

Conclusion: Gender and leadership

Joy Damousi¹ and Mary Tomsic²

We began this volume with quotations from Julia Gillard, Australia's first female prime minister (2010–13), and Australia's first female governor-general, Quentin Bryce (2010–14). During the course of preparing this volume of essays, both positions have now been occupied by men—respectively, Tony Abbott and Peter Cosgrove. Time will tell whether the fact that women occupied the most powerful positions in the country in the early twenty-first century was an aberration in relation to what went before or whether we will see this elevation of women to the seat of power once again. This is a vital question and one that has provided the contemporary framework for the questions that have been pursued in this volume.

The significance of the sex of the people who hold these two positions of leadership must also be considered in relation to the style of leadership they enact and the ways in which they are presented and understood as leaders. The valorisation of a masculine heroic mode of leadership is clearly seen in Greg Craven's recent praise of Peter Cosgrove's appointment as governor-general. Craven said: 'Cosgrove is less qualified for the job than *designed for it*. He is a general; a war hero (he won the Military Cross in Vietnam); a civic hero (he oversaw the reconstruction of North Queensland after Cyclone Larry); and an international figure (for leading the peacekeeping force in East Timor).'³ While the suggestion here is not that such a career and experience preclude Cosgrove from being a good governor-general, what is noteworthy is the statement that Cosgrove is 'designed for' the job; this reflects the type of leadership Craven envisages as desirable. Additionally, whether intentional or not, it is difficult not to read such a statement in contrast with the experiences and qualifications of the outgoing governor-general. Most of the roles Cosgrove has held were not and, in practice, will probably not be open to women. What Craven's discussion reveals is a particularly narrow conception of leadership. This example brings into focus the esteem in which masculine heroic leadership continues to be held,⁴ with the effect of silencing or devaluing other modes of leadership, which are often enacted by women.

1 The University of Melbourne.

2 The University of Melbourne.

3 Emphasis added. Greg Craven, 'Peter Cosgrove, Groomed by a Life of Service to be Our GG', *The Conversation*, 29 January 2014, <http://theconversation.com/peter-cosgrove-groomed-by-a-life-of-service-to-be-our-gg-22499>.

4 See also Amanda Sinclair's chapter in this volume.

Craven's article concludes by saying:

Cosgrove also brings with him a rare bonus in his wife, Lynne. As clever and as funny as her husband, she is the veteran of innumerable parades, fund-raisers and graduations. With three children of her own and a newly minted grandson, she is another people-lover who will make the Cosgroves a very Australian gubernatorial combination. All in all, Australia has the very model of a modern governor-general.

The position Craven affords Lynne Cosgrove is defined in supporting and maternal roles. While this is not necessarily of any particular importance, in light of Craven declaring Peter Cosgrove being 'designed' to be governor-general, the place for a woman within such a conception is limited to a support role only.

The question of women and leadership continues to be vital in our times.

Beyond the state of play of women's role in positions of high public office, but informed by it, in this volume we have attempted to show the range and variety of women's social and political leadership across a variety of enterprises and activities within democratic political structures. We want to unsettle common conceptions of leadership and challenge readers to think broadly about what leadership can and does look like; to see the range of ways women have sought to influence others, to work towards social change.

Through an examination of a diversity of women's experiences in a number of historical and contemporary settings, this volume of essays has examined the complexity, fluidity and varied nature of women's leadership through the twentieth century. But this volume has sought not only to document women's achievements but also to highlight several distinctive aspects of women's leadership. The first is the remarkable diversity of women's leadership across time and place. By adopting a range of themes—feminist perspectives and leadership; Indigenous women's leadership; local and global politics; leadership and the professions; women and culture and movements for social change—this volume has demonstrated the significant activities women have engaged in to bring about change. Second, while women themselves have often eschewed the term 'leadership', the ways in which women have undertaken roles and activities that required leadership—however loosely defined—invite an analysis of the term that goes beyond the traditional and conventional masculine understandings of leadership. Finally, this is a timely publication, which highlights the factors that have enhanced and limited women's opportunities to exercise leadership in a range of political, cultural and social fields, both in the past and for the future.

Women's leadership in everyday life and on issues of immediate concern is also scrutinised in this volume. It is valuable to conclude with commentary

on a contemporary event that highlights the gendered aspect of leadership at an everyday level. Recent research has revealed that some people experienced significant conflict as to how they should respond to the dangerous conditions of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. The conflict revolved around gender, with some men wanting to stay to defend their homes and women wanting to leave. There was a masculine heroism attached to staying and defending property despite the heightened risk of death. In stark contrast with this, the women involved in the study in all cases preferred to pack the car and leave. Meagan Tyler, who conducted this research, observed ‘society should not make heroes of the blokes who stay on with a garden hose to defend the pub in shorts and thongs, but instead celebrate the man who listens to his wife and helps pack up the car well before the fire arrives’. ‘Men are significantly more likely to die during bushfire in Australia, because of their propensity to stay in the thick of the action.’ In fact, the ‘2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission revealed text messages and phone conversations where entire families had died after spouses disagreed over whether to defend the home or leave’.⁵

In this context, staying and defending property are valorised as heroic and often interpreted as acts of leadership. Conversely, the actions of women in evacuating (or wanting to leave) are interpreted as passive and weak, rather than as exercising leadership. The gendered dynamics and meanings associated with these actions are ‘quite literally, a life or death issue’.⁶ In the case of bushfire survival in Australia, ‘history has conclusively shown the woman to be right’.⁷ We would contend that precisely these types of research and analysis where models of leadership are challenged along gender lines are what will shed light on the diversity of leadership: the limits of elevating a masculine model and spotlighting how women often exercise leadership in ways that are very different to men and not labelled as such.

The stories and analysis presented here are part of an important conversation that interrogates ideas about leadership. We wish to encourage a critical use of the term—for us to think about when the term leadership is applied to someone and/or their actions: what are the tacit assumptions behind this? In contrast, what acts of leadership do we see, which go publicly unidentified as leadership? Any why? In bringing a critical eye to the category of leadership, we hope this volume provided an opportunity to reflect on the diverse ways leadership has been enacted by women in the past and present, and the range of ways women have publicly and privately worked to influence others and for social change.

5 Aisha Dow, ‘Firefighting Macho Men are Sometimes, Well, Stupid’, *The Age*, 11 February 2014, <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/firefighting-macho-men-are-sometimes-well-stupid-20140211-32f2e.html#ixzz2t8xkau4B>. Also Megan Tyler and Peter Fairbrother, ‘Gender, Masculinity and Bushfire: Australia in an International Context’, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28(2) (April 2013): 23.

6 Tyler and Fairbrother, ‘Gender, Masculinity and Bushfire’, 24.

7 Dow, ‘Firefighting Macho Men are Sometimes, Well, Stupid’.

References

- Craven, Greg. 'Peter Cosgrove, Groomed by a Life of Service to be Our GG.' *The Conversation*, 29 January 2014. <http://theconversation.com/peter-cosgrove-groomed-by-a-life-of-service-to-be-our-gg-22499>.
- Dow, Aisha. 'Firefighting Macho Men are Sometimes, Well, Stupid.' *The Age*, 11 February 2014. <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/firefighting-macho-men-are-sometimes-well-stupid-20140211-32f2e.html#ixzz2t8xkau4B>.
- Marshall, T. H. *Citizenship and Social Class: And Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950.
- Tyler, Megan and Peter Fairbrother. 'Gender, Masculinity and Bushfire: Australia in an International Context.' *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28(2) (April 2013): 20–5.

This text taken from *Diversity in Leadership: Australian women, past and present*, edited by Joy Damousi, Kim Rubenstein and Mary Tomsic, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.