

**Images of Women in Western Australian Politics:
The Suffragist, Edith Cowan and Carmen Lawrence**

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Introduction

'Politics', claimed Carmen Lawrence in March, 1995, 'is a world in which you can easily become a caricature of yourself.'¹ In her own case, Lawrence's words were to prove prophetic. During the rest of 1995, only French nuclear testing and Bosnia rated more attention from the Australian press than the problems of this erstwhile state Premier and federal politician, and she was talkback radio's most popular topic for the year.² Although Carmen Lawrence does not specify gender as a significant aspect of the 'caricature effect', we do. Our paper explores the gender dimension in the 'public' construction and consumption of political figures, using the evidence of press and parliamentary comment.

Our focus is the portrayal of women in West Australian politics. In 1999, the state of Western Australia is celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage, and this paper is in part a response to those celebrations. Western Australia was second only to South Australia in granting women the vote, at a time when Australia and New Zealand were seen as leading the world in responding to demands for female suffrage. Out of a century of women's struggles we compare three figures, each of whose political participation has been represented as a breakthrough for women. We begin with the 1890s suffragist then look at two prominent women politicians - Edith Cowan and Carmen Lawrence.

The significance of these figures reflects public attention to the relationship between prominent women, feminism and state politics. Like the suffragists, both Cowan, Australia's first female parliamentarian, and Lawrence, the first woman premier of any Australian state, have been represented as signs of women entering new stages in their political development.³ In that sense all are icons of *feminist* interventions in the body politic. We suggest that the 'public' construction of feminism is bound up with the representations of these prominent female figures particularly through caricature.

Most people are now well aware of the role the mass media (print and television) play in the absorption, structuring and representation of politics. Feminism, too, is absorbed, structured and represented through news media.⁴ The women's movement uses the power of the press for feminist purposes, yet the goals and self-presentation of diverse feminisms are also shaped to meet the logic of news coverage.⁵ Although news constructs 'feminism' for its great variety of readers it also constructs those readers for one another as 'the public'.

Some writers in media studies examine the press as an institution which presents a monolithic, dominant point of view.⁶ Others explore questions of 'truth' and the ethics of influencing the public mood.⁷ Our approach deploys the theory of 'framing', introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman,⁸ and uses this

¹ Quoted in S. Mitchell, *The Scent of Power: On the Trail of Women and Power in Australian Politics*, Sydney and Melbourne, 1996, p.145.

² Mitchell, *The Scent of Power*, p. 235

³ See P. Cowan, *A Unique Position: A Biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan 1861-1932*, Perth, 1978, for Edith Cowan; and for Lawrence see R. Cameron, 'Feminisation: The Major Emerging Trend Underlying Future Mass Audience Response', Unpublished Address, 11th National Convention of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, 19 October 1990

⁴ See S. Howell, *Reflections of Ourselves: The Mass Media and the Women's Movement, 1963 to the Present*, New York 1990; B.J. Dow, *Prime Time Feminism*, Pennsylvania 1996.

⁵ P. Norris (ed) *Women, Media and Politics*, Oxford 1997.

⁶ J. Curran, 'The Press as an Agency of Social Control', in G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds) *Newspaper History: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, London 1978.

⁷ D. McQuaill, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, Beverly Hills, Ca 1992; C. Fink, *Media Ethics in the Newsroom and Beyond*, New York 1988.

⁸ E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York 1974

together with elements of a cultural studies approach. News 'frames' structure the selection and presentation of information, 'slotting new events, issues or actors into familiar categories',⁹ while in cultural studies the historical and political construction of a medium's readership is emphasised.¹⁰

Key among the imagery we inspect is the political cartoon. Politics is a public practice bounded by the production and consumption of a multiplicity of meanings: the frames for many of these are supplied and updated regularly in our daily newspapers. Political cartoons bring to the fore issues seen (by the media) as central in public awareness. They provide a frame through which 'the public' is located as an audience for wider concerns, while being amused by the simple and repeated representation of caricature. Cartoons do not need to be identified as political in order to produce a political effect. As John Hartley argues, pictures are inescapably political: they are the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet'.¹¹ We can add to this the caricature effect of words - 'Honest John' (Howard), 'The Iron Lady' (Margaret Thatcher) - which creates a simple and easily repeated image of prominent figures.

'Unwomanly and Neglectful'

In the 1890s a key reaction to the political woman centred on her physical appearance. Detractors characterised the woman who engaged in political action as lacking the sexual allure to secure the cherished prize of husband and family. According to William George, speaking in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly as the member for Murray in 1897, the West Australian suffragist was unwomanly – an unnatural and even malformed creature:

I have known a few of these new women who go on the public platform to try to improve men and so forth; and I notice they have got a very long sort of jaw and a very peculiar face. As a rule, they consist of disappointed spinsters or of ladies to whom, if they are married, the fates have not been kind enough to give them families to look after.¹²

William George's evocation of the 'new woman' bore an uncanny resemblance to political cartoons of suffragists at the turn of the century in the West Australian, Victorian, Queensland and New South Wales press. The hooked noses and sharp expressions of the feminist activists that cartoonists show agitating at election meetings are in sharp contrast to her opposite - the comfortable 'wife' and 'mother'. The more 'womanly' woman, however, is not presented as any more fitting for the privilege of a vote, being shown as more concerned with appearances (hers and theirs) than with the civic worth of her chosen representatives (see *The Coolgardie Pioneer*, 1898, in figure 2).

Not one but two images of woman, therefore, graced the political cartoons during struggles for suffrage: the one sharp-featured and often withered, the aggressive, ridiculous feminist (brolly poised to beat down the male who crosses her path); the other buxom and motherly, a woman who knows and relishes her 'proper place.' See the cartoon from the *Bulletin* (figure 1[a]) for these two images, which became firmly engraved in caricature as the suffrage struggle moved on from state to state.¹³

The pointed features of the suffragist are defined by those presented in contrast - the soft, rounded contented look of her ideal 'other'. Yet in many depictions of the time the political woman has another clear 'other' – the suffering male, emasculated by the feminisation of public and political life. In our reproduction of a

⁹ P. Norris, 'Women Leaders Worldwide: A Splash of Colour in the Photo Op', in Norris (ed) *Women, Media and Politics*

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive outline of the feminist cultural studies approach see S. Sheridan, 'Reading the Women's Weekly', in B. Caine and R. Pringle (eds) *Transitions*, Sydney 1995.

¹¹ J. Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media*, London 1992, p. 3.

¹² *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates [WAPD]*, 1897, 11:753.

¹³ This cartoon forms an appropriate cover for Audrey Oldfield's *Australian Women and the Vote*, Melbourne, 1994, a recent volume produced for school children.

cartoon (figure 1[b]) from *The Coolgardie Pioneer* of August 20 1898, a balding man awkwardly holds a baby while a professional woman encumbered by no such burden stands suited for the street.¹⁴ The ultimate authority, the distant judge presiding over the 'Divorce Court', is both feminised and feminist. The following week the same paper's cartoons (see figure 2) reiterate the theme of the abandoned husband, showing him grappling with two squalling infants while his wife goes off to cast her vote. Additional cartoons implied that women would vote for the man who was best dressed. In another, on the same page, ranks of 'old maids over 30' face a solitary male speaker, their expressions as grim as their noses are sharp.

Women in these cartoons occupy a new place, threatening the familiar fantasy of complementary roles with its promise of motherly pleasure and heterosexual desire. Exercising her vote, it seems, will usurp man and family, dislocate society and produce feminism's goals at society's cost. The cartoons entertained their audience, providing messages about 'the political woman' which the colony relished for a time. But the humour masks a fear that male advantage¹⁵ and the myth of domestic bliss might be permanently damaged by the broileries' sharp ends. There was a continuing social anxiety at the prospect of irreversible change. As early as 1883 Henrietta Dugdale confronted such communal angst ironically in her feminist utopia, *A Few Hours in a Far Off Age*: 'Some there are who say: if we permit woman to go beyond her sphere, domestic duties will be neglected. . . Others say, voting will render woman *unwomanly* '.¹⁶ By 1898 this fear had become more than a joke. The spectre of harassed males 'holding the baby' frames politically active women as traitors to family and duty. Behind these outbursts, however, as Dugdale had declared much earlier, was men's fearing that if woman won political rights 'we shall not get so much work out of her'.¹⁷

The Coolgardie Pioneer's editorial for August 27, 1898 normalises gender roles and masculine advantage in keeping with its cartoons. The editor fantasises a scenario where the woman who 'took an active role in politics' might, in a later age, be allowed to take a seat on the parliamentary bench and then – unimaginable disaster – rise to become 'Premieress'. Ruin would befall the organisation of politics, the editor declares:

if the impressionable Premieress should fall under the spell exercised by the dashing leader of the Opposition, and yielding to the dictates of Cupid, fall into the arms of her political enemy, and turning a deaf ear to the call of duty to party, form a coalition.¹⁸

What better way to lessen the 'masculinity' of the political woman than to characterise her as 'falling' for a man? Thus the grime and uncertainty of politics, so often used as an excuse for banning women, was framed within an age-old notion of feminine unreliability. Pilloried on the one hand for neglecting her 'sacred duties' of motherhood and on the other for inviting sexual immorality, the political woman is not only unwomanly but a grave danger to the moral fabric of society. For the agitated editor, the hotly excited arena of politics' was 'certainly no place for women.'

Male politicians, even those who spoke in favour of female suffrage, often portrayed themselves as sullied by the demands of political life. They were redeemed in their own eyes, however, by locating moral purity in the domestic realm and assigning it to their wives and daughters. The formal, dignified and salubrious space of Victorian family portraits exemplify this sanctification of the home.

Most men of consequence worried, as Henrietta Dugdale had inferred, over who would care for the domestic sphere. Rather than proposing a new policy for domestic life, however, such politicians joined in the language of dismay at the potential turmoil. The Premier, Sir John Forrest claimed that 'whether she were a

¹⁴ We thank Bobbie Oliver of Curtin University, for introducing us to this cartoon.

¹⁵ See Joan Eveline, 'The Politics of Advantage', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Number 19, Autumn, 1994, pp. 129-154

¹⁶ H. Dugdale, *A Few Hours in a Far Off Age*, 1883, cited in M. Sawer and M. Simms, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia*, Sydney, 1993, p. 2, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Coolgardie Pioneer* 27 August, 1898.

widow or a spinster', . . . 'the proper place for a woman . . . was to look after her home, and not be running about all over the place.'¹⁹ In similar vein, Frederick Illingworth, in the parliamentary debate of 1898, furnished the following poetic version of women's rights:

*The rights of woman, what are they?
The right to labour and to pray;
The right to watch while others sleep;
The right o'er others' woes to weep.*²⁰

The bulk of the assembled parliamentarians gave Illingworth's little sonnet appreciative applause.²¹ For these planners of the future, the essence of the work required of (white) Australian women was the bearing and nurturing of children. This was seen as crucial in Western Australia. By the late 1890s, according to Sawyer and Simms, the influx of men onto the newly developing goldfields had ensured there were only about 20,000 women eligible to vote in Western Australia compared to 70,000 men.²² Diane Scott puts the total population at 171,000 in 1899, of whom 59,000 were women.²³ Whatever the correct figures of the voting age populace, there is no doubt that the need for women was at a premium if the colony was to become conventionally civilised. In terms of 'populate or perish' a trope common in the Australian colonies in the light of the 1890s fall in the birthrate, any preoccupation of women beyond motherhood incurred social anxiety.²⁴ In W.A. particularly, no woman could be spared, many media representations implied, from the citizenly duties of domestic and family life. By July and August, 1898, however, editorials in *The West Australian* were providing a different recipe for increasing the female population: the granting of suffrage. Given that immediate and drastic measures were needed to fill out the ranks of women, the editor wrote, 'woman suffrage', might 'prove an inducement to men to bring their wives and families here.' Oldfield points out that this led to a spate of letters, with their writers arguing both for and against the women's vote.²⁵

Despite support from some quarters of the media, men who supported suffrage were invariably chastised, their views made into a parody of fair comment. Parliamentarians Walter James and Frederick Vosper were berated for their 'gross waste of the valuable time of Parliament' and slated as 'wrongheaded and mischievous . . . faddists.' Such men were supposedly acting at the behest of 'zealots' and 'busybodies', the usual term for feminists, in Perth and Fremantle.²⁶ The Premier complained to Parliament that James was 'very much admired by the women;,' he was a 'cock-bird', a 'hero amongst them (who) got a considerable amount of kudos out of the role he assumed as champion of women's rights.'²⁷

Yet within a year Premier Forrest found it politically expedient to do an about face and support the suffrage campaign. The women's vote would provide the rationale for increasing the numbers of parliamentary seats in the city in line with the increase on the goldfields. But as Gail Reekie suggests the case was more complicated than that. There is also evidence that by mid 1899 Forrest acted to remove the agitation for female suffrage so that he could direct his full attention to a more pressing, and (for his party) divisive issue: the

¹⁹ WAPD, 1893, 4:149.

²⁰ WAPD, 1898, 12:922.

²¹ Applause echoed enthusiastically in *The Coolgardie Pioneer* 27 August, 1898, p.5.

²² M. Sawyer and M. Simms, *A Woman's Place*, p. 4.

²³ D. Scott, 'Woman Suffrage: The Movement in Australia', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 53, (1967), 307.

²⁴ See A. Mackinnon, *Love or Freedom*, Melbourne 1996, for a complex analysis of the effects of the demographic transition on the social anxiety surrounding the 'new', professional woman of the early twentieth century.

²⁵ Quoted in A. Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: Gift or Struggle?* Melbourne, 1992, p. 52

²⁶ *The Coolgardie Pioneer*, Vol IV, No. 24, Saturday, 27 August, 1898, p. 1

²⁷ Sir John Forrest also called James a 'hen member.'*Ibid.*, p. 5. The cartoon of James and his admirers at the top left in figure 2 conveys similar sentiments.

certain imminence of federation.²⁸ Walter James' final motion for woman suffrage and the Constitution Act Amendment Bill passed that year with a healthy majority in the Assembly, although receiving a bare majority in the Legislative Council.²⁹

Women had won – if they were non-Aboriginal – the opportunity to vote, and with the focus now on federation dire prognostications of family demise and social change abated. In place of a Walter James held up as the saviour of the suffragist, he was pictured as neglecting a comely and acceptable Miss Suffrage while showering attention on his new love: federation³⁰ The anxiety surrounding the politicisation of women subsided. Acceptance was no doubt helped by the realisation that although most women now had voting rights they were still banned from standing for election.

During the 1890s suffrage debates newspapers played a prominent role in representing the actively 'political' woman and framing responses to those women's actions. The gibes and comments of anti-suffrage parliamentarians also structured discourses surrounding the prospect of women's political rights, and constructed a face for feminism in which unwomanliness and neglect of the household were the salient features. A central theme in these caricatures was the crisis for family life posed by feminist claims for suffrage. The social anxiety suggested here may not have been as real as the anti-suffrage camp tended to project but as a framing device it had strong potential (for instance to sell newspapers and generate wide comment). We shall examine whether any similar anxiety shaped representations of the two subsequent parliamentarians we have selected, each of whom is represented as breaking new ground for feminism and women in politics.

The New 'House'-wife

For a further twenty-three years West Australian women were prevented from taking the next logical step in political participation. Only in 1920 did the Attorney-General, T. P. Draper, bring in a bill allowing women to be elected to Parliament. The following year he lost his West Perth seat to a woman: Edith Cowan. Predictably, since Cowan was the first woman elected to any Australian parliament, women crowded the public gallery to hear her opening speech, while the media greeted her as an intruder in this key sanctuary of male power and privilege.

With the parliamentary woman still a 'unique' oddity, the images framed by the press had far less to do with talking and debating, and far more to do with the old social anxieties: the prospect of men losing sole rights to a privileged space and of severe criticism of their political ways. Predictably, Cowan's election caught the imagination of the national print media. *The Bulletin*, in a set of cartoons on 31 March 1921 (see figure 3), did its best to convey the momentous event of Cowan's electoral success. Playing on the idea that Cowan's win posed a threat to previously undisturbed male privilege they do indeed capture some of the responses which Cowan's presence in the House was to evoke. The new member is shown as the 'New House-Wife'. In striped suit and brimmed hat, she regally surveys the assembly of glum men, her floor-mop held like a mace. Worse, she attacks her washing tub in the middle of a debate, dusts the balding pates of the honourable gentlemen on the front bench and beats a colleague with a broom for littering 'my clean floors'.³¹ With (as we shall see) some foresight the cartoonist has Cowan saying: 'Can't you do as I do - talk and work?' The fear that Dugdale identifies, that the politicising of women will lead to them neglecting their

²⁸ G. Reekie, 'With Ready Hands and New Brooms: The Women Who Campaigned for Female Suffrage in Western Australia 1895-1899', *Hecate*, 7, (1981), 24-35.

²⁹ Diehards in the Council managed to have the last say on the woman who stepped out beyond her 'proper place' of the private and domestic. Frederick Crowder, MLC for South-East Province, declared: 'I have a perfect horror of the would-be political woman [who goes about] attending meetings and sowing seeds of discord throughout the ranks of her fellow women'. *WAPD* 14:939.

³⁰ Walter James became Premier of the colony in 1901 replacing Forrest.

³¹ Today, Edith Cowan is perhaps better known by these cartoon depictions than she is for her parliamentary work. Ironically, Cowan took little responsibility for the housework of her own household, leaving it with pleasure to her daughters. See M. Sawer, 'Housekeeping the State: Women and Parliamentary Politics in Australia', in Department of the Senate, *Trust the Women: Women in Federal Parliament*, Canberra, 1992, p.17.

assigned work, has been transformed: the anxiety now is that the latest feminist triumph will ensure that man is supplanted from the very political sphere he has tried to keep his own.

In *The Bulletin's* cartoons the feminist politician is transformed into the housewife on parliamentary terrain - she does not neglect her assigned work, she simply transports it into the public world of politics. Men cannot compete with such industrious labour, and instead cower away from splashing soapsuds as the cleaning lady rolls up her sleeves and scrubs the floor on hands and knees. Men's lack of dignity in this process is clearly a humorous portrayal of the threat evoked by the new member's presence. Yet the cartoons also mobilise the question of whether this 'cleaning' is a desirable adjunct to party politics. The answer can be read either way: women are preoccupied with the tidiness of a person's hair, or the amount of paper that litters the floor, while men get on with the cut and thrust of the debate; alternatively, the woman is directly active in cleaning up the polity. The contrast playfully expresses both public hopes and the threat of difference.

As a Legislative Assembly member Cowan practised the industriousness lampooned in the *Bulletin* cartoon. For example, the debate on the Redistribution bill (26 January 1923) lasted for an unprecedented 29 hours. During part of the session she kept herself awake by needlework. There are reports that over the extended time male members snoozed, chatted, absented themselves and rustled newspapers, but it was only Edith Cowan's embroidery which drew members' questions as to what should be permitted.³² As the W.A. parliament's one female member, she clearly and outspokenly objected to the delaying tactics that unnecessarily dragged out the proceedings:

If we have much more of our time wasted I shall feel inclined to get up and say, as was said by an influential public man many years ago, 'For goodness sake, gentlemen, cease wasting time like this; let us get on with the work of the country'³³

Men had good reason to worry about the effectiveness of Edith Cowan on the parliamentary stage. A gifted speaker and a clear thinker, she collaborated with National Party colleagues to push through legislation such as the Legal Reform Act (which allowed qualified women to practice law), but she upset the party faithful by voting against party lines on other issues. Midway into her 1921-24 term, she raised the ire of both unions and conservative politicians by proposing that women should be paid for housework. She argued that if household workers were to be brought under the Arbitration Act, the 'only logical corollary' was for wives to be paid a wage, to have set hours and to be allowed to form a union.³⁴ Yet she also voted for a bill to pay women less than men, because she wanted to ensure their jobs. Indeed, her firm views on feminist strategies divided her public into followers and foes even within the women's movement.³⁵

In death, eight years later, Cowan awakened a further controversy, over an appropriate memorial for this first woman to grace an Australian parliamentary bench. Some proposed a highly visible clock tower, high on a hill in the centre of Perth, at the gateway to King's Park - the capital's unique 'bush in the city'. Critics argued that this monument 'would be seen by every visitor to Perth' and was the kind of recognition which should be reserved for a 'thoroughly representative national' figure. The King's Park Board suggested that Edith Cowan failed to fill this bill.³⁶ In the ensuing debate, the underlying question was Cowan's degree of womanliness. On the one hand, as friend and foe alike confirmed, Mrs. Cowan was 'a woman through and through'. Her admirers, on the other hand, argued that she had succeeded in a male domain so she should

³² P. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, p. 207.

³³ WAPD, 67:2870

³⁴ WAPD 65:1730.

³⁵ See P. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, and D. Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave*, Perth, 1997, for descriptions of the feud between Cowan and Bessie Rischbieth. Their differences drove a wedge between the NCW and the Women's Services Guilds for many years.

³⁶ Kings Park Board correspondence, Accession Number 482A, Battye Library.

receive a fittingly erected memorial. After all, as the writer of one of her obituaries pointed out, '(i)t has often been said she possessed the mind of a man'.³⁷

The notion that 'leader' equates with 'male', and that the woman leader first and foremost represents all women through her very gender, has endured and flourished. For example, in appointing Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State, U.S. President Bill Clinton felt obliged to mention her being a woman. 'Gender', he claimed, when announcing her appointment, had nothing to do with her getting the job.' Yet when the other top posts went to men the President made no mention of their gender. Clinton's disclaimer reminds us that the powerful woman's gender is contentious in a way that a man's is not.³⁸

It was a further seven decades after Edith Cowan's election before a woman assumed parliamentary leadership of an Australian state. Carmen Lawrence was that woman. The scrutiny of her leadership has continued to create enormous interest long after her retirement as premier. In a sequence of parliamentary and legal procedures which she and her supporters claim to be a 'political witch-hunt', Lawrence was charged with failing in her public duty, and with knowingly giving false evidence to the subsequent Royal Commission of Inquiry.³⁹ Our question, as before, concerns how these dramatic events are shaped within a simplistic frame of 'woman' in politics. What meanings are made of the female political leader?

A Woman in Charge

In 1989 Dr. Carmen Lawrence became Premier of W.A. and the first woman to hold that office in any Australian state. Lawrence's rise to leadership was hailed as a major change in the position of women in politics. Women had become an accepted political presence, reports claimed, and we would now find Australian parliaments rapidly feminising their ranks. Pollster Rod Cameron, addressing the Public Relations Institute of Australia in October, 1990, declared that the premierships of Lawrence and then Joan Kirner in Victoria had ushered in a new era in Australian political life, one characterised by a 'feminisation' of politics. Voters now wanted, claimed Cameron, a cleaner, more balanced approach to parliamentary politics, and they believed women were more likely to fulfil that need than were men.⁴⁰ In Cameron's view feminisation was inevitable in Australian politics. Since both Lawrence and Kirner were known to share feminist goals, Cameron also implied that a feminist presence in politics was now not only acceptable but desired.

As W.A.'s Minister for Education and later for Aboriginal Affairs, Lawrence had shown a capacity for serious thought, political maturity and an ability to generate a sense of optimism in her community. The national press, however, greeted her rise (to Premiership) in a similar way to Edith Cowan's political success, framing her as an ideal candidate for sweeping away the dirt of Western Australia's parliamentary politics. The day after her election the front page of *The Australian* showed her standing in a kitchen, with the caption: 'Lawrence Can Stand the Heat'.⁴¹

At the outset Lawrence made it plain that under her regime there would be a serious attempt to replace the mudslinging 'boys' playground' behaviour of parliamentary sittings with respectful and well-reasoned debate. Improving parliamentary behaviour, however, was small change beside the 'W.A. Inc.' clean-up that electors were demanding of the government. When Lawrence proclaimed a Royal Commission into an earlier Labor government's dealings with business and industry, colleagues on the right wing of her party were dismayed. The Commission subsequently found ex-Premier Brian Burke and several members of his government guilty of serious misconduct. Alongside Burke, a number of other politicians, public servants and business leaders eventually suffered jail and disgrace. Public perceptions of a crisis in legitimacy had been countered by calling in a woman to bring the party back to sanity and public respect.

³⁷ Cited in P. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, p. 281.

³⁸ Clinton's public disavowal of 'private' matters has drawn attention from media and onlookers to a contentious 'gender' issue, but this focuses not on how a man has attained exceptional political office, only on his behaviour once there.

³⁹ False testimony carries the possible penalty of imprisonment.

⁴⁰ Cameron, 'Feminisation: The Major Emerging Trend Underlying Future Mass Audience Response', 1990.

⁴¹ *The Australian*, 8 February 1990, p. 1.

In the first twelve months of her term, Lawrence's government announced cutbacks to public services and public jobs, necessitated by the economic mismanagement of the past. The rationalisations caused some of her most ardent supporters — women in unions, bureaucracy and community groups — to organise a public meeting protesting at funding cuts.⁴² Unlike Cowan, however, the notion that she had failed to meet the expectations of the women's movement neither dogged Lawrence, nor was it general enough to have repercussions for her own electorate. Although she subsequently lost the 1993 election, Carmen Lawrence came out of her term as Premier with more public accolades than blame.⁴³ The media portrayed her as having tackled the mess left by her predecessors with vigour and skill. Lawrence's political ability recommended her to federal ALP leaders. After 10 years in office the national Labor party needed fresh talent on its front bench and they were under pressure to include more women.⁴⁴ Lawrence was offered a safe seat at a Commonwealth by-election, which she won easily. Prime Minister Paul Keating immediately appointed her to a Ministry in his federal Labor government.

A little over a year later, however, in mid 1995, Dr Lawrence was herself the target of a Royal Commission. In November that year Commissioner Kenneth Marks tabled what became known as the *Easton Report* in the W.A. Parliament

The day after the Commission reported, the front page of *The West Australian* proclaimed **SHE LIED** in letters several centimetres high. There was no question as to who 'she' was. The Easton Royal Commission was instigated by the W.A. Liberal Premier, Richard Court, to inquire into events of three years previously. The question was the degree of prior knowledge that Premier Lawrence, as leader of the parliamentary executive, had of a petition tabled in the W.A. Legislative Council by a Labor member, Richard Halden. The petition, tabled November 5, 1992, referred to a Family Court matter, and made allegations about a Perth lawyer Penny Easton and Richard Court, then opposition leader in the W.A. Parliament. The Commission of Inquiry was surrounded by bitter accusations of parliamentary impropriety, dealing uneasily with the fact that four days after the petition's tabling, Penny Easton had .suicided. The Royal Commission turned up political minutiae which received daily, and extensive, press coverage. In particular some ex-Ministers gave evidence of a cabinet meeting at which the proposed petition was discussed, and said they had voiced disquiet at the proposal to allow the petition to be tabled.⁴⁵ Lawrence, on the other hand, denied she was privy to any substantive discussion of the petition prior to its tabling, a claim which she has continued to make.

. *The West Australian*, W.A.'s sole daily newspaper, noted in its editorial:

. . . Dr Lawrence and Mr Halden not only connived in a dirty political enterprise based on a matrimonial dispute that was no business of government, but later falsely denied their involvement.

Further, 'the damage these MPs have done to public confidence in the institution of parliament far outweighs any injury they have done to themselves.'⁴⁶ The discourse that had valorised political feminisation and sanctified 'Saint Carmen', was now being reversed.

⁴² See J. Eveline and M. Booth, 'Who Are You Really? Feminism and the Female Politician' *Australian Feminist Studies* 12, (1997), 105-118, for an elaboration of the expectations the women's movement had of Lawrence's term as Premier.

⁴³ In the February 1993 election the electorate replaced the Labor regime with a Liberal government headed by Richard Court, the son of an earlier right-wing Premier.

⁴⁴ W. Fatin, 'Half by 2000', paper at 6th National Labor Women's Conference, Brisbane, 1991; Australian Labor Party, 'Status of Women Policy Committee report' Victorian State Conference, 1993; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Towards a Plan of Action to Correct Imbalance in the Participation of Men and Women in Political Life*, Canberra, 1993.

⁴⁵ For a longer discussion of this Royal Commission, which also draws on some of these cartoons see Eveline and Booth, 'Who Are You Really?'

⁴⁶ *The West Australian*, 15 November, 1995, p. 8

For the Marks Royal Commission, Lawrence's 'crime' was expressed in terms of the responsibilities of leadership. For Lawrence's critics, however, she was guilty of allowing a private matter involving the family life of a woman lawyer to become public, through a parliamentary process which she should, and could, have stopped. By deeming Lawrence responsible for Penny Easton's suicide, here at last the forecast of the *Coolgardie Pioneer* cartoon had come to fruition. The 'neglectful' and 'unwomanly' feminist, so carefully exposed as fiction by Henrietta Dugdale a century before, could be reconstructed in this individual circumstance of female leadership. Lawrence stood condemned as the *woman* who allowed the public realm to include domestic conflicts, neglecting her duty of care to those who should be protected from the 'dirt' of political life. The Premier(ess) is caricatured not as a busy leader but as a neglectful mother - a 1990s replay of 1890s anxieties.

The public construction of this Premieress's procedural failure, however, is ambiguously framed. The day after the Marks Commission reported, the headline 'She Lied' on the front-page of *The West* is juxtaposed with a large cartoon. The picture shows a diminutive Lawrence, as a child, complete with grubby knees and band-aids, in a circus yard littered with scraps of paper. She's being dragged away, clasping a doll, by a fatherly, and working-class, Paul Keating. Throughout Lawrence's trials Keating was depicted as a strong supporter, retaining her as the Federal Minister for Health. At the beckoning door of a fairground 'House of Horrors' stands a busker with cigar, bow-tie, and Richard Court's features, scratching his head in puzzlement. The woman who was once in charge is now the infant led by a superior paternal figure, who curbs her desires when she is caught out of place in the morally undesirable circus.⁴⁷ The cartoon's sense of a wayward child needing guidance counters the moral collapse suggested by the headline.

Lawrence's public image in successive cartoons on *The West Australian's* editorial page (see figure 4.) shows an increasing ambiguity. On the first day, Wednesday, November 15, 1995, cartoonist Alston draws Lawrence as a broken down car. Keating, a second-hand car salesman, is planning a cheap cover-up job for a quick sale. Despite odd bits that have fallen off, Carmen-car's wide-eyed headlights shine with clarity, and perhaps a certain naïve innocence. Next day, 16 November, shows Lawrence as a pox-marked Minister for Health. An agitated Keating remains by her side, while the 'public' flees. By 17 November, the cartoonist's Lawrence is at homely ease, being consulted by Keating. She smiles serenely behind inscrutable lenses and Keating, on the telephone, nervously deciphers her advice by reading it backwards. Dr Lawrence becomes a Buddha figure, the oracle of ambiguous and difficult messages. In three days, Lawrence's cartoon image translates a battered vehicle with limpid headlights, into a risky oxymoronic Health Minister and then a 'good authority' for the otherwise indecisive Federal male leader.

Is woman's political leadership being caricatured here as 'unwomanly and neglectful'? Perhaps not. Journalists wrote of a Teflon-coated woman, and cartoonists struggled with uncertainty about the 'public' response to the report. For months such outspoken feminists as ex-Premier of Victoria, Joan Kirner, had suggested that positioning Lawrence as either a victim or wicked was an unthinkable reduction. In a year media characterisations had shifted from the moral 'Saint' to fallen woman, and then, as we have seen, from infantilised miscreant to quizzical enigma, a 'Mona Lisa' of contemporary politics. As a child-woman in the political circus Carmen Lawrence is caricatured neither as political house-wife nor fallen sinner. She figures more as a dangerous high-wire act, suggesting a public audience which catches its breath at her daring. Feminists are now 'risk-takers' but with skills to adjudge those risks and some licence to question conventional morality.

Dr Lawrence's political career survived the 1995 onslaught by media, lawyers and political adversaries. Lawrence kept her ministerial portfolio under the Labor government until its defeat in 1996, and she remained a shadow minister until she was charged (by the West Australian police on April 21, 1997) with a misdemeanour: that she knowingly gave false evidence to the Marks Royal Commission. Charged on three

⁴⁷ The letters page of the *West* was soon to catch in its net comments echoing the judgements of this cartoon: "I don't care if Carmen Lawrence lied. . . the findings and recommendations create jobs for the boys, using tons of paper . . .". Court has used a million dollars to prove that "many public figures do not always tell the truth." Others write of "fairies", "witches" and "broomsticks" (*West Australian*, 17 November, 1995).

counts, she faces a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment. The case came to court in July of 1999, notably the year West Australians were celebrating a centenary of female suffrage. A jury of six women and six men took less than an hour to acquit her on all counts. The decision 'sparked wild scenes of jubilation usually associated with a football grand final' from the crowded public gallery of the court.⁴⁸ The West Australian commemorated the event with another huge front page headline **SHE'S BACK**,⁴⁹ and most Australian dailies featured large photos of an emotional and shaken Lawrence being bodily appropriated once again by the men in her life. The chosen frame of patriarchal imagery in 1995 had been a fatherly Keating dragging his eager child away from a political circus. In 1999 this became a son, father and brother holding up her brave and shaken figure as she exits the court.

Carmen Lawrence has had vocal and unwavering support from a number of Labor women (seventy of whom rostered themselves to keep a constant vigil by her side throughout the court case) and from the broad base of the women's movement.⁵⁰ Former senator Pat Giles, for example, claims the attacks on Lawrence arise because: 'Carmen's position is unique. She's such a target. The biggest you can imagine.' Ex-Premier Joan Kirner agrees. Among women she knows, says Kirner:

There's a great feeling of anger about what many regard as a witch-hunt, a lack of justice. . . . When you have a Royal Commission into recollections and a misdemeanour charge laid over recollections, it would be farcical if it wasn't so serious.⁵¹

A journalist with the magazine *HQ*, who interviewed a number of Labor women, claimed they all 'insist that the disputed facts of the Easton affair have never been the issue for them.' Instead, it is 'the sense that somehow Lawrence must be made to pay for the - in their eyes - unrelated suicide of Penny Easton, that has them seething with rage.'⁵² Revealingly, images of feminist and womanly solidarity with Carmen are not to be found in the mainstream media. Instead, some commentators have suggested that in the 1999 trial Lawrence's defense counsel played on traditional jury sympathy for 'the woman in the dock' by keeping her needlessly on display as 'a small pretty woman alone in a railed enclosure' and by emphasizing the feminist point that male politicians, eg Paul Keating and Jeff Kennett, would not have been arraigned in this same way.⁵³ While Frank Devine and other media commentators highlighted certain aspects of the gender politics being played out in the news, to a man they failed to note that all leading copy on the topic in the days immediately following Lawrence's acquittal had the bylines of male journalists.

Women are no longer scarce in Australia's federal parliament.⁵⁴ In women's struggle for suffrage the spectre of a total reversal of men's and women's roles was caricatured to cancel out arguments for white women's voting. In the 1920s women remained largely out of place in the political sphere: the press drew on an ironic contrast of household and public spaces to express the public's response to an exception. This contrast could be turned into farce, but it was also questioning a form of political life carved out by men, and whether it had any place for a woman. Cowan's achievements were inevitably limited by her 'unique position' and the debate over the clock tower shows how minimally a woman's political action had by then become accepted.

⁴⁸ Matt Price, 'Sick, shaken, fragile but free' *The Weekend Australian* July 24-25, 1999, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *The West Australian*, July 24, 1999

⁵⁰ Women from all walks of life turned out in sizeable numbers to support Carmen Lawrence through the days of the Marks Royal Commission. See reports in *The West Australian*, August, 1995.

⁵¹ Comments by Pat Giles and Joan Kirner cited in J. Eveline and L. Hayden, 'Carmen Lawrence: In Labor' in J. Eveline and L. Hayden, *Carrying the Banner: Women, Leadership and Activism in Australia*, Perth, 1999.

⁵² 'Carmen and Her Sisters', *HQ*, Jul/Aug 1997, pp. 54-61, on p. 57

⁵³ Frank Devine, 'Chivalrous QC saves damsel in the dock: playing gender politics', *The Australian*, July 26, 1999, p. 13

⁵⁴ In the 1996-98 federal parliament, there were 41 women: 23 in the House of Representatives and 18 senators. Many of the Coalition women were in marginal seats however, and subject to defeat with small percentage swings against their party.

Lawrence too has a 'unique position'. Her situation, seven decades after Cowan's death, embraces a position for women that was once inconceivable. In her 13 years in parliamentary politics, Dr Lawrence's image has been rewritten. No longer pure enough to represent the metaphor of women cleaning up the state,⁵⁵ she is nonetheless too good at her job for her 'public' to let her go. She enjoys the loyalty of her electorate, polling better than most other ALP candidates, in both 1996 and 1998.⁵⁶ As an icon of the feminist political imaginary she retains a pool of solid supporters, who are aware of the many ways in which men are advantaged in politics. In counterpoint to this are the observers who claim that her failure to accept general responsibility for the 'Easton affair' is the event that has crippled her high-flying political career.

The figures of suffragist, first woman in parliament and first female Premier are emblematic of critical turns in Australian politics. The accompanying reconstruction of 'public' space forces ajar a door previously closed to women. Yet here is also the occasion for humorous relief, for caricaturing the social anxiety that confronts the political woman, in frames of 'unwomanly', domestic, saintly, flawed. By such means the masculinity of formal politics remains, regulated, normalised, powerful.

⁵⁵ See M. Sawyer, 'Housekeeping the State', 1992, and J. Haines, *Suffrage to Sufferance*, Sydney 1992, p. 57.

⁵⁶ Lawrence substantially increased her majority in her Fremantle seat in the 1998 federal election.