

EMILY's List and Angry White Men: Gender Wars in the Nineties

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In the 1998 federal election the politics of 'angry white men' intruded on the campaign with the entry of the Abolish Child Support/Family Court Party and the Family Law Reform Party and with strong male support for the Pauline Hanson One Nation Party. The coalition under John Howard continued with a politics of social division, including policies differentiating between women inside and outside the workforce. The Labor Party had 'mainstreamed' women but was assisted by a strong campaign on the part of a new feminist organisation, EMILY's List.

More women were elected to the House of Representatives than ever before, thanks to the ALP quota finally beginning to bite and to Liberal women defying the swing to hang on to their marginal seats. For the first time a group of Labor women (eight) were elected in safe seats and for the first time a significant group of women (eleven) entered parliament who had made formal commitment to a feminist agenda in the process of obtaining EMILY's List endorsement.

Groups such as the Equality for Fathers, Men's Confraternity Incorporated, Dads Against Discrimination, the Men's Rights Agency and Parents Without Rights had been proliferating in the 1990s when their ideas began appearing in the mainstream media. While others may think that women still have a long way to go to achieve equality, these groups believe that women have already gone too far. They claim that feminists have entrenched themselves in positions of power and influence in government and are using their power to victimise men.

Examples of such beliefs are to be found in submissions to the 1998 Review of the Affirmative Action Act. According to Mr Alan Barron, previously spokesman for Women Who Want to be Women and now Convenor of the Institute of Men's Studies, men are rapidly being marginalised in Australia: 'Make no mistake, women have enormous political clout, a clout men do not have in any measure. Is it any wonder men are being left behind?'¹

M Ward, Convenor of Men's Confraternity Incorporated, wrote: 'There is no doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that the AA Act 1986 legislation was feminist-inspired and designed to replace men in our workforce by women...The main architect of this feminist-inspired legislation has been Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) whose members have infiltrated the decision-making processes of Federal and State governments, assisted by the numerous women's departments and offices using the millions of taxpayers' dollars available'.² The League of Rights versions of these conspiracy theories depict feminists entering government not only to promote anti-male agendas but also to pave the way for world government on behalf of the United Nations.

The Family Court and the Child Support Agency are particular targets, along with gun control. In the words of consultant Malcolm MacGregor: 'if you scratch the surface of the gun lobby, there's a lot of these blokes who have a huge fixation with the CSA. There's a perception it's run by a whole bunch of lesbian separatists

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who have access to their bank accounts'.³ The Family Court is similarly seen to be in the grip of feminist ideology. Every time a non-custodial parent resorts to violence there are now letters to newspapers suggesting that this shows men's powerlessness in the face of a system biased against them. Lawyers Miranda Kaye and Julia Tolmie have analysed this discursive shift whereby incidents of violence become evidence of the victimisation of men.⁴

Parents without Rights was set up by a Melbourne man, who changed his name to Abolish Child Support/ Family Court in 1996 and subsequently created the political party of the same name. Its letterhead is adorned with images of bombs. A man who attended weekly meetings of Parents Without Rights killed his estranged wife outside the Dandenong Family Court during a lunchtime adjournment in December 1997, stabbing her 48 times. He had buried \$400,000 in his backyard to avoid paying child support. The chairman of Parents without Rights commented that the verdict should have been manslaughter, not murder: 'Men are being pushed to their limits, it's like a rat caught in a corner, they strike out'.⁵

In 1998 the party ran candidates in five states and the ACT, while the Family Law Reform Party ran candidates in Victoria and Queensland. Both parties were Melbourne-based and they were grouped together on the Victorian Senate ticket. Their agenda focused on supposed discrimination against men in child support and family court determinations and their candidates are overwhelmingly male.

The characteristic campaign tactic of Abolish Child Support was to register a political slogan as the name of an enrolled voter and then nominate for election under that name, thus gaining free political advertising on ballot papers. While Justice Abolish Child Support and the Family Court did not succeed in getting his name accepted in time for the 1996 federal election he did stand for Knox Council in Melbourne in 1997 and as a NSW Senate candidate in 1998.⁶ The candidate in Bennelong, Prime Minister John Piss the Family Court and Legal Aid, had also had his name accepted in Victoria while Bruce The Family Court Refuses My Daughter's Right to Know Her Father was a Queensland Senate candidate.⁷

The Australian Electoral Commission had warned in its submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into the conduct of the 1996 election of its concern about electors who wished to be known by such names. It cited Abolish Child Support and the Family Court. One should note here that all other forms of political advertising are prohibited within six metres of the entrance to a polling place. The Electoral Commission wanted the Electoral Act amended to prohibit the enrolment of an elector with a politically or electorally significant name. The Joint Standing Committee, chaired by Michael Cobb MP and later by Gary Nairn MP, felt this concern was 'overstated', the act was not amended, and candidates for men's rights parties enrolled under such slogans in time for the 1998 federal election.

These parties gained negligible support from voters. Abolish Child Support garnered only 0.16 per cent of the national vote for the Senate, despite running in all states except South Australia. One of their best results was in the ACT, where they still only received the same vote as the Australian Women's Party (0.44 per cent). They did, however, unlike the Australian Women's Party, have the ear of government. Peter Brown of the Family Law Reform Party recounted to a Lone Fathers' Association of Australia conference in 1997 the process of getting a meeting with the attorney-general: 'when I replied that we were a registered political party we had an appointment within two hours — all this for 135 votes'.⁸

One Nation, with its much more significant electoral support, was also competing for the votes of angry white men. Pauline Hanson, already on record for her belief that the most downtrodden person in the country is the white Anglo-Saxon male, told supporters in July 1998 that income support for sole parents was promoting the breakdown of the family unit. She said single motherhood was an industry that was providing an income for unemployed women at taxpayers' expense: 'Under One Nation Policy I am really going to come down on single women out there who are continually having child after child'.⁹

Before the election, One Nation adopted the men's rights agenda of replacing the Family Court with a 'tribunal' and changing child support and family law to eliminate bias against men. One Nation Senator, Len Harris, reiterated this agenda in his maiden speech (11 August 1999) as well as echoing men's rights discourse linking suicide and murder to child support obligations.

Barry Williams, long-time activist on men's rights issues and national president of the Lone Fathers' Association, was approached to run as a One Nation candidate. There is a strong relationship between the proportion of female candidates fielded by parties and party ideology (see table 2). At one end are the Greens, with 46 per cent of their candidates women and strong support for affirmative action, while at the other end comes Abolish Child Support with nine per cent of their candidates women and the belief that men are victims and women are in control.

The electoral support for these parties also comes largely from men. In 1998 almost twice as many men as women voted for One Nation. The gender gap in support for it has been larger than for any other party for whom polling data is available, although almost certainly the gender gap would be even larger for the small men's rights parties.¹⁰ Pauline Hanson's rival, Graeme Campbell of Australia First, was also competing for the votes of angry white men on issues of child support and gun control, while the Australian Shooters' Party, was another competitor characterised by a largely male membership (72 per cent) and predominantly male candidates.¹¹ Gun control is an issue on which polls show an unusually large gender gap and the nexus between beliefs in the right to bear arms and the right to control women is a disturbing one. The group voting tickets registered by Abolish Child Support and Family Law Reform largely favoured other men's rights parties, including Australia First, the Australian Shooters' Party and One Nation.

Angry white male politics was gaining the ear of government to an unprecedented extent, despite the Howard government's claims to be governing for the mainstream rather than for special interest groups. According to Lone Fathers' Barry Williams, the deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer, had been very sympathetic in 1997: 'He is going to back us all the way for quick and positive changes. He stated the system and especially the Child Support Scheme is stacked against the man'.¹² In February 1998 Williams was able to spend an hour with the prime minister to discuss the plight of non-custodial fathers, while Kathleen Swinbourne of the Sole Parents' Union was unable to get even an answer to her letters. She did however receive a message from Dads R Us saying 'We have the Family Court, Child Support Agency embittered self-centered women such as yourself and their effeminate/poofster men supporters, clearly in our sights'.¹³

The amendments to the Child Support Act went ahead, reducing transfers to custodial parents and increasing control by non-custodial parents over how the remainder was spent. The amendments echoed the shift in policy discourse from the problem of sole

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parent poverty to the positioning of men as the victims of feminism. It is in line with the discursive strategy of appealing to 'ordinary Australians' or 'Australian mums and dads' by fanning resentment of minorities, a strategy discussed below.

In 1999 Williams was to receive a national secretariat grant of \$50,000 a year for two years for the Lone Fathers from Senator Jocelyn Newman's Department of Family and Community Services. When she opened the 1999 national conference of the Lone Fathers the minister said that the funding was to redress the 'gender imbalance' in policy development, claiming 'There are not many opportunities for men or fathers to have input'.¹⁴ This was at a time when Newman was preparing her social welfare reform paper designed to reduce the number of sole parent (and disability) pensioners.

In the same year, without any tendering process, Williams received \$125,000 from the cash-strapped ACT government to open a men's refuge. He believes that women are equally as violent as men. For example, he alleges his ex-wife 'chucked a frozen chook at me'.¹⁵ Because women are equally violent, despite the biased statistics produced by government agencies, it is discriminatory for women to have refuges if men do not. Moreover, as he explained on SBS television (Insight, 7 October), many of the men seeking refuge are the subject of apprehended violence orders: 'AVOs in Canberra are just made like birthday cakes'.

Horst Sommer of DADS has also been seeking funding, claiming that 'DADS Coffs Harbour receives daily calls from fathers who have been abused, beaten, battered and left homeless'.¹⁶ In the 1999 NSW State election the Non-Custodial Parents Party for which he stood received 0.1 per cent of the vote for the Legislative Council and 128 votes in Coffs Harbour.

Table 1: Gender breakdown of 1998 House of Representatives Nominations

Source: Australian Electoral Commission Nomination Details

Party	Male	Female	Female %
Greens*	66	57	46.3
ALP	97	51	34.5
Democrats	106	42	28.4
Liberal	103	31	23.1
National Party	27	5	15.6
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	121	18	12.9
Abolish Child Support	10	1	9.1

* Including Western Australian Greens

One of the features of John Howard's political discourse has been the appeal to a 'mainstream' Australia and in particular to its fears, resentments and insecurities. Characteristic of such discourse is the construction of divisions around which such resentments can flourish. As far as women are concerned John Howard has worked hard to cultivate a division between women in the workforce and women at home. He has made repeated assertions that the second tax-free threshold, which recognises the costs of earning a second income, somehow constitutes bias against women at home. He has also pushed the view that feminists deride women's work in the home, talking of the 'stridency of the ultra-feminist groups in the community' who sneer at and look down on women who choose to provide full-time care for their children.¹⁷

The prime minister's wedge politics attempt to divide women working full-time in the home from other women juggling work and family responsibilities and particularly from feminists arguing for full recognition of women's work in the home and for the legitimate choice of sole parents to undertake it. Such divisions are inherently unstable, as most women now expect workforce participation to extend over the life course, with interruptions for family responsibilities; life events such as marriage breakdown are also a realistic expectation.

Warnings came from within the Liberal Party of the electoral dangers of the prime minister's approach and the ignoring of women's groups which was part of that approach. Senator Helen Coonan prepared a briefing paper in late 1997 which described how she and other women colleagues were being 'virtually besieged at functions by women protesting at "what the government is doing to women"'.¹⁸ She warned of 'perceptions' that the withdrawal of the \$40 million subsidy from community childcare centres had 'led inexorably to steep increases in the affordability (sic) of quality child care and has provided a disincentive for women to continue working'. Other 'perceptions' were that the removal of the minimum hours requirement for casual and part-time work had disproportionate impact on women; that decentralising of wage-fixing would impact heavily on women; that women were the vast majority of those affected by nursing home and community care fees; and that the rationalisation of legal aid meant less money for victims of domestic violence.¹⁹

Coonan's paper suggested these 'perceptions' could be countered by a women's electoral taskforce. She also recommended that each minister nominate an adviser to monitor the potential impact of their portfolio policy on women: 'All too often policy is formulated without sufficient consideration of the likely impact on women or even knowing what women's groups to target to promote the policy'. The paper was press-boxed by the ALP during the 1998 campaign and received considerable coverage under headlines such as 'Women are angry with Coalition says top Liberal' and 'Lib Senator buckets party's record on women'.²⁰

During the election the coalition, thanks to some hard work by Judi Moylan as Minister for the Status of Women, did actually produce a women's policy with some new initiatives, including a female flying doctor service. Her efforts were not rewarded; following the election she was dumped from the ministry and the status of women portfolio was returned to Jocelyn Newman, known for her confrontational approach to non-government organisations. One area in which the Howard government won much praise from women's organisations was that of gun control. On the other hand, this caused problems for the coalition government in their courtship of men's rights groups and One Nation supporters.

Table 2: Gender breakdown of House of Representatives after the 1998 Election

Party	Male	Female	Female %
ALP	51	16 (+12)	23.8
Liberal	49	15 (+2)	23.4
National Party	14	2 (+1)	12.5
Other	1	0 (-1)	0
Total	115	33 (+10)	22.3

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On the Labor side, former minister Gary Johns, now attached to the free-market Institute of Public Affairs, was happy to push along the politics of division. Immediately after the 1996 federal election he had claimed that Labor had been defeated because the electorate was 'sick of listening to the chant of the cult of rights — the Greens, gays, feminists, ethnics and disabled'.²¹ During the 1998 election campaign he chose the theme of deserving versus undeserving war widows and sole parents for an article in the IPA Review. In it he highlighted his right as a tax payer to dictate the behaviour of sole parents (he had overheard one swearing outside a pub), arguing that because he was a taxpayer and sole parents were beneficiaries, he was in effect raising their children.²² This was an interesting extension of men's rights themes concerning the rights of men to control women to whom they pay child support. In passing, he attacked the National Council for Single Mothers and Their Children for defending sole parents on the grounds they also were taxpayers. Presumably because men pay more tax they have greater rights.

The menace of feminism also made an appearance in the guise of friendly advice to the ALP from columnist Robert Manne.²³ He suggested that if the ALP were to prosper, it must emancipate itself from the stranglehold of feminism: 'An explanation of the relationship between the strength of feminism under Keating and the weakness of the female vote for Labor in 1996 ought to be one of the central tasks now facing the ALP'.²⁴

Anne Summers provided a vigorous response, suggesting a modicum of research would have revealed that it had been feminists not conservative columnists who had tried to achieve recognition of the skills involved in women's work in the home and measurement of the value of such work for the purpose of the national accounts. She also pointed out that in the 1996 election campaign (unlike the 1993 campaign in which she was centrally involved) the ALP was so preoccupied with blue-collar workers that women hardly got a look in.²⁵ Another interesting feature of the 1996 election was that the women voters who deserted Labor tended to shift over to parties more associated with feminism than Labor — the Democrats and Greens.

Nonetheless the preoccupation with the loss of male blue-collar (heartland) voters in 1996, together with the suggestion from within the party that feminists were partly to blame for this loss, was such that the ALP lost sight of women. Its national status of women policy committee was 'mainstreamed' soon after the 1996 election. When the time came to release a women's policy in the 1998 election there was no policy there. A last-minute scissors and paste job had to be done, focusing on the impact of coalition policies on women. Overlooked completely were issues such as equal opportunity or equal pay, let alone a unifying framework such as provided by previous national agendas for women.²⁶

Meanwhile Labor feminists had created a new organisation, despite hostility from the party's national executive, to assist endorsed feminist candidates and to refocus attention on gender gap issues.²⁷ EMILY's List was a feminist fund-raising trust, modelled on EMILY's List in the USA and launched around Australia in 1996-97. Former Labor premiers Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence provided high profile leadership and EMILY's List began channelling funds and other forms of campaign assistance to endorsed Labor candidates. To be eligible, candidates needed to have preselection for a winnable seat and a demonstrated commitment to women's rights including, but not only, abortion.

EMILY's List also promoted gender-gap campaign strategies. In the US Democrat strategists had found that women voters were more likely than men to perceive themselves as economically and socially vulnerable and could be mobilised to vote against small government policies.²⁸ High-profile US pollster, Celinda Lake, was brought to Australia in 1997 to promote this message and to highlight the fact that the ALP was the only social democratic party in the west to be supported by more men than women. During the federal campaign EMILY's List put some \$40,000 into gender gap research conducted by Karen Luscombe of Western Australian Opinion Polls. It showed older voters, including women, as an important target group for the ALP thanks to concern about health, nursing homes and the proposed GST and identified Telstra as a significant gender gap issue.

Table 3: Gender breakdown of Senate as of 1 July 1999

Party	Male	Female	Female %
ALP	20	9	31.0
Liberal	22	9	29.0
National/CLP	4	0	0
Democrats	5	4	44.4
Greens	1	0	0
Other	1	1	50.0
Total	53	23	30.3

The ALP's post-election survey showed four per cent more women than men supporting Labor, marginally less women than men supporting the Coalition and five per cent less women than men supporting One Nation. Labor polled much better among women over 40 than men, women being less responsive to the coalition's economic message and more concerned about the GST. Despite Labor reversing the traditional gender gap in support, there were still those unable to resist rattling the feminist can. According to former Labor member for the seat of Adelaide, Dr Bob Catley (now Professor Catley): 'The candidates which Labor selected appeared to represent Labor Party interests, particularly in the politically correct agenda which was soundly rejected by voters in 1996. In this respect of course Cheryl Kernot was a stand out, obvious to an electorate tired of the previous failed Labor feminist icons, Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence'.²⁹ It might be noted that the electorate was not too tired to turn the marginal Labor seat of Fremantle into a safe Labor seat for Carmen Lawrence, nor indeed to elect Kernot.

In its assessment of the election EMILY's List drew attention to areas for improvement, including the lack of content in the ALP women's policy launch and the disappointing nature of the childcare policy: 'Next campaign we want a women's launch with content'. Another black mark was the 'failure of Labor strategists to ask Labor women to act in partnership with the Labor leaders in shaping and reviewing the campaign'.³⁰

In one interesting development, both the ALP and the Greens overtook the Democrats in terms of women candidates. The Democrats had fielded the largest number of female candidates at every federal election from their formation up to

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1998 and from 1993 women had monopolised the federal leadership positions of leader, deputy leader and party whip. The feminised image of the Democrats was used for campaign advertising, for example in *Lesbians on the Loose* in the 1998 campaign, and women again constituted the majority of Democrat voters.

Despite its female leadership and the female-friendly nature of Democrat policies (given the highest rating by Women's Electoral Lobby of all the parties contesting the 1998 election) something had changed within the party. In 1996 women constituted around 44 per cent of party membership and 35 per cent of House of Representatives candidates. In 1998 the respective figures had fallen to 41 per cent and 28 per cent.³¹ While five out of seven Democrat Senators had been women after the 1996 election, when the new Senators took their seats after the 1998 election women would be four out of nine.

The Australian Election Study for 1996 had shown a considerably higher proportion of Democrat than of ALP candidates thinking that equal opportunities for women (and migrants) had 'gone too far', while only a minuscule number of Green candidates agreed with this proposition.³² The Greens had overtaken the Democrats in 1990 in terms of the proportion of their candidates who were women and the increased number of Green candidates saw them overtake the Democrats in absolute terms as well, although none of their candidates were successful. Western Australian Green, Senator Dee Margetts, was defeated, removing a strong feminist voice from parliament, notably on international trade law matters.

Table 4: Gender breakdown of the Ministry / Second Howard Ministry 1998

	Male	Female
Cabinet	16	1
Outer Ministry	10	3
Ministry as a whole	26	4
Parliamentary Secretaries	7	5
Shadow Ministry	26	4

The overtaking of the Democrats by the ALP was more of a surprise, although the increased proportion of Labor women candidates was in line with the target adopted in 1994 of women constituting 35 per cent of Labor parliamentary parties by 2002. The Democrats did however have an Aboriginal candidate heading its NSW Senate list and a gay advocate heading its Western Australian list, both of whom were elected to the Senate. In fact the gay presence in the party has strengthened in recent years.

The 1996 cohort of Liberal women in the House of Representatives did better than expected, given the highly marginal nature of most of their seats. Only four were defeated and two new Liberal and one new National Party woman were elected. Jackie Kelly was to be rewarded by the prime minister for her strong performance in the seat of Lindsay by being appointed to the ministry — to the female vacancy created by the departure of Judi Moylan. Senator Jocelyn Newman remained the only woman in cabinet, although in the family and community services portfolio (which had swallowed up social security) rather than in the defence portfolio

she had asked for. There was disquiet over the failure to appoint more than one woman to cabinet and the failure to promote women with strong policy claims to the ministry, leaving them instead to languish as parliamentary secretaries.

There was a similar picture in the ALP, where by coincidence exactly the same number of women were elected to the shadow ministry (four out of 26) as had been appointed to the coalition ministry. The two senior women were Jenny Macklin, a strong policy performer and Cheryl Kernot, while Kate Lundy and Sue Mackay had entered the shadow ministry in 1997. All except former Democrat Cheryl Kernot were from the left.

The 1998 federal election resulted in women forming over a fifth of the House of Representatives for the first time, but no increase in the proportion of women in government nor in the influence of women on government. Although the declared intention of the government was to govern for the mainstream and not for special interest groups, small men's rights organisations appeared to be exercising disproportionate influence. They gained changes to the Child Support Act in favour of non-custodial parents and changes to the Family Law Act which served to de-emphasise issues of male violence.

Despite the ambivalence of the Labor Party over whether women formed part of its heartland, a new feminist campaigning organisation emerged within the party and helped shape individual campaigns around gender gap and work/family issues. Whether for this or other reasons, the Labor Party joined its fraternal parties elsewhere in becoming more appealing to women voters. At the same time a considerable number of women apparently followed Cheryl Kernot out of the Democrats.

Overall there was a new virulence in gender politics in the 1998 election, spilling onto ballot papers in the form of the slogans of Abolish Child Support candidates. It was also becoming increasingly evident on the internet, hate messages turning up on seemingly innocuous sites such as the Work and Family Discussion List sponsored by the Department of Workplace Relations and Small Business. The welcome which John Howard extended in 1996 to the defeat of 'political correctness' is coming back to haunt him, whether on the Bennelong ballot paper or at state conferences of Young Liberals where motions are tabled for on-the-spot fines for nursing mothers. But then, gender wars are likely to have all kinds of unexpected casualties.

Endnotes on pages 236-7

Notes

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My thanks to Gillian Evans for valuable research assistance and to Carol Johnson for helpful suggestions. Another version of this article is forthcoming in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds) *Howard's Mandate: The Politics of the 1998 Federal Election*, University of Queensland Press.

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- 2 M Ward, Men's Confraternity Incorporated Submission to Affirmative Action Review, Department of Workplace Relations and Small Business, 22 April 1998.
- 3 *Weekend Australian*, 11 July 1998, p 19.
- 4 Miranda Kaye and Julia Tolmie, 'Discouraging Dads: The Rhetorical Devices of Fathers' Rights Groups', *Melbourne University Law Review*, vol 22, no 1, 1998.
- 5 *The Australian* 19 May 1999.
- 6 *Age*, 3 October 1997.
- 7 John Zabaneh had successfully applied to change his name to Prime Minister John Piss the Family Court and Legal Aid on the Victorian state electoral roll. The Victorian Electoral Registrar, subsequently determined that a mistake had been made in allowing the name change. Prime Minister John etc appealed but the Melbourne Magistrates Court dismissed his appeal on 18 December 1998, ruling that it was not a name, that the nature of its construction impeded its use as a name and that the documentary evidence of its acceptance as a name was inconsistent (Prime Minister John Piss the Family Court and Legal Aid v Electoral Registrar for the State District of Carrum). This ruling did not resolve the problem caused by the lack of discretion under the Commonwealth Electoral Act to reject name changes where they have been achieved through deed poll and consistent evidence of their acceptance is provided.
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