the boat in her

bloomer costume, a sartorial symbol of women's emancipation from social and political constraint. She soon put a firecracker up the arse end of Melbourne's world of gentrified gender relations.

Women's political equality was on the radical agenda.

Meanwhile, the unbiddable women of Ballarat, post-Eureka, were wondering what happened to all the talk of democratic reform. Fanny Smith wrote to the editor of the Ballarat Times in September 1856 asking "Will you be good enough to inform me if ladies holding the 'miner's right' are eligible to be elected as members of the Local Court? I have read the Gold Fields Act 18 Vic No 37, and find it silent as to s-x." Fanny was not alone in her own possum-stirring inquiry. "Your opinion will be anxiously waited for by myself and many other ladies ambitious of a seat in the Local Legislature of Ballarat," she wrote.

Women such as Caroline Dexter and Fanny Smith are all but written out of the history books, yet the legacy of their courage in testing the boundaries of political orthodoxy lived on in the hearts and minds of later activists.

Victorian-born Vida Goldstein, granddaughter of a Scotch Presbyterian squatter and Polish Jewish freedom fighter, ran for a seat in the Australian Senate in 1903. The previous year, the newly federated Australia had become the first country in the world to grant women the right to sit in parliament.

Thirty-four year old Vida was already the shining star in a luminous constellation of politically active women who had been campaigning to gain women the vote in this country since the Dexters parachuted onto the scene.

Forget building bridges, telegraph lines and other feats of mechanical engineering. The struggle for women's political equality was a majestic act of social engineering fought in

bedrooms and parlours across the Western world. And Australia was at the forefront of the battle.

In 1891, 30,000 of Victoria's women signed a monster petition in a mere six weeks, advocating their fair share of the rights and responsibilities in making the laws that governed them. It was the largest petition ever put to an Australian parliament to that time. This meant a hell of a lot of traipsing around the muddy streets of Melbourne and its regional centres in neck-to-toe dresses and crinolines. (Dexter's bloomers didn't catch on.)

Goldstein lost her 1903 tilt for the Senate and went on to contest four more unsuccessful campaigns for parliamentary election. She ran as an independent every time, eschewing invitations to join the Labor Party and thus guaranteeing her victory -- and a place in the international record books. Her seemingly suicidal motive? Vida believed that bowing to the party machine would mean certain failure for her reform agenda: improving the living conditions, working conditions and human rights of women and girls.

In 1921, Western Australian Edith Cowan stood for the Nationalist Party in the first state elections in which women could stand as candidates. She beat the sitting member, Nationalist Tom Draper. Ironically, Draper was the man who had introduced the legislation permitting women to sit in WA's legislature. Politics has never been a place for the faint-hearted.

Bob Hawke, who had his prime ministership ripped asunder by Paul Keating, honoured Goldstein's democratic legacy by naming a federal seat after her. In 1984, an electoral boundary change witnessed the creation of the blue ribbon Liberal seat of Goldstein, presently held by Andrew Robb. In 2007, Robb lost a party room ballot for the deputy leadership of the Liberal Party to Julie Bishop.

They say history never repeats, but it sure has a funny way of messing with your mind. Julia Gillard is the member for the seat of Lalor, named after the most notorious of the Eureka rebels, Peter Lalor.

I know I am not the only Australian who is quietly blessing those trail-blazers of the past for clearing the rocky road to Gillard's momentous climb to the top job.

Dr Clare Wright is a Research Fellow in History at La Trobe University. She is writing a book about women's role at the Eureka Stockade. She is also writing a documentary for ABC TV and Screen Australia's Making History Initiative about the history of women's suffrage in Australia.