

CHAPTER 14

‘A race of intelligent super-giants’: The Whitlams, gendered bodies and political authority in modern Australia

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Gough and Margaret Whitlam stood out as a political couple. ‘When [Margaret] travels overseas with Gough’, one woman told the *Sydney Morning Herald* after the December 1972 federal election, ‘they’ll be thinking Australians are a race of intelligent super-giants ... [T]hey stand head and shoulders above the populace and I think this is one of the things that appealed to the voters. People like someone to look up to’.² The Whitlams’ relationship was characterised as both a personal and political asset: ‘The Prime Minister obviously sees Margaret as a person, not as an appendage of himself. Today the wife of a politician has a very important part to play and Margaret Whitlam is up to the task’.³ The new prime ministerial couple were portrayed in the sympathetic press as harbingers of progressive politics, as the first modern political ‘power couple’, and Margaret Whitlam as an exemplar of the increasingly radical

1 I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the bursary which facilitated my participation in the Personal as Political conference.

2 ‘Margaret Whitlam Leaves Men at a Loss for Words’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 1972.

3 Ibid.

demands of Australian women.⁴ This reception reflected contemporary consciousness of women's changing roles and wider questioning of Australia's gender relationships, national character and international status.

Following his appointment as Australian Labor Party deputy leader in 1960, Whitlam waged a crusade to 'modernise' the party's organisational structures and policies. As parliamentary leader from 1967, he set about further rejuvenation, aimed at broadening Labor's electoral base to include progressive middle-class, professional and university-educated voters. This required a shift in the party's image, from a reputation as strategically, ideologically and structurally old-fashioned to one of contemporary relevancy. Cultivating and identifying with a mood for change, Labor's increasing political viability contrasted with the Liberal Party's seeming inertia and lack of an alternative vision for the future. Labor's electoral fortunes were enhanced by Whitlam's urbane performance of authoritative masculinity and the couple's perceived modernity.

Whitlam has been widely attributed with shifting the Australian political landscape through his impact on Labor institutions, and his eventful period as prime minister, 1972–75. Margaret Whitlam's reputation as a new type of political wife amplified this interpretation. The following focuses on the key role normalised ideologies of gender played in shaping the political images of both Gough and Margaret Whitlam. The reading of leadership is a gendered political statement, not a neutral or ahistorical process, even (or particularly) when men are compared with other men.⁵ As gender theorist Michael Kimmel has noted, twentieth-century politicians 'have found it necessary both to proclaim their own manhood and to raise questions about their opponents' manhood',⁶ including at the level of the body. Gender is thus revealed as an evaluative, explanatory and descriptive tool in politics.

Examining the history of male leaders' embodied practices in national contexts allows us to explore the shifting meanings of masculinity (and femininity) in Australian history. Theorists have increasingly revealed

4 Including Diane Langmore, *Prime Ministers' Wives: The Public and Private Lives of Ten Australian Women* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1992), 255; and Stephanie Peatling, 'Margaret Whitlam a Trailblazer', *Canberra Times*, 18 March 2012, 6.

5 Marilyn Lake, 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context', *Historical Studies* 22, no. 86 (1986): 116–31, doi.org/10.1080/10314618608595739; Kate Murphy, 'Feminism and Political History', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 56, no. 1 (2010): 25, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2010.01539.x.

6 Michael Kimmel, 'Invisible Masculinity', *Society* 30 (1993): 28, doi.org/10.1007/BF02700272.

the importance of analysing the gendered processes of embodiment.⁷ For example, American historian Kathleen Canning has noted how the political body is invoked to signify different class, race, ideological or political judgements and positions.⁸ There has been significant work done on the marginalisation of female and non-white bodies in politics, but white hegemonic male bodies have not received substantial critical attention.⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, we need to notice, and thus to denaturalise and historicise, the ways in which specific styles of embodied white manhood have been employed as markers of political legitimacy.¹⁰

Analyses of male political contests must remain conscious of the effects of these gendered constructions on women—political discourses naturalise a link between particular types of embodied masculinities and power.¹¹ Separate gendered spheres were constitutive of the way men, women and family life have been interpreted by contemporaries and written into (or out of) Australian political history. As such, Whitlam's modern image included the invocation of his 'private' roles as husband and father, and the public endorsement of his wife. The feminist ideas that would be embedded in Labor's welfare state were brought further into the mainstream by Margaret Whitlam's progressive pronouncements as a political consort. Yet her political capital also contributed to the election of a Labor Government with no female representatives in 1972.¹² An inherent tension thus existed between Margaret Whitlam's role as a women's liberation 'fellow traveller' and fulfilment of the expectations of prime

7 Including Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Fiona Webster, 'Do Bodies Matter? Sex, Gender and Politics', *Australian Feminist Studies* 17, no. 38 (2002): 191–205, doi.org/10.1080/08164640220147960; and Amanda Sinclair, 'Body Possibilities in Leadership', *Leadership* 1, no. 4 (2005): 387, doi.org/10.1177/1742715005057231.

8 Kathleen Canning, 'The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History', *Gender and History* 1, no. 3 (1999): 505, doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00159.

9 A key Australian example is Julia Baird, *Media Tarts: How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004).

10 Bethany Phillips-Peddlesden, "A Stronger Man and a More Virile Character": Australian Prime Ministers, Embodied Manhood and Political Authority in the Early Twentieth Century', *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 4 (2017): 502–18, doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1323932.

11 Toby L. Ditz, 'The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History', *Gender & History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 7, doi.org/10.1111/j.0953-5233.2004.324_1.x.

12 Lyndal Ryan, 'Feminism and the Federal Bureaucracy, 1972–1983', in *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions*, ed. Sophie Watson (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990); Margaret Thornton, 'Feminism and the Changing State', *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, no. 50 (2006): 151–72, doi.org/10.1080/08164640600731747.

minister's wife.¹³ Despite Whitlam's progressive legislative agenda and the realities of Margaret Whitlam's liminal political positioning, gendered division remained in the interpretation of the couple's roles in the 'public' sphere. Gender continued to mark the boundaries of the political.

This chapter examines the continuities as well as the changes in the gendering of political culture and claiming of political authority during Whitlam's tenure. In what follows, the reforming, not revolutionary, nature of the Whitlams' gender politics is explored through a focus on the interpretation of Margaret Whitlam as a representative of modern Australian womanhood, and on the ways Whitlam's embodiment was implicated in his masculine political authority. I begin with a critical examination of the Whitlams in Australian historiography, recognising political history as a body of knowledge that (re)produces power relationships and gender norms. Next this chapter analyses masculine authority in contemporary contestations of political legitimacy. Whitlam legitimised his reforming political agenda by reproducing a respectable, middle-class masculine leadership model, as his physical stature was linked to his political and intellectual standing. This chapter then examines how the gendered logics and structures of the public/private divide were employed in Labor's 1972 election campaign. And, finally, I examine the interpretation of Margaret Whitlam as a new kind of political wife to explore the gendered political culture that shaped the possibilities of her public role. By re-examining key political sources (state archives, newspapers and published auto/biographical works), we can explore how gendered assumptions, language and political structures have shaped the way the Whitlams have been written into Australian history.

The Whitlams in Australian political history

Contemporary and historiographical assessments of Gough Whitlam's leadership focused on his substantial legacy, ego, marital relationship and stature. Labor's election has been commonly framed through a narrative of progress—a Whitlam-driven acceleration into modern Australia out

13 Susan Magarey, 'Women's Liberation Was a Movement, Not an Organisation', *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 82 (2014): 380, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.976898.

of the slow lane of the Menzies era.¹⁴ The voluminous literature on Whitlam began contemporaneously, with political journalists publishing dissections of his rise, prime ministership and political demise.¹⁵ The 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of such political biographies and histories in an expanding range of genres, including psychoanalysis, class, party organisations and political crises.¹⁶ Partisan attempts to define an Australian story increasingly used historical portrayals of prime ministers to signify party meaning and national character, while Whitlam became a figure contemporary Labor defined itself against, and later reclaimed.¹⁷ Enduring interest saw popular and academic scholarship on the Whitlam Government continue to be published during and beyond the interminable Howard years.¹⁸ Yet the necessarily gendered nature of political leadership went unrecognised; the literature instead reflecting and compounding gendered interpretations of prime ministers by focusing on their wit, temperament and physical appeal, the acquisition and loss of power.

Whitlam was, and continues to be, portrayed in history as 'a man of commanding physical presence'.¹⁹ Historians Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett have noted how his height shaped the language used to describe him and 'augmented his rhetorical gravity'.²⁰ Such historical readings of Whitlam's embodied political authority rest on a naturalised, rather than natural, association between physical stature and authority. Wallace Brown's

14 This narrative endures, particularly in popular history. However, a number of recent critical works complicate this reading, including Nick Cater, 'Hearts and Minds: The Meaning of "It's Time"', and Frank Bongiorno, 'Whitlam, the 1960s and the Program', in *The Whitlam Legacy*, ed. Troy Bramston, rev. ed. (Annandale: Federation Press, 2015); and Greg Melleuish, 'E G Whitlam: Reclaiming the Initiative in Australian History', in *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government's 21st Century Agenda*, ed. Jenny Hocking (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

15 Including L. Oakes and D. Solomon, *The Making of an Australian Prime Minister* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1973); Paul Kelly, *The Unmaking of Gough* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1976); and Graham Freudenburg, *A Certain Grandeur* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1977).

16 Including Allan Patience and Brian Head, eds, *From Whitlam to Fraser: Reform and Reaction in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979); Michael Sexton, *Illusions of Power: The Fate of a Reform Government* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979); and James Walter, *The Leader: A Political Biography of Gough Whitlam* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980).

17 See Carol Johnson, *The Labor Legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); and Jenny Hocking and Colleen Lewis, eds, *It's Time Again: Whitlam and Modern Labor* (Melbourne: Circa, 2003).

18 Including James Curran, *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015); and Paul Kelly and Troy Bramston, *The Dismissal: In the Queen's Name* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2016).

19 James Walter, 'Gough Whitlam: Bursting Limitations', in *Political Lives*, ed. Judith Brett (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 31.

20 Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth: The Sixties and Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1991), 169.

comparative analysis of Whitlam and his rivals is a representative example, arguing that ‘all the symbolism and imagery was against McMahon’: ‘a tall, confident imposing figure versus an often nervous “Little Billy” with big ears’. The political contest was thus one sided: ‘a witty and imperious Opposition Leader who knew his time was coming, versus the Liberals’ last-choice Prime Minister ... the giant versus the dwarf’.²¹

As well as assessments of Whitlam’s political legitimacy, historians have continued to re-examine his government’s program in the context of contemporary debates over Labor’s legacy and future. Into the 1990s, women remained at best peripheral in historical examinations of the period. Most analyses of the Labor Government’s impact on gender relations have been contained within recent anthologies or in literature focusing on women in Australian history.²² For example, the most recent monograph includes a chapter on a Whitlam government investigation of women’s changing place in society.²³ Much of this scholarship has portrayed Margaret Whitlam’s role and the couple’s marriage as an illustrative example of Labor’s progressive gender politics.

Early biographical works on Whitlam only briefly noted the couple’s similarities in height and intelligence, and her supportive political role. Turn-of-the-century literature focused on Margaret Whitlam’s ‘modernity’, forthrightness and life outside her marriage, and explored her auxiliary political role.²⁴ However, these works continued to employ gender tropes such as natural marital complementarity and conventional political history paradigms. Biographer Susan Mitchell’s analysis is typical: Whitlam had ‘innate feminism’ while the couple were ‘exact opposites in terms of personality and talents. These two opposites formed a great team’.²⁵ While these later studies went beyond trite references to wifely support, no historical work has provided a gender analysis of

21 Wallace Brown, *Ten Prime Ministers: Life among the Politicians* (Double Bay: Longueville Books, 2002), 101. Also, Mungo MacCallum, *The Whitlam Mob* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2014), 142.

22 Including Marian Sawyer, ‘Reinventing the Labor Party? From Laborism to Equal Opportunity’, in Hocking and Lewis, *It’s Time Again*; and Carol Johnson, ‘Gough Whitlam and Labor Tradition’, in Bramston, *The Whitlam Legacy*.

23 Michelle Arrow, ‘An Enquiry into the Whole Human Condition? Whitlam, Sexual Citizenship and the Royal Commission on Human Relationships’, in Hocking, *Making Modern Australia*.

24 Langmore, *Prime Ministers’ Wives*; Susan Mitchell, *Margaret Whitlam: A Biography* (Milson’s Point, NSW: Random House, 2006); Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008); Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: His Time*, updated (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2014).

25 Susan Mitchell, *Margaret and Gough: The Love Story That Shaped a Nation* (Sydney: Hachette, 2014), 122, 141, 317.

their political images and impact. Yet the Whitlams' important role in Australian political history needs to be contextualised within the longer history of the gendered construction of political office.

'A towering and commanding figure': Embodiment and political authority

Arthur Calwell, following his own removal from Labor leadership, despaired at the party's new direction and composition. Writing with some bitterness to the widow of former prime minister John Curtin in 1970, Calwell argued that, under his successor Whitlam, the party had changed beyond recognition, or repair:

The Labour Party [sic] today has too many academics and long-haired and mini-skirted people in its ranks, and I am afraid that some of the top people in this party will do us as much harm as ever Billy Hughes did if ever they get the chance.²⁶

This pointed questioning of Whitlam's class loyalty reflected the discomfort socially conservative, working-class Labor elements felt with the party's new style, class composition, priorities and changing gender relations. Suspicion of Whitlam's lack of working-class credentials was often articulated through a focus on his authoritative body, as his physique, dress, mannerisms and leadership style were read as evidence of his class (dis)loyalty and political character. Personal domination, oratory and control of policy direction were central to Liberal Party leadership.²⁷ Bruce Grant has argued that Whitlam had an ambivalent relationship with conservative politicians, holding 'them in disdain while sharing their style'.²⁸ His leadership attitude and middle-class appearance were therefore the focus of internal challenges to his legitimacy as a Labor leader.²⁹ Advocates attempted to counter this unease through reference to Whitlam's intellectual qualities and policy vision, his commitment to promoting equality of opportunity and, crucially, his growing political legitimacy and thus potential ability to win government.³⁰

26 Arthur Calwell, letter to Elsie Curtin, 15 January 1970, 'Personal Letters from Elsie Curtin', series 21, box 73, Arthur Calwell Papers, MS 4738, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

27 Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511481642.

28 Bruce Grant, 'Introduction', *The Whitlam Phenomenon*, 3.

29 Troy Bramston, 'The Whitlam Ascendancy', in Bramston, *The Whitlam Legacy*, 1.

30 Elizabeth Riddell, 'Whitlam: The Fashionable New Look in Labor', *Sydney Mirror*, 20 March 1960, 43.



Figure 14.1: A towering figure on the world stage. Gough Whitlam and Margaret Whitlam with the Emperor and Empress of Japan, 1973.

Source: National Archives of Australia: A6135, K16/11/73/69.

By the late 1960s, television had become a key medium for political communication.³¹ This new visibility, in combination with an increased focus on party leaders and new advertising techniques, intensified the significance of an authoritative image.³² The Whitlams proved adept at generating positive public exposure and cultivating a strong political image. Gough Whitlam quickly developed a reputation as ‘a Colossus’, in the words of a fellow Labor member, who described him as ‘a big man in every sense who helped all of us and our country walk taller’.³³ Contemporary political commentary made almost universal reference to Whitlam’s height and appearance, depicting his body as a political asset on a national and international stage. He was described by colleagues and the press as ‘imposing’, a ‘towering and commanding figure’ whose dominance in parliament was due to his ‘eloquence, his erudition ... [and] his witty

31 Gerster and Bassett, *Seizures of Youth*, 169.

32 Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Party Games: Australian Politicians and the Media from War to Dismissal* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003); Sally Young, ‘Selling Australian Politicians: Political Advertising 1949–2001’ (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003); Stephanie Brookes, *Politics, Media and Campaign Language: Australia’s Identity Anxiety* (London: Anthem Press, 2017).

33 Mike Rann, ‘Gough Whitlam’, *Round Table* 103, no. 6 (2014): 600, doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2014.988029.

and sometimes devastating repartee, allied to his commanding stature'.³⁴ As a national leader, Whitlam was also seen to embody the Australian nation in gendered ways—he was a representative of national *manhood*. Whitlam's physique, hair and sartorial style were described in evaluations of his electoral attractiveness and ability to engender the necessary gravitas of prime ministerial office. His body was overwhelmingly appraised as authoritative and sufficiently masculine for the necessary stamina, belligerence and assertion of will needed to succeed in politics.

The frequent commentary on Whitlam's masculine physique reveals the link made between the masculinities of leaders and political legitimacy in Australian political culture. Whitlam was measured against alternative Liberal Party leaders (as well as potential Labor rivals). In contrast to the frequent references to Whitlam's physical stature and attractiveness, his 1972 Liberal Party rival, William McMahon, was consistently found wanting. This reflected the ascendancy of a dominant leadership style, personified by Robert Menzies and later practised, with mixed success, by Whitlam. In contrast, colleagues and opponents rhetorically linked McMahon's weak leadership to his diminutive physique, reading his body as an externalisation of personal and political character. For example, in a litany of diminutives Liberal Cabinet colleague Paul Hasluck associated McMahon's small stature with deficient morals and political illegitimacy. He was 'a contemptible creature', a 'sorry little person ... extremely sensitive about his lack of manly qualities', a perpetual liar, a 'sneak', a 'tick', a 'puny little fellow', a treacherous and 'dirty little bastard'.³⁵

From the late 1960s, a political culture that valued authoritative masculine leadership had increasingly normalised a strategy of belittling politicians through reference to inadequate physical and verbal performances.³⁶ Historians including Robert Manne have argued that Whitlam and the press utilised this 'politics of derision' against their Liberal rivals, including mocking McMahon's body, oratory and leadership.³⁷ However, they have not recognised the specifically gendered nature of this derision.

34 Alan Reid, *The Whitlam Venture* (Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1976), 1; Gareth Evans, 'The Build Up to 1972', *The Whitlam Phenomenon* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1986), 177; Ralph Willis, 'A View from the Backbench', in Bramston, *The Whitlam Legacy*, 122.

35 Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1997), 184–94.

36 Gerster and Bassett, *Seizures of Youth*, 169.

37 Including Robert Manne, 'The Whitlam Revolution', in *The Australian Century: Political Struggle in the Building of a Nation*, ed. Robert Manne (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), 181; and James Carleton, *The Wit of Whitlam* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014), viii.

John Gorton was undermined by his detractors, including Whitlam's supporters, for his inability to speak clearly and forcefully, like a proper man.³⁸ For McMahon, the focus of derision was on his inability to embody masculine political leadership qualities, including eloquence, a forceful will and a virile body: 'With his puny stature, his high-pitched voice, his ageing playboy demeanour and his apparently outmoded views, McMahon was constructed by the media as a comical figure of a bygone age'.³⁹ His anachronistic qualities were exaggerated through comparison to the more youthful Whitlam (and Sonia, McMahon's much younger wife). McMahon's political authority was thus challenged by emasculating references to his aged, diminutive, unassertive, insufficiently masculine body, and even his sexuality.⁴⁰

Furthermore, in the wake of Prime Minister Holt's death in 1967, Gorton and then McMahon were unable to consolidate their party leadership. This allowed Labor to disseminate the idea that the Liberals weren't modern but instead remained anchored to the past by the weight of Robert Menzies's influence. It also meant that Whitlam was implicitly (and often explicitly) compared with Menzies.⁴¹ The language used to describe Whitlam echoed that of Menzies: he too had a forceful, masculine presence that revealed, even conferred, political dominance.⁴² The similarities in the aggression, wit and bodies of Menzies and Whitlam were mobilised to promote the latter's political skill and leadership potential.⁴³ Whitlam's physical dominance, ascendancy in parliament, biting wit, erudition and respectable middle-class appearance therefore supported his claim to political legitimacy in modern Australia.

38 Alan Reid, *The Gorton Experiment* (Sydney: Shakespeare Head Press, 1971).

39 Manne, 'The Whitlam Revolution', 181.

40 In discussing rumours about his sexuality, McMahon attempted to prove his heterosexual virility: 'when I was single, it could have been charged that exactly the opposite was true of me'. Interview in Ray Aitchison, ed., *Looking at the Liberals* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1974), 15.

41 Paul Strangio, Paul 't Hart and James Walter, *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2017), 89, 116.

42 Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party: A Study in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1965), 255; Don Whittington, *The Rulers: Fifteen Years of the Liberals* (Melbourne: Landsdowne Press, 1964), 101; Pat Farmer, *Menzies: Man and Myth* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1983), 228.

43 Craig McGregor, *Profile of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1966), 204.

'Winning the female vote!' The Whitlams, gender and the 1972 federal election campaign

While Menzies and Whitlam were very different politicians, not least in political longevity, they shared style and personality traits, and flaws. Both developed reputations as cold and arrogant, which both attempted to soften by demonstrating an affiliation with normal Australians' concerns. One of the main vehicles of each man's endeavour to change his image was an extensive political advertising campaign. Menzies's costly 1949 campaign was designed by the Hansen Rubensohn Company. Featuring an innovative use of radio, it aimed to 'promote the softer side of Menzies' personality' and portray him as a 'man of the people'.⁴⁴ Similarly, the perception of Whitlam as aloof was addressed in part through a campaign emphasising his 'private' relationships as husband and father, and the foregrounding of his wife.

Labor's 1972 election campaign promoted not only the party but also, more specifically, Whitlam as leader. The 'It's Time' campaign has received historiographical attention for its public relations and marketing research innovations, political strategies and emphasis on political image.⁴⁵ Yet there has been no critical analysis of the link made between the highlighting of Whitlam's 'private' life and his political viability. Examining the public relations recommendations and political strategies reveal the gendered assumptions and masculinist political structures that shaped Labor's campaign, and the ways the ambiguous relationship between the 'private' and the 'political' was exploited by men in politics.

44 Julian Fitzgerald, *On Message: Political Communications of Australian Prime Ministers 1901–2014* (Canberra: Clareville Press, 2014), 222.

45 Including Glenn Kefford, *All Hail the Leaders: The Australian Labor Party and Political Leadership* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 70; Murray Goot, 'It's Time: Spectrum's Market Research, Modern Campaigning, and Whitlam's Mandate', in Hocking, *Making Modern Australia*, 295, 303; Robert Crawford, 'Modernising Menzies, Whitlam and Australian Elections', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2004): 139; Vicky Braund, 'Timely Vibrations: Labor's Marketing Campaign', in *Labor to Power: Australia's 1972 Election*, ed. Henry Mayer (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 19, doi.org/10.1080/00323267308401315; Stephen Mills, *The New Machine Men: Polls and Persuasion in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1986), 134; and Young, 'Selling Australian Politicians', 321, 621.

In the postwar period, the Liberal Party had proved adept at appealing to women through their domestic identities, while Labor continued to frame Australian politics around issues of class and the concerns of male breadwinners. By the late 1960s, this perspective shaped Labor's reputation as old-fashioned, masculine and undemocratically trade-union dominated. Yet gender progressiveness was increasingly linked to modernity, and Whitlam wished to modernise the party. In 1971, Labor hired Spectrum International Marketing Services to research the party's image, and public relations company Hansen-Rubensohn-McCann-Erickson to devise their federal election campaign. Spectrum's initial report contained a key conclusion: Margaret Whitlam was a potential political asset, perceived as intelligent, warm and down-to-earth.⁴⁶ This was welcome news, as another major finding was that Labor, and Whitlam, had an image problem, especially with women. In order to address the gender imbalance in voting intentions, the marketing consultants urged Labor to 'soften' Whitlam's image and increase his presence on platforms favoured by women.⁴⁷ But their key recommendation was to use Margaret Whitlam to promote her husband, and Labor, to women. This strategy became a central plank in the proposal submitted by Hansen Rubensohn McCann Erickson in December 1971.⁴⁸

While Labor's 1972 election platform did not elaborate policies specifically relating to women, strong lobbying by groups such as the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and female Labor members saw them given more attention.⁴⁹ Labor candidates generally scored better in the WEL surveys conducted to determine politicians' attitudes to feminist concerns such as equal pay and abortion. Yet this focus did not just reflect the influence of WEL. It was also a sincerely held conviction by many newer Labor members, including Whitlam. Furthermore, the public relations surveys independently highlighted Labor's need to attract women.

46 'Political Parties, Leader & Issues: A Pilot Study of Voters' Attitudes', Report for the Australia Labor Party by Spectrum International Marketing Services, 11 August 1971, item EGW 44043, box 0205, The Whitlam Institute, Sydney (Whitlam Institute).

47 They made no mention of developing *policies* that would appeal to women.

48 'It's Time' Proposal from Hansen-Rubensohn-McCann-Erickson, 7 December 1971, Copy 1, Whitlam Institute.

49 Marian Sawer, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008); Ann Curthoys, 'Doing It For Themselves: The Women's Movement Since 1970', in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, ed. Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 425–47.

'It's Time' was an innovative campaign, particularly the celebrity-laden television advertisements, which foregrounded Whitlam's place in a family.⁵⁰ The campaign, and Margaret Whitlam's prominent role within it, were designed to show 'one of our primary target groups that the Leader is not a political automat, but has a wife and a family. Additionally, it will show that the Whitlam family is a tight-knit unit, a factor which most women will support'.⁵¹ The importance of 'Winning the Female Vote!' was thus reiterated to Labor.⁵² The party responded quickly, cultivating Margaret Whitlam's public presence, including on television and radio.⁵³ These appearances gained positive coverage in the print press. The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted in March 1972 that 'Mrs Whitlam's charm, intelligence and willingness to comment on a wide range of subjects is a considerable electoral asset to Gough Whitlam'.⁵⁴

Yet a focus on Labor's new policies and innovative campaign in 1972 has overshadowed continuity in the message and delivery. Politicians' families have long been used to reinforce their position as advocates of normal family values. The efficacy of promoting a politician as a family man reflected the mutually reinforcing male power in both 'private' and 'public' spheres. Similarly, Margaret Whitlam's interpretation as 'the best public relations agent Gough could have' reflected a conventional narrative in political circles, including an assumption that wives were ciphers of their husbands' politics.⁵⁵ Her appeals were mainly targeted to other women, who were seen as a discrete, special interest group. The view that Margaret Whitlam could improve her husband's political legitimacy also rested on an assumption of complementary gender roles in marriage, with husbands as intellectual, rational, authority figures and wives as emotional, supportive figures. According to feminist scholar Charlotte Adcock, within this gendered logic, political wives could be deployed as 'cultural reference points for the promotion or judging' of their husbands' political parties and leadership. Wives therefore 'constituted sites for the

50 Cater, 'Hearts and Minds', 51.

51 'It's Time' Proposal, 18, 53–55.

52 'Political Party, Leader and Issues'; Peter Shenstone, Letter to Gough Whitlam, 2 June 1972, item EGW 44060, box 0205, Whitlam Institute. Emphasis in original.

53 Graham Freudenberg, Letter to John Ducker, 5 October 1971, item MEW 47946, box 0287, Whitlam Institute.

54 'Mrs Whitlam: Women's Link with Labor', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1972.

55 *Daily Telegraph*, 9 November 1972. See also 'Putting in a Word for Gough', *Herald*, 8 June 1972, 21.

playing out of a wider cultural and sexual politics'.⁵⁶ Margaret Whitlam's public role thus influenced public perception of the Labor Government's gender politics and her husband as a man and leader.

'A thinking woman': Margaret Whitlam as a modern prime minister's wife

Margaret Whitlam was understood by many contemporaries as a new type of prime minister's wife because she spoke her mind, including on controversial subjects, before and during her husband's terms in office. Her outspokenness was also interpreted as further proof that Whitlam, and Labor, held progressive gender values. Once in power, Labor had enacted an impressive range of reforms affecting women, including the adult minimum wage, the Family Law Act, and the appointment of a federal advisor on women's affairs.⁵⁷ Margaret Whitlam became personally involved with one Labor initiative, the programs developed around International Women's Year. She even attended the International Women's Year conference held in Mexico in June 1975 as a delegate. This was the first time a prime minister's wife had travelled overseas to represent her country at an event independent of her role as political consort. Her public presence also extended beyond tradition in other ways, such as her 'My Day' newspaper columns and appearances on television and radio shows.

In light of the new feminist movement, it was becoming more acceptable, even expected, for political wives to be politically engaged and visible. The *Daily Telegraph* argued in 1972 that 'with Australian women at last beginning to become politically aware, Margaret Whitlam—well-educated ... well-travelled and with a mind of her own—fits well with the ALP's election slogan, "it's time"'.⁵⁸ She espoused many progressive views and was seen as modern and intelligent.⁵⁹ As one article argued, as a 'thinking woman', Margaret Whitlam would be an 'asset to her husband'.⁶⁰

56 Charlotte Adcock, 'The Politician, the Wife, the Citizen and Her Newspaper: Rethinking Women, Democracy and Media(ted) Representation', *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 146.

57 Susan Ryan, 'Women of Australia', in Bramston, *The Whitlam Legacy*, 206; Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

58 *Daily Telegraph*, 9 November 1972.

59 *Sunday Australian*, 1972, quoted in Hocking, *Gough Whitlam*, 384.

60 'Margaret Whitlam Leaves Men at a Loss', *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Yet her outspokenness and attempts to make a meaningful position as prime minister's wife were also met with resistance.⁶¹ Praise turned increasingly to criticism, as detractors attempted to police the supposedly apolitical and supportive nature of her role.⁶² It is illuminating that those wanting to delegitimise Margaret Whitlam's authority attempted to undermine her femininity—like the *Sunday Mail's* derisive reference to her height in an article about her 'illegitimate' acceptance of payment for a position on the Commonwealth Hostels Board.⁶³ Margaret Whitlam was aware of the fraught nature of the role she played: both supporting her husband and party while remaining publicly 'apolitical'. She wrote of frustrating invitations 'given because of one's husband's political position and yet there is often the spoken fear that one might make a political comment and thus pollute the minds of those attending a "social" occasion!'⁶⁴

Here we see the fundamental paradox in the auxiliary role given to political wives. Margaret Whitlam was building a public presence, at least in part, to assist her husband's career. Her activities were thus linked to her position as prime minister's wife.⁶⁵ This is not to undermine her agency—Margaret Whitlam had a longstanding interest in journalism—but to recognise the social and structural factors at play in expectations of her as a political consort. For example, despite the new governmental 'advisor on women's affairs', she was still widely interpreted as a representative of Australian womanhood, a position consistently attributed to prime ministers' wives while no women sat in parliament. She played this role in a way some felt modern Australian women could be proud of, with one arguing that 'it's the greatest thing that has happened ... to have a really intelligent spokeswoman who knows what she's talking about'.⁶⁶

Historian Susan Magarey has argued that unlike Margaret Whitlam, previous prime ministers' wives have 'seen their role merely as an extension of their existing roles of wife and mother'.⁶⁷ Yet a number of earlier Labor prime ministers' wives also attempted at times to expand or challenge the expectations placed on them as political consorts. Elsie Curtin argued

61 Susan Mitchell, *The Matriarchs: Twelve Australian Women Talk about Their Lives* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1987), 22.

62 Langmore, *Prime Ministers' Wives*, 244.

63 'Big Purse for Big Marg', *Sunday Mail*, quoted in Mitchell, *Margaret and Gough*.

64 Republished as Margaret Whitlam, *My Day* (Sydney: Collins, 1973), 73.

65 Coulston, 'Women's Rights and the Whitlam Program', 13.

66 'Margaret Whitlam Leaves Men at a Loss', *Sydney Morning Herald*.

67 Magarey, 'Women's Liberation Was a Movement', 190.

repeatedly that she should be viewed as separate from her husband.⁶⁸ Furthermore, interpretations of Margaret Whitlam as a new kind of prime ministerial wife ignore the precedent set by Enid Lyons in the 1930s.⁶⁹ Lyons was integral to her husband's populist appeal and a household name with a prodigious public presence, including writing articles for newspapers.⁷⁰ And as Diane Langmore has noted, unlike Lyons, Margaret Whitlam 'was not closely involved in the political affairs of her husband's term of office ... her attractiveness to the media was due more to her readiness to speak and write uninhibitedly on a wide range of subjects'.⁷¹ Yet Lyons has largely been dismissed as a figure deserving of historical study because of her social conservatism and maternalist rhetoric.

Like her husband, Margaret Whitlam's popularity as a modern public figure was partly based on a longer political lineage. The couple's politics were fundamentally reforming, not revolutionary. Their politics reflected a modern outlook and new feminist challenges, including Margaret Whitlam's advocacy for an expanded role for prime ministers' wives and Labor's support for women's emancipation. Yet they contained less of an immediate challenge to men's position in politics.

The structural, political and personal constraints on women's roles and men's continuing hold on political power thus remained. This is clear in Margaret Whitlam's dual roles in the Labor Government as both a symbol of women's expanding voice in society and as 'private' evidence of Whitlam's credentials as a normal family man. The difference between Whitlam's progressive policies and gendered divisions of labour in his own marriage and office reflected a widespread reality of the period's sexual revolution.⁷² As political scientist Rosemary Whip has shown, the expectation of the free labour of politicians' wives, the 'two person single career', continued into the 1980s and beyond, a situation 'based not on necessity but on convention, on convenience from the point of view of the husband and the invariably male-dominated employing institution'.⁷³ This maintained a political culture that, both on a personal

68 Curtin argued that 'you do not represent your husbands, I don't see why I should represent mine'. 'What Is Happening in Your Home State', *Army News*, 2 October 1944, 2.

69 *The Herald*, 5 December 1972; Langmore, *Prime Ministers' Wives*, 227.

70 With a few exceptions that do little more than mention the precedence in passing.

71 Langmore, *Prime Ministers' Wives*, 227.

72 Hocking, *Gough Whitlam*, 239, 284.

73 Rosemary Whip, 'The Parliamentary Wife: Participant in the "Two Person Single Career"', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 2 (1982): 42–43.

and individual, as well as political and systemic level, continued to take advantage of political wives' physical, emotional and social labour while minimising its relevance to the political world it enabled.

Conclusion

The Labor Government's shift away from socialism and incorporation of the demands of the women's movement under Whitlam facilitated and reflected a commitment to the more inclusive 'equality of opportunity'.⁷⁴ The three years of the Labor Government were thus transformative in many ways. Yet masculinity continued to be a benchmark for political performance, a key political dynamic that shaped and reflected political discourses in Australia during the 1970s. While women's concerns gained more traction in the state, they remained atypical politicians, their ability to embody leadership complicated by gendered assumptions of political behaviour. Women representatives remained a minority and white men continued to be represented as neutral political actors. This obscured a key similarity, sex and a key tool and marker of political contestation and hierarchisation, gender.

Claiming political authority is a relational and performative process, (re)producing historically specific knowledges about the nature of political power that have enduring political effects. In 2012, the first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, responded to a parliamentary attack with an excoriation of Opposition leader Tony Abbott's gender politics.⁷⁵ Her powerful speech gained positive international coverage, but was dismissed by large sections of the Australian media as 'playing the gender card'.⁷⁶ Conservative media commentator Miranda Devine was particularly virulent:

Playing the gender card is the pathetic last refuge of incompetents and everyone in the real world knows it ... [Abbott] asks whether men might have innate advantage ... For instance, voice is important to demonstrate authority. Men with a booming

74 Carol Johnson, 'Gough Whitlam and the Re-imagined Citizen-Subject of Australian Social Democracy', in Hocking, *Making Modern Australia*.

75 Julia Gillard, House of Representatives, Hansard, 9 October 2012, 11581.

76 See A. Worth, M. Augoustinos and B. Hastie, "'Playing the Gender Card": Media Representations of Julia Gillard's Sexism and Misogyny Speech', *Feminism & Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2016): 52–72, doi.org/10.1177/0959353515605544; Marian Woodward, 'Ditch the Witch: Julia Gillard and Gender in Australian Public Discourse' (Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2013).

baritone command attention. Height is another issue. Men are usually taller than women, and height generally correlates with high office.⁷⁷

This construction of what constitutes political authority ‘in the real world’—what it looks, acts and sounds like—has been remarkably resilient in Australian politics. If this is to change, we need to pay critical attention to the historically specific, and therefore contingent and mutable, enactments of masculinity and femininity on which Australian political leadership is based.

77 Miranda Devine, ‘Gender Card is a Loser for Gillard’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 October 2012.

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