

Edith Cowan – Inspiration for Women Independent MPs

Adrian Farrell

candowisdom.com

28 June 2022

This essay is in two parts:

Part I: Breaking new ground – Edith Cowan’s inspiring story for women independents examines the life of Edith Cowan, the first woman to be elected to an Australian Parliament in 1921.

Part II: Edith Cowan 100 years later – what’s changed for women in Parliament? explores what it’s like for women in politics one hundred years later and efforts used to prevent the election of the teal independents in the 2022 election.

Related

DOWNLOAD [The Wise Voter and the ‘Voices of’ Independents](#)

This essay examines the pioneering work of the ‘Voices for Indi’ community movement and explores what political wisdom means for both voters and elected members of Parliament.



Part I: Breaking new ground – Edith Cowan's inspiring story for women independents

One hundred years after Edith Cowan was elected as a member of the Western Australia Parliament, women independents are also breaking new ground.

The main ambition of a woman's life should be to become the wife of an honorable and honest man. . . . It is man's duty to be here [in this Chamber], and it is woman's duty to attend to the family."

--William Knox (Kooyong, Free Trade) House of Representatives, 23 April 1902.



Edith Cowan on the Australian \$50 banknote

The 2022 election saw a large number of women independents become members of the House of Representatives. It's now 100 years since Edith Cowan was elected as the first woman in any Parliament in Australia. What was it like to be elected as a woman to Parliament at that time and why is she so respected for what she achieved?

Edith Cowan is best known for being the first woman to be elected to an Australian Parliament. While she did achieve a great deal in her one term of political office, we can also learn much from her trailblazing life of service to the community. After all, she was 59 when she entered parliament and was already highly respected for her earlier achievements. As an effective activist for change, she was a doer, not a complainer. As a Nationalist Party member, she was also fiercely independent.

Early life and childhood

Edith Dircksey Cowan (nee Brown) was born on 2 August 1861 at Glengarry Station near Geraldton, Western Australia, the second child of Kenneth Brown and Mary Eliza Wittenoom. Mary Eliza died while giving birth to their fifth child in 1868 and Edith was sent as a seven year-old to a boarding school run by two Cowan sisters in Perth. Their brother, James Cowan, would later become Edith's husband.

Edith's father, Kenneth had arrived from England with his parents, Thomas and Eliza Brown, in 1841 as a four-year old, accompanied by servants. The union would go on to produce six more children.

The first property Thomas purchased was Grass Dale in York, which he used for sheep and horse breeding. Although Thomas was intent on growing his wealth by purchasing tracks of land, he spent much of his time working for the Government as a land surveyor, magistrate and a brief stint a member of the Legislative Council. It

was left to Kenneth and his brother Maitland to manage the properties at Grass Dale and Glengarry.

After the death of his wife, it seems Kenneth went into a downward spiral from being a successful explorer and pastoralist to losing money by gambling and drinking. Kenneth's second marriage was to Mary Tindal in 1873 in Melbourne. Two more daughters were added to the four daughters and one son from his first marriage.

After time away living in Melbourne and New Zealand the couple returned to Geraldton in Western Australia late in 1875. On the afternoon of 3 January 1876 Kenneth, after a trivial argument with his wife, shot her twice in front of witnesses. She died at the scene.¹

The subsequent criminal court cases made news around Australia. Here was a man of considerable means from a respected family with many connections in high places now on a murder charge.

It was difficult to find suitable jurors for the trial, one of the first in the colony as a 'trial by jury' in the Supreme Court. The population of Perth was only around 5,000 at the time, with roughly two-thirds being male.

The Age newspaper in Melbourne gave a long-winded, detailed report and commentary on the evidence presented at the trial:

[W]hen he [Brown] at length rouses himself to do the fearful deed, he deliberately fires at his victim as she flies shrieking from his presence, and when he perceives the shot is not fatal follows her to her place of retreat, and as she comes out from it and crouches before him in terror points the second barrel of his gun at her head and blows out her brains. All this occurs in open day, in the middle of a town, without any attempt to escape observation, and is proved beyond dispute.²

The news report goes on to debate whether a conviction of murder would still be the result even with the overwhelming evidence presented:

Defence, therefore, there was absolutely none, while there was an abundance of aggravating circumstances, one of them being the fact that the poor woman was near her confinement. But the reluctance of the colonists to convict a brother settler and bring disgrace on his connections was known to be so great that an attempt was made to offer such a show of evidence as might give an excuse to a friendly jury for bringing in a verdict of insanity.

The first trial before Chief Justice Burt was aborted after the jury could not reach a verdict. The same thing happened in the second trial. It was only after jurors in the third trial unanimously rejected the defence proposition that Brown was insane that a guilty verdict was reached on 25 May 1876. Brown was sentenced to death and was hanged two weeks later.

Edith faces a new life

Edith had suffered a painful childhood in losing her mother as a child. Now she had to endure the traumatic loss of her father and stepmother, plus the public humiliation of a father hanged for murder. Now aged 15, Edith left her boarding school to live with her paternal grandmother, Eliza Brown, in the Perth suburb of Guildford.

For the remainder of her school years she attended the Rectory School run by Church of England cleric Canon George Hallett Sweeting. Canon Sweeting had previously been Headmaster at the Bishop's Collegiate School, founded by Bishop

Hale in 1858, known today as Hale School. The late Peter Cowan, grandson of Edith Cowan, wrote in her biography, "Canon Sweeting left Edith Brown at least with a life-long conviction of the value of education, and an interest in books and reading".³

By the time she had finished school it appears she was determined not to hide herself away from the public but to devote her life to be a champion for social justice for others:

On the family the emotional effect of the father's shame was crippling, extending on into later generations. That it did not entirely inhibit Edith Cowan from a public life is, particularly given the conventions and attitudes of the time, remarkable. Indeed, it may very well have had the reverse effect, though at a cost recognized by those who knew her.⁴

Marriage and public life

In 1879 Edith married James Cowan, who had recently been appointed as Registrar and Master to the Supreme Court. She was eighteen; he was thirty and had been in numerous low-paying government jobs until this appointment. While James had minimal formal education he read extensively in law and became recognised for his legal knowledge.⁵

Between them, the Cowans had five children, four girls and one boy. No doubt Edith was busy with rearing their children before beginning her public life in 1890. James had by then been appointed as Perth Police Magistrate and Edith therefore became aware of the social problems of the day and the injustice meted out to women and children.

With her love for reading it is little wonder to find Edith become a member of the St. George's Reading Circles which had formed by a school teacher, Miss A. J. Best, around 1877. Its purpose was to exchange and discuss reading material, and debate current affairs.⁶

A number of the members went on to form the first women's club in Australia, the Karrakatta Club in 1894. According to the club's history, the objective "was to bring into one body the women of the community for mutual improvement. Special engagement and advocacy were strong interests, and Club members championed local social justice issues affecting women."⁷

Mrs A. Onslow, later Lady Onslow, was the first President. Edith Cowan was appointed as the first secretary and later became President. It was under leadership that the club became involved in women's suffrage. Ultimately the right to vote was achieved in 1899.⁸

Edith suggested the motto for the club, *Spectemur Agendo*, let us be judged by our own actions. This was very much her own philosophy.

The next few decades are remarkable in what she achieved in her public life by either joining as an active member or founding numerous organisations. A newspaper report in 1921 summarised her community involvement:

She is a justice of the peace (being a member of the Children's Court), president of the National Council of Women and the Soldiers' Welcome Committee, secretary of the King Edward Maternity Hospital (for the existence of which institution she was largely responsible), a member of the Perth Public Hospital Board, on the committee of the Red Cross Society, and one of the founders of the Women's Service Guild.⁹

Edith could have had a comfortable life as the wife of a public servant having a secure job. But according to her biographer, such a life would seem to her to be a waste, “cruel for the individual, and real for society.”¹⁰

During the Great War of 1914-18 Edith, although heavily engaged in social work, took on a range of war work:

The sheer number of committees on which she served or which she led would have made a full-time occupation. No one ever accused her of being an inactive member of anything she supported, and this work, with the vitally important social work that was undertaken in this period, did in fact totally consume her time through the years of the war until 1920.¹¹

She received the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for work done during the war.

Meanwhile, her husband James had been forced to retire as a magistrate in 1914 to be replaced with men with legal training. In some ways this was fortunate as it allowed Edith to take on these additional roles.

From all these activities Edith gained extensive public recognition:

Few women in Australia, perhaps none in her time, had more publicity than Edith Cowan, yet she never ceased to assert that her causes were important, not herself . . . There had to be leaders, and she had the qualities of leadership, and through this, publicity came to her.¹²

Women for Parliament

There was a push dating back to the late eighteen-hundreds for the emancipation of women. This grew in the early decades of the 20th Century.

In Western Australia the law was changed in 1920 to allow women to be elected to Parliament. Most of the population welcomed the move but some men, especially politicians and even some women weren't impressed:

The President of the Farmers and Settlers' Association, however, still publicly deplores the intrusion of women into the legislative halls, and a correspondent in Saturday's issue of the West Australian, while conceding the right of women to vote for “those men whom they think will best represent them,” considers that that should be the end so far as they are politically concerned. His view is that if a woman is unfortunate enough to be born “a woman, her mission is to marry, rear a family, and teach her girls to be domesticated.”¹³

It wasn't expected that any women would be elected but there were four women candidates for the Western Australian Legislative Assembly election held on 12 March 1921. Edith, by now aged 59, was the endorsed candidate for the Nationalist Party, forerunner of the centre-right Liberal Party, in the West Perth electorate. She was up against another Nationalist candidate, Thomas Draper, the Attorney General who had introduced the legislation to allow women to become members of Parliament. She didn't expect to win but she did with a 46 vote margin, becoming the first woman to sit in a Parliament in Australia. Voting was not compulsory at that time – until 1936 – and it was women voters, in particular, who enabled her win.

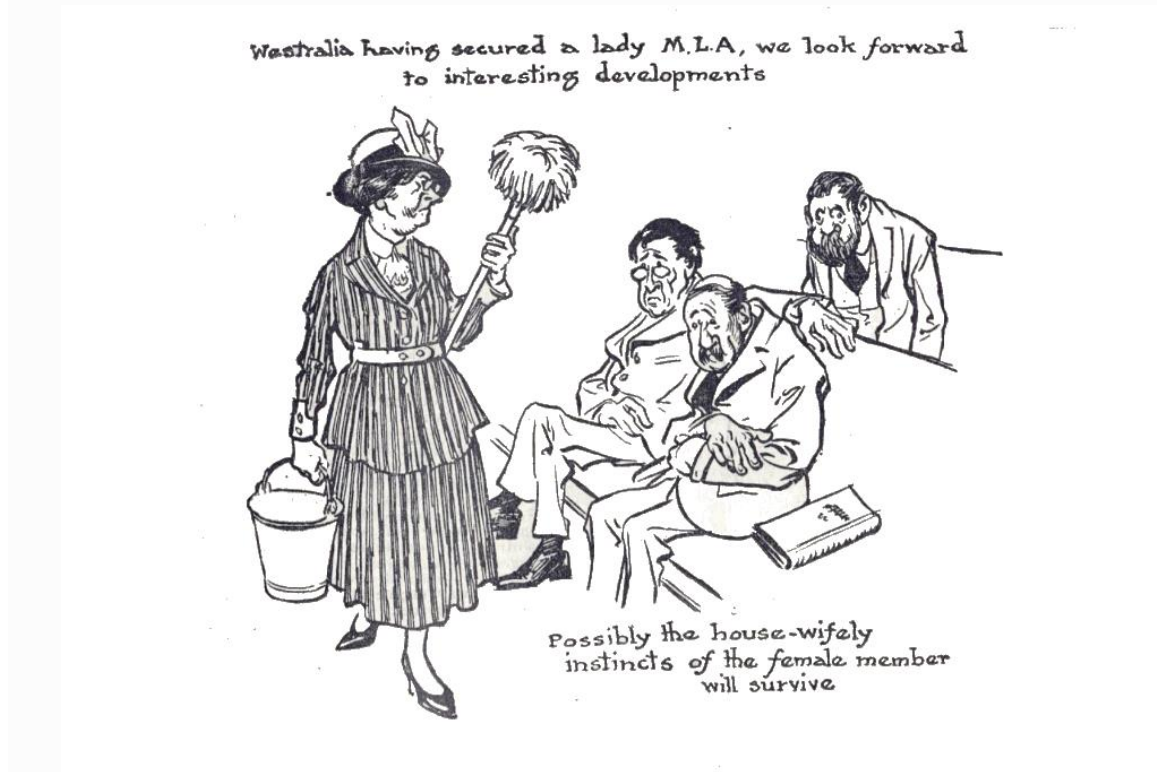
The result was a shock to the Nationalist Party:

They saw it in the simple terms of a disaster. They had lost an able and experienced party and cabinet member. They had gained a representative unknown politically, uncertain in terms of strict party allegiance, and a woman.¹⁴

The election of a woman to Parliament made news nationally and around the world. Although the report in the *Melbourne Age* was generally positive to the development it ended with a warning:

Were political office to become the ambition of the fair sex and were standing for Parliament to become the latest craze of fashion, there would be many dreary and neglected homes through out the country sacrificed on the altar of political ambition.¹⁵

The Bulletin also lampooned Edith's entry into the male domain of Parliament with a series of cartoons, with one showing the new member with a mop and bucket:



Edith Cowan's welcome to Parliament in *The Bulletin*.¹⁶

Edith had the right credentials to be a member of Parliament: well educated, intelligent and having leadership experience. A news correspondent added this description:

Of very forceful character, yet intensely sympathetic, a fine speaker, witty and logical, with a wide knowledge of social and economic questions, her advent into the House will be welcomed by people of many shades of thought.¹⁷

Edith's entry into Parliament was not without its challenges. For one thing there were no female toilets in the building and consequently she had a four-minute walk to her home nearby – or perhaps it was a two-minute run.

It is customary in the Westminster system of Parliament that a member's first speech be heard without interruption or interjection. In Edith's case there were 17 interruptions or interjections during her speech. In thanking the government for passing the law to allow women to be elected to Parliament a member interjected with the comment, "They only wanted your vote." But it didn't put her off from her message that she was there to represent her constituents:

It is all the more necessary, therefore, that I should make it clear where I stand. I am a Nationalist, and I belong to no party in this House. I was sent here to uphold law and order and constitutional government, and it will be my desire to assist in carrying out these objects in a proper and satisfactory manner; while in the discharge of my duties here I shall be responsible only to my own constituents.¹⁸

Edith also believed more women elected to Parliament would benefit society by bringing in a women's perspective:

If men and women can work for the State side by side and represent all the different sections of the community, and if the male members of the House would be satisfied to allow women to help them and would accept their suggestions when they are offered, I cannot doubt that we should do very much better work in the community than was ever done before.¹⁹

Edith was a very active contributor during her three-year term in Parliament. Having private members bills passed is rare but in Edith's case there were two significant bills passed:

- The Administration Amendment Bill (1922) to give equal inheritance rights to mothers when a child died intestate.
- The Women's Legal Status Bill 1923 to open the legal and other professions to women.

Other states had already passed similar legislation to allow women to take on roles in professions, such as law. Nevertheless, there was opposition from members who wanted to keep these professions in the male domain. One member interrupted her Second Reading speech of the Bill in September 1923, claiming, "You will be cutting all the solicitors and barristers out of their jobs."

Another asked, "Surely you do not want generally to bring women down to the level of men?" to which she responded, "No, I want to raise men to the level of women."²⁰

Eventually the bill passed through both Houses without dissent. Her biographer summarised her achievements in Parliament:

To succeed in two private member's bills was a considerable achievement in any parliament. She gained a reputation for precise speaking, a clear grasp of questions, and except on rare occasions . . . for reasonably brief and relevant contributions to debate.²¹

Some of her other political contributions²² included:

- Fighting for proportional representation and compulsory voting.
- Giving strong representation to children's rights, particularly in the court system and with health matters.
- Strongly advocating for free education with greater funding for education; and enhancement of educational standards for the nursing profession.
- Lobbying for regional development, tax incentives and infrastructure for schools, infant health centres, hospitals and roads.
- Strongly opposing gambling, alcoholism and lowering the drinking age below 21.
- Tabling a notice of motion to eliminate the 'men only' reservation rule to access all Parliamentary Galleries (now open to women and men).

Edith stood unsuccessfully for the elections held in 1924 and 1927. Her independent views had not always aligned with the policies of the Nationalist Party and she also had differences with some of the women's movements. That didn't stop her from being fully involved in women's affairs but it was the end of her political career.

One cannot fail to notice that Edith is not seen smiling in any photos. Peter Cowan spoke of her serious nature and absence of emotion:

Hers was a difficult personality, its virtues – great courage, outspokenness, a remarkably clear and logical mind – were public rather than private virtues. She had great compassion, a keen sense of pity, which could spill over into public attitudes at times overstated. In private life these feelings were far more controlled – one might suspect repressed. She seemed often difficult to approach, was called at times hard, could appear in personal aspects abrupt, perhaps cold. In the hurt and confusion of childhood and early youth she learned a great distrust of emotion that could leave her vulnerable, it was too deep to be removed by her intelligence.²³

Towards the end of the 1920s decade, she was observed to be less effective in her work with others, as one person reported:

Edith Cowan was tactless to a committee important to the National Council of Women dispute, that she adopted a high-handed attitude, antagonizing the members present, reflected an attitude easy to avoid in earlier years.²⁴

She was admitted to hospital in April 1932 and died a few weeks later on 9 June with her funeral service taking place two days later. According to newspaper reports, a 'large gathering' attended, which is remarkable considering the short time for the news to travel.

Two years after her death, and after much controversy, the Edith Cowan Memorial Clock was unveiled in her honor at the entrance of Kings Park at Perth.

She has also been honoured with postage stamps and on an issue of the Australian \$50 bank note.

In 1991 the Western Australian College of Advanced Education was renamed Edith Cowan University (ECU).

The Edith Cowan story shows that a woman parliamentarian with the right background can achieve significant change while they are in office.

Notes

1. "Coroner Inquest into the death of Mary Ann Brown." *The Western Australian Times*, 11 Jan 1876, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2975398?searchTerm=mary%20ann%20brown>.
2. "The Kenneth Brown Murder in Western Australia," *The Age*, 26 Jun 1876, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/202160233?searchTerm=trial%20kenneth%20brown>.
3. Peter Cowan, *A Unique Position: A Biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan 1861–1932* (Nedlands: UWA Press, 1978) 47.
4. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 46.
5. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 61.

6. "Glimpses of the Past – Karrakatta Club Jubilee," *Western Mail*, 30 Nov 1944, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/38558708>.
7. "History of the Club," Karrakatta Club, <https://www.karrakattaclub.com.au/history-of-the-club>.
8. "Edith Cowan," TheFamousPeople, <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/edith-cowan-7227.php>.
9. "Mrs. Edith Dircksey Cowan, O.B.E., M.L.A.," *The Queenslander*, 9 Apr 1921, 36, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/22610612>.
10. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 53.
11. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 148.
12. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 71.
13. "Women in Parliament," *The West Australian*, 28 Mar 1921, 4, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/27959986>.
14. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 165.
15. "There are people in Australia who will have visions of an Imperialism," *The Age*, 15 Mar 1921, 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/201698680>.
16. "The Women Should Have a Voice: Edith Cowan's legacy of social justice in Western Australia," Issuu, <https://issuu.com/lswa/docs/brief-aug-2021/s/13039488>.
17. "Mrs. Edith Dircksey Cowan," *The Queenslander*.
18. Edith Cowan, "Inaugural Speech – Mrs Edith Dircksey Cowan, MLA," Parliament of Western Australia, [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/webcms.nsf/resources/file-edc100ar1921/\\$file/01.%20Address%20in%20Reply%201921.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/webcms.nsf/resources/file-edc100ar1921/$file/01.%20Address%20in%20Reply%201921.pdf).
19. Cowan, "Inaugural Speech".
20. David Black and Harry Phillips, *Making a Difference—A Frontier of Firsts: Women in the Western Australian Parliament 1921–2012*, (Perth: Parliament of Western Australia) 2012, 85, [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/library/MPHistoricalData.nsf/32e457f9ba7d7c5148257b5500242416/80e6430ba5f9a786482577e50028a588/\\$FILE/Making%20a%20Difference%20chapter%205.%20Edith%20Cowan.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/library/MPHistoricalData.nsf/32e457f9ba7d7c5148257b5500242416/80e6430ba5f9a786482577e50028a588/$FILE/Making%20a%20Difference%20chapter%205.%20Edith%20Cowan.pdf).
21. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 220.
22. "Edith Cowan Political Life," Parliament of Western Australia, [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/WebCMS.nsf/resources/file-heritage—cowans-political-life/\\$file/Edith%20Cowans%20Politial%20Life.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/WebCMS.nsf/resources/file-heritage—cowans-political-life/$file/Edith%20Cowans%20Politial%20Life.pdf).
23. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 279.
24. Cowan, *A Unique Position*, 280.

Part II: Edith Cowan 100 years later – what’s changed for women in Parliament?

The 2022 election saw a large number of women independents become members of the House of Representatives. It’s now 100 years since Edith Cowan was elected as a woman in any Parliament in Australia. What difference does today hold for women wishing to serve in Parliament or public life?



Edith Cowan and ‘teal’ independents

This is Part II of a two-part series examining how Edith Cowan’s experience as an MP compares to life for a woman in Parliament today. **Part I**, [Breaking new ground – Edith Cowan’s inspiring story for women independents](#), looks at the life and impact of Edith Cowan.

Women belong in all places where decisions are being made . . . It shouldn’t be that women are the exception.

—Ruth Bader Ginsburg, former justice of the U.S. Supreme Court

Edith Cowan was a positive contributor as a member of the Western Australia Parliament, and the first woman to be elected to any Parliament in Australia during her three-year term. Her victory in the 1921 election was unexpected and close—only by 46 votes at a time of non-compulsory voting. Her win was largely due to women voting for an intelligent and competent woman who had a history of helping women and children in difficult circumstances.

Some of the principles Edith stood for were not popular with her fellow MPs. She wanted to see more women in Parliament; she believed MPs should not be careerists and even not be paid; and she intended voting for what her constituents needed, not necessarily what her Nationalist Party wanted.

She would, no doubt, have welcomed the 2022 election of the female independents as this would go somewhere towards her desire of creating equality of representation.

The rise of the women independents and the failure of the Liberal Party

Few were surprised when the two incumbent community-based independents, Zali Steggall and Helen Haines were re-elected in the 2022 election.

But no one was expecting to have seven new women independents to be elected to the lower house. One independent was not supported by Climate 200, so this left six

so-called 'teal' independents as new MPs. What hasn't been appreciated is that other teal independents, while not being elected, have changed once safe Liberal seats into marginal seats.

Take, for example, the seat of Wentworth in metropolitan Sydney. This was a Liberal Party stronghold with Malcolm Turnbull as the sitting member from 2004-2018 and historically a very safe seat. Dr Kerryn Phelps, an independent, was elected after Turnbull resigned in 2018. And even though she failed to be reelected in 2019, Wentworth, with a margin of just 1.3 per cent was no longer a safe seat. Come the 2022 election, teal independent, Allegra Spender easily ousted the sitting Liberal member, Dave Sharma.

Other teal candidates who weren't elected¹ nevertheless made a big impact by converting safe Liberal and National Party seats into marginal ones:

- Nicolette Boele (Bradfield, NSW) from 16.6% to 5.5% margin
- Claire Ferres Miles (Casey, VIC) from 4.6% to 1.5% margin
- Carolyn Heise (Cowper, NSW) from 6.8% to 2.7% margin
- Deb Leonard (Monash, VIC) from 7.4% to 3.2% margin
- Rob Priestly (Nicholls, VIC) from 20.0% to 4.6% margin

Why is this important? It means that these seats in the next election are set up for a close contest by an independent, especially if there is dissatisfaction with the sitting MP or with the Liberal or Labor Party.

The support for the major parties has been decreasing for decades and has now reached new lows. The Labor Party won the election with a primary vote of just 33 per cent. The Liberal Party did even worse, at 24 per cent. This means that a third of Australia's voters were not prepared to trust either party to govern in their interests.

The realignment of the Liberal Party has been going on since Howard adopted the hardline approach of the right-wing populist movement of Pauleen Hanson's One Nation Party in the lead up to the 2001 election.²

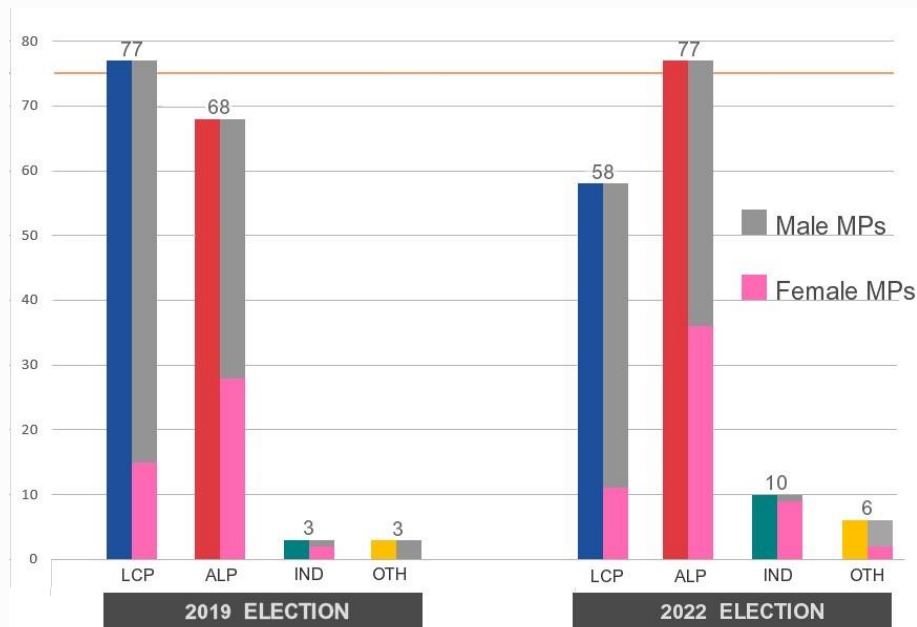
The Tampa 'children overboard' crisis was the start of the culture wars on refugees and won Howard the 2001 election. Subsequent Prime Ministers carried this on during his term and ultimately Scott Morrison, assisted by his Deputy Barnaby Joyce, took political divisiveness to new levels. In doing so, the Liberals have lost the vote of the young, wealthy professional in the inner suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne—once the Liberal heartland. The Liberal base now becomes what used to be the Labor stronghold, the working class. The Coalition now represents 16 of the 20 poorest electorates, and only four of the 20 highest-income electorates.³

The same thing has happened with the Republican Party in the USA where they are losing wealthy, educated urban voters and picking up poorer rural ones.⁴

So where does this leave the remaining older, rusted-on, Liberal voters in the suburbs who have supported the Liberal Party from when they reached voting age? It's probably going to get worse as the Liberal Party is unlikely to regain the electorates now held by the independents. Also, the Liberal seats that shifted to Labor could well become independent if the 'Voices of' movement continues to produce candidates of the calibre of the existing teal independents.

Teal independents improving gender equality

The new 47th Parliament of Australia has seen the number of women elected to the Lower House increase to 58 of the 151 members. At 38 per cent this is a long way short of the 50 per cent ideal but is a big improvement compared to 20 years ago when only 25 per cent were women. There has also been an increase in diversity with a record number of newly elected Asian and South Asian Australian politicians.



Male–Female Seat Distribution Lower House 2019 & 2022 Elections

But Australia is currently a laggard when compared to other countries. According to figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Australia is currently ranked 56th in the world when it comes to female representation in parliament. New Zealand is ranked 6th with just under 50% women in the Lower House.

Australia's position is confirmed in another, broader study of by the World Economic Forum. The Global Gender Gap Index for 2021 ranks Australia's overall Gender Gap position as number 50 out of 156 countries. For the Political Empowerment sub-category looking at the gender gap in Parliament, Australia is ranked at 54. By comparison, New Zealand is ranked in position 4.⁵

Why is gender equality important in Parliament?

Edith Cowan sought to be in Parliament because she and her followers believed women's issues were not given the attention they needed. But as she was only one member of the House of Assembly she wanted to see more women elected to Parliament. Her proposition that the views of both sides—men and women—should be taken into account is just as valid today. She would have been surprised to see how long it's taken to move towards equality for women.

According to UN Women, the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality, while women and girls represent 50 per cent of the population, they are often unrepresented at the leadership and decision-making level. This is an argument based on fairness or justice—a democratic right.⁶

The other argument is based on the 'added value' women bring to political participation with their better understanding of women's issues as a starting point.

Studies have shown that increasing women's political participation "has proven to be good for economic and social development around the world."⁷

The potential benefit once gender equality is achieved is that 'women will change how politics is done, bring new policy priorities, adopt a different style of interacting with constituents, and affect the political culture of parliament itself.'⁸

It's also been shown that having more women in key roles is good for business. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency has evidence which shows that gender equality in the workplace increases the productivity of the organisation and boosts the profits. The research has identified the following:

- An increase of 10 percentage points or more in the share of female Key Management Personnel leads to a 6.6% increase in the market value of Australian ASX-listed companies, worth the equivalent of AUD \$104.7 million (or USD \$70.2 million) for the average company.⁹
- Companies that reduce the share of female key managers by 10ppts+ leads to a reduction in market value of AUD \$46 million on average.¹⁰

So why is gender equality in Parliament House so different to the business community?

You don't belong here

For her move to be a candidate and an eventual Member of the Western Australian Parliament Edith Cowan had to endure criticism from newspapers and especially *The Bulletin* magazine.

Once she became a Member of Parliament her main complaint was the lack of courtesy from some of the other MPs:

One Labor member, William Angwin, in particular, constantly interjected when she spoke. As no special favours were given to her, she was sometimes prepared to retaliate with interjections. Significantly, though, the experienced and influential Philip Collier made the judgement that the eleventh parliament had a very good tone and was one of the most constructive.¹¹

Edith Cowan experienced hostility from the male members of Parliament in her day, but nothing like the aggression and harassment experienced by female politicians today both inside and outside Parliament House.

An IPU study has found that sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians, particularly for psychological violence is prevalent in countries world-wide.¹² The most common form of psychological violence experienced by women MPs was the humiliating sexist remarks made in parliament by male MPs from opposing parties or from their own.

There have been many examples of bad behavior exposed over the last few years in Australia. It's now 10 years since Julia Gillard was in the middle of her three year period as the first woman Prime Minister. Few would forget the psychological violence she endured from inside and outside Parliament.

The Kate Ellis Story

Former Labor MP Kate Ellis has experienced first-hand the sexist and misogynist culture of Parliament House. She was first elected in 2004 as a 27 year-old and within her first two weeks a Liberal staffer came up to her and said, "The only thing

anyone really wants to know about you, Kate, is how many blokes you had to f--k to get into parliament.”¹³

She had been active in Labor Party politics from the time she was at university and she thought that the sexist comments she experienced were normal in the workplace. But she was still shocked that such disrespect would be shown to an elected member of Parliament.

In 2009 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd appointed her as Minister for Youth and Sport at the young age of 33. She knew that some others in her own party would be unhappy:

There are a lot of people that would have thought, “Who the hell is this girl?” and so it’s probably no surprise that there were people who wanted to undermine me, probably right from that appointment.¹⁴

What she wasn’t prepared for was the lengths that others would go to in order to undermine her. When she heard about a story by News Corp journalist Glenn Milne about to be published in the Sunday papers on 23 August 2009 she knew she was in trouble. The crux of the sensational ‘exclusive’ was that Ellis was in a love triangle in her office and it was causing division within her office and for the government:

It doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. Once it’s printed, there’s no going back from that and I instantly knew if that story ran it would be career ending for me and I would be labelled as a slut and I would be labelled as someone who isn’t really up to the job at all.¹⁵

She had to plead with the editor of the paper that the story was pure fantasy and there was no conflict or love triangle before the editor decided not to proceed. By that stage, Malcolm Turnbull was on News Corp’s hit list, so instead they published another ‘scoop’ by Glenn Milne about Turnbull’s approaches to join the ALP ten years earlier at the time of the republic referendum.

Later, Ellis reflected on the ‘bullet’ she’d missed:

The level of knowledge about the way that my office worked, who was in my office meant that that story could only ever have originated within my own party from my own colleagues. The only reason to make that up was to undermine me.¹⁶

Kate Ellis went on to serve in multiple portfolios in a 15-year career in Parliament before retiring at the 2019 election to spend more time with her young family.

However this was not the end of her political life. Upon looking back on her own exposure to the toxic Canberra culture she began to wonder if her experience was unique. It was a topic she didn’t talk about with other women politicians while she was in Parliament:

You get so acclimatised to the relentless toxicity in parliament, and you are so busy or so caught up in the day-to-day madness that you tend to just accept it all and move on.¹⁷

So she set about interviewing women across all major parties including, including Julia Gillard, Julie Bishop, Linda Burney, Sussan Ley, Penny Wong, Sarah Hanson-Young and Pauline Hanson:

I wanted to see whether other elected women across the Parliament had been treated differently as a result of their gender as I had on many, many

occasions. What I found is that every woman that I spoke to across the political spectrum had a story to tell.¹⁸

Whether it within Parliament House or in the media, the experience is always the same for women, Ellis maintains:

Focus on physical appearance is much greater for women, focus on their private lives, issues around motherhood, slut-shaming, personal attacks, rumours and gossip used to undermine women in a way men don't have to face to the same extent in parliament . . . It makes it harder for you to actually focus on doing your job.¹⁹

The result is her book, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*, published in March 2021. In the book she reveals her own and others experiences of issues such as sexism, motherhood, appearances, social media, the sisterhood and sex.

Gender inequality starts early in politics

Many individuals become involved in politics as volunteers or staffers for local MPs. In a survey of volunteers and election candidates carried out by Medha Majumdar, a PhD candidate at ANU in 2021, she found the “experiences of abuse and harassment force some women to abandon their aspirations for political leadership and at times, a political career entirely.”²⁰

Their negative experiences ranged from harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse and bullying to inappropriate sexual advances and physical assault. One volunteer reported:

Verbal and physical harassment while working as a campaign volunteer gets very tiresome. After working on ten years of campaigns the negatives start to outweigh the positives. I have withdrawn from political participation as a result of constant online and real-life abuse.²¹

So just how bad is it to work at Parliament House? It was only in 2021 that the public became aware of the extent of the toxic working conditions for many of the people working in Canberra and electoral offices throughout Australia. There are up to 5,000 individuals working in Parliament House during sitting periods, including parliamentarians and their staff, lobbyists, media, police, cleaners, and more.

In her *Set The Standard* report released on 30 November 2021, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, found that one in three people working in the building had been exposed to sexual harassment. Another finding was that women experienced sexual harassment and bullying at a higher rate than men.²² Of the 28 recommendations, a key one was to bring in targets to achieve gender balance and diversity targets for parliamentarians and staff.

The high-stakes, competitive nature of party politics—coupled with position power, sexual harassment and misogyny coming from the ‘boy’s club’—makes a potent mix for the dirty tricks foisted on aspiring MPs, regardless of gender.

Consider the alleged actions of Scott Morrison and his supporters against Michael Towke in the pre-selection process for the NSW electorate of Cook in 2007. This became news again in April 2022 when Towke broke his silence about what transpired after he initially won the preselection count by 80 votes to 8. In a statement for the Nine newspapers, he said, “Amongst many unedifying tactics used to unseat me from my preselection victory for Morrison, racial vilification was front and centre and he was directly involved.”²³

His claims are backed up by others who were present, one saying, “I’ve been in the Liberal Party for over 40 years, and I’ve never witnessed such a vicious preselection with such distortions of the truth.”²⁴

Towke’s claims were vehemently denied by Scott Morrison who described them as ‘bitter slurs’. When so many politicians happily sue for deformation, why Morrison didn’t do so is a question intriguing many observers.²⁵

The Michael Townke case, as with Kate Ellis, involves malicious backgrounding. This is off-the-record briefings of journalists to disclose personal information, whether it’s true or false, in order to smear the reputation of candidates.

In her 60-page report, *The Missing Women Of Australian Politics*, Medha Majumdar says women candidates are often encouraged to withdraw from the pre-selection process because there are ‘more-deserving’ male candidates:

Candidates . . . reported that they were backgrounded against by people within their own party in an effort to unfairly tarnish their reputation. Their personal information was leaked by party insiders and rumours were spread against them.²⁶

The News Corp media, especially the tabloids and Sky News, have a well-earned reputation as collaborators in such backgrounder exposes.

News Corp and the teal independents

The most powerful political actor in Australia is not the Liberal party or the National party or the Labor party, it is News Corporation. And it is utterly unaccountable.

—Malcolm Turnbull

Late in 2021 it became apparent to the Liberal Party that the so-called ‘teal’ independents were becoming a serious threat in some key seats. That’s when News Corp swung into action to try to do as much damage as possible to their cause.

For teal independent Dr Monique Ryan in the Kooyong electorate, the issues she wanted to address were those most important to the local community, namely: action on climate change; a strong economy; integrity in politics; equality for women; an inclusive society; health care.

For her trouble she, and the other teal independents, were subjected to negativity from Sky News and the News Corp press right up to the election, far worse than Edith Cowan ever experienced.

According to ABC’s Media Watch, of 21 *Daily Telegraph* articles about the teal independents between 10 April 2022, when the election was called, and 2 May, two-thirds were negative, with only one mildly positive.²⁷

The attacks kept coming. “The most destructive, harmful and dangerous vote anyone can make in the forthcoming election is for a teal independent or the Greens,” wrote Greg Sheridan in *The Australian* on 3 May. “They are both a direct threat to our national security.”

Of 38 stories and columns, 20 were negative for teal candidates and only two were positive.²⁸ At the same time, 39 articles about the Coalition and Scott Morrison’s election campaign, 26 were positive for Scott Morrison or the Coalition.²⁹

Professor Rod Tiffen, media researcher at Melbourne University believes News Corp has turned ‘rogue’ by “abandoning any attempt at fulfilling one of the media’s primary

obligations to a democratic society—the provision of truthful news coverage—and instead becoming a truth-distorting propagandist for one side.”³⁰

It turned out, though, that News Corp failed to convince voters to keep the Libs in power. This is not surprising. The Digital News Report published by the University of Canberra finds that Sky News is the least-trusted news source, while News Corp’s *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* tabloids are the least-trusted newspapers.³¹ It demonstrates the impotence of the Murdoch media to influence voters—even allowing for its market dominance.

While the conservative views of Rupert Murdoch may have limited public influence, there is no doubt he is able to influence governments on media policy, according to Derek Wilding, Co-Director, Centre for Media Transition at the University of Technology Sydney. One example was the successful lobbying of the government for the Digital Media Bargaining Code to make Google and Facebook pay for the use of news content—but only for selected news sources.³²

Conclusion

The remarkable victory of the teal independents in the 2022 election was in spite of a determined effort by the Liberal Party, in league with Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation media, to derail their campaign.

It’s not going to be easy for these independents during their term in Parliament but, like the somewhat rebellious Edith Cowan, they will not be bogged down with the factions and intrigues that are inherent in the rigid party structures. Instead of division in politics, one can expect integrity and respect from these independents—something lacking in politics at present.

Now is the time for change once and for all so that no woman—politician or admin staff—will be subjected to the shameful treatment experienced in past years.

Notes

1. “Federal Election 2022 – Australia Votes,” ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/elections/federal-election-2022/>.
2. Gwenda Tavan, “Issues that swung elections: Tampa and the national security election of 2001,” *The Conversation*, 3 May 2019, <https://theconversation.com/issues-that-swung-elections-tampa-and-the-national-security-election-of-2001-115143>.
3. Daniel Wild, “The Liberals Need To Embrace Their Working Class Voters To Win Over The Outer-suburban Freedom Fighters,” Institute of Public Affairs, 3 June 2022, <https://ipa.org.au/ipa-today/the-liberals-need-to-embrace-their-working-class-voters-to-win-over-the-outer-suburban-freedom-fighters>.
4. Waleed Aly, “There are no natural majorities anymore. Albanese’s might be the last one,” *The Age*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/there-are-no-natural-majorities-anymore-albanese-s-might-be-the-last-one-20220602-p5aqqb.html?btis>.
5. “Global Gender Gap Report 2021,” World Economic Forum, 30 Mar 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.
6. “Women’s Political Empowerment and Leadership,” UN Women Asia and the Pacific, 2018, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/11/womens-political-empowerment-and-leadership>.
7. “Women’s Political Empowerment,” UN Women.

8. "Women in Parliament: 20 years in review," Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015, 15, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/WIP20Y-en.pdf>.
9. Rebecca Cassells & Alan Duncan, Gender Equity Insights 2020: Delivering the Business Outcomes, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre & Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency Gender Equity Series, no. 5, March 2020, 41, <http://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/06/BCEC-WGEA-Gender-Equity-Insights-2020-Delivering-the-Business-Outcomes.pdf>.
10. Castles, Gender Equity, 42
11. Harry C.J. Phillips, "The voice of Edith Cowan: Australia's first woman parliamentarian 1921-1924," Edith Cowan University, 1996, <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/6821>.
12. "Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians," Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.
13. Kate Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*, (Richmond, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books) 2021.
14. Jennifer Feller, Producer, "Chamber of Silence," Australian Story, screened 29 March 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/austory/chamber-of-silence/13275176>.
15. Feller, "Chamber of Silence".
16. Feller, "Chamber of Silence".
17. Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*.
18. Kate Ellis, Twitter post, 25-Mar 2021 4:43 p.m., <https://twitter.com/KateEllis22/status/1374960027333578752>.
19. "Former Labor MP Kate Ellis leads group of female politicians lifting lid on 'toxic workplace culture' in Parliament House," ABC News, 29 Mar 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-29/female-politicians-reveal-toxic-culture-in-parliament-house/13249844>.
20. Medha Majumdar, "The missing women of Australian politics — research shows the toll of harassment, abuse and stalking," The Conversation, 29 Sept 2021, <https://theconversation.com/the-missing-women-of-australian-politics-research-shows-the-toll-of-harassment-abuse-and-stalking-168567>.
21. Medha Majumdar, "Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship Report 2020-21," Emily's List Australia, 25, https://www.emilyslist.org.au/julia_gillard_next_generation_internship_report_2020_21.
22. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (2021)*, (Canberra, ACT, 2021) <https://humanrights.gov.au/setstandard-2021>.
23. David Crowe, "Morrison accused of using race in bid for seat," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/morrison-accused-of-using-race-in-bid-for-seat-20220402-p5aaax.html>.
24. Crowe, "Morrison accused of using race".
25. Catie McLeod, "'Bitter slurs': Scott Morrison denies racial allegations about 2007 preselection battle," news.com.au, 3 April 2022, <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/scott-morrison-denies-explosive-racial-allegations-about-2007-preselection-battle/news-story/c6b57d266b4a95bb5a3ecfcf2bd57306>.

26. Medha Majumdar, "Julia Gillard Next Generation," 39.
27. Paul Barry, "Independent candidates," ABC Media Watch, 2 May 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/teals/13863682>.
28. Barry, "Independent candidates".
29. Zara Zadro, "Meddling Murdoch: How The Australian poisons Federal Election coverage," Honi Soit, 15 May 2022, <https://honisoit.com/2022/05/meddling-murdoch-how-the-australian-poisons-federal-election-coverage/>.
30. Denis Muller, "As News Corp goes 'rogue' on election coverage, what price will Australian democracy pay?" The Conversation, 9 May 2022, <https://theconversation.com/as-news-corp-goes-rogue-on-election-coverage-what-price-will-australian-democracy-pay-181599>.
31. "Digital News Report: Australia 2022," University of Canberra, 103, <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia-2022>.
32. Zoe Samios, "How much influence does the Murdoch media have in Australia?" Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Oct 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/how-much-influence-does-the-murdoch-media-have-in-australia-20201015-p565dk.html>