The Many Faces of Political Eve: Representations of Queensland Women Parliamentarians in the Media

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'Forget Policy — I've Got Great Legs!' That newspaper headline was one of the most interesting if not anomalous banners to appear during the 1998 federal election campaign. It was run in the Daily Telegraph¹ as the header to an article about Pauline Hanson, who was busy campaigning for the Queensland seat of Blair in the state elections. As one might expect from the headline, the story dismissed any consideration of Hanson's political agenda in favour of blatant and highly sexualised comment about her very feminine physical attributes. Whilst this sort of media attention openly negated Hanson as a serious political force, it was indicative of the way the media had come to portray her since she arrived on the political scene two years earlier. Moreover, it was symptomatic of the media's widespread concern with portraying female politicians of all parties in accordance with worn-out assumptions and clichés, which rarely — if ever — were applied to their male counterparts.

This paper is not intended as an analysis or discussion about the political ideologies or career of Pauline Hanson. It focuses instead on the media representations of Pauline Hanson as part of a wider argument about the problematic relationship that has developed between the Australian media and female politicians. It contends that the media treat all female politicians differently to the way they treat men, and furthermore that the difference serves to disadvantage women, often to the detriment of their professional and personal lives. In that context, reference will be made to two other notable Queensland female politicians — Dame Annabelle Rankin and Cheryl Kernot — to demonstrate, firstly, the degree of difference that exists, and secondly, that over the last 50 years there has been a discernible change in media portrayals of female politicians that exploit negative stereotyping and unflattering caricatures in the guise of political commentary.

In early 1996, Hanson stood as an Independent candidate for the seat of Oxley and shocked many Queenslanders when she won the previously safe Labor seat

with a swing of almost 25 per cent. In one of the first published photographs taken of her after that victory, the Courier-Mail featured Hanson behind the counter of her Ipswich fish and chip shop overlooking a tray of raw fish. In that instance, the headline declared: 'Victorious Hanson now has bigger fish to fry.' Although the pun was definitely unoriginal, Pauline was not. She projected an image that was considerably removed from the usual representations of female politicians who had gone before her. Throughout the history of Australia's political system, its female politicians have consistently projected an image of refined, articulate and welleducated womanhood. Hanson did not fit any of those descriptors. Still, despite her obvious divergence from the 'norm', Hanson had garnered sufficient public support to achieve a noteworthy political victory. In doing so, she joined the cohort of other female politicians elected at that time who would make up 'the highest ever level of female representation in Parliament'. Yet, despite the increasing presence of females at all levels of government, women are still finding that they need to learn special skills that allow them to negotiate and survive the increasingly harsh and very personal media attention often focused upon them.

For many Queenslanders, the outspoken Hanson was a political breath of fresh air. As an Independent federal Senator, she used her maiden speech to warn against the perils of Asian immigration, decry special welfare payments to Aborigines, and disparage the response of previous governments to the problem of unemployment. She did this after first identifying herself as 'a mother of four children, a sole parent and a businesswoman running a fish and chip shop'. Her forthright views and her self-identification with members of the working class who had had 'a fair share of life's knocks' found support among many thousands of so-called 'ordinary' people. Most supporters applauded her as a modern 'Aussie battler' and straight-talker who dared to defy the constraints of political correctness. For thousands of others, though, she personified a combination of anti-intellectualism and bigoted racist views. It seemed that the Australian public either loathed or loved her — but for the media she was an intriguing new performer on the stage of Australian politics, and much of that intrigue was generated not only by her forthright views, but by her gender. As a woman, she was part of the political minority, but additionally she was a different sort of political woman from those the media were used to dealing with. That combination posed a quandary for the Australian media — one which remains largely unresolved.

Australia's female politicians have, historically, always been treated as the Other by the media. This tendency is ably reflected in the different emphasis given to the public and private lives of female politicians when measured against that given to men. A quantitative study recently conducted by Cathy Jenkins of Griffith University's School of Politics and Public Policy revealed that 68 per cent of the media attention focused on men dealt with their public lives, and 32 per cent dealt with their private lives. The comparative figures for women were markedly different, in that only 53.8 per cent of media attention dealt with their public lives and more than 46 per cent of coverage fell into the category of private life. As part of that gender imbalance in coverage, the media continue in their attempts to link women with the traditional view of woman as wife and homemaker, while simultaneously

placing greater concentration on women's private relationships, sexual lives and appearance.¹¹

These findings support Elizabeth van Acker's argument that the diversity and complexity of women's interests is often overlooked in the media's fixation with categorising women into stereotyped distinctions of femininity that fall broadly within the parameters of 'Saviours, sinners, and stars'. 12 Whilst blatant sexstereotyping is becoming far less prevalent, common themes still remain strong in the rhetoric surrounding female politicians. For example, coverage of female political figures often configures the women as unusually high achievers who stand out from other women (and men) because they are 'saviours' or 'stars'. Media references made to their success and status as high achievers are commonly couched in terms of a 'breakthrough' for women, or of them being an 'agent of change'.¹³ Those themes, however, are becoming increasingly redundant in contemporary Australian society when talking about feminine achievement in all areas. Nevertheless, Australia's female politicians are patently aware that, whilst some of the notions surrounding the perceived anomaly of women in public office are dissipating, those long-held beliefs concerning the moral obligation of women are much slower to change. As it has in the past, any transgression from the traditional code of decent or respectable feminine performance is almost certain to earn the errant woman the label of 'sinner'.

This contention is supported by evidence which shows that, in Australia, there have been rapid shifts in media imagery that can deliver women from the role of media darling one day to media tart the next. This is because, as Julia Baird points out in her recent book entitled *Media Tarts*:

[the] prevailing assumption — often fostered by women to their own advantage — that women are cleaner, more ethical than men, and that their presence will bleach politics of grime, has been their greatest burden. Trumpeted as sincere, honest, and accessible; when they turn out to be human and flawed the pundits marvel and sneer.¹⁴

When, in 1946, Dame Annabelle Rankin became the first Queensland woman to be elected to federal parliament, she exemplified the ideal type of woman to hold public office. Reported to be a quiet, unassuming but intelligent and determined woman, Rankin was unmarried and came to political life with a strong family background in conservative politics. She was neither flamboyant nor controversial in appearance or actions, and Rankin herself credited her political success to 'not being antagonistic towards men [or] an iron lady'. 15

Her public persona was one of quiet and poised feminine dignity that mirrored her personal life. Her single status was not, apparently, cause for great concern because much of the public, and presumably her political associates, would have found the combination of a high-level political career and that of traditional homemaker an incongruous mix. The contemporary media could therefore accommodate her easily within the boundaries of political life because she personified a benign form of both femininity and political force. As such, media portrayals of

Rankin tended more towards an emphasis on the matronly side of femininity than that of an energetic and successful career woman. Still, during that time there were always some people whose sensibilities were challenged by the idea of a woman as a successful political figure. It was reported that, on one occasion during a campaign speech, an angry woman from the audience interjected with the emphatic declaration aimed at Rankin: 'I wish you would get married!' to which Dame Annabelle replied sweetly: 'Madam, thank you so much for thinking so kindly of me. A number of people have said that to me, but they have always been men.' ¹⁶

Charming and measured responses such as that, coupled with the prevailing media and social etiquette of the time, guaranteed her a high level of respect from all sections of the media. It was perhaps this low-key image of respectable, compliant and somewhat mellow femininity that guaranteed that her elevation to the federal ministry in 1966 would attract little media interest, despite her being the first woman to achieve such political success. Even Brisbane's Courier-Mail failed to make much of the groundbreaking success of this Queenslander. In fact, the paucity of newspaper coverage of Rankin during the entirety of her political career hints at an overriding lack of interest in female politicians as a whole. It was only in the early 1980s, when she was an elderly retiree, that the media appeared to find her political life newsworthy, 17 and even then the focus took on the eerie tenor of preparations for an epitaph that would highlight the milestones of a female political 'pioneer'. The limited media coverage enjoyed by Rankin is unsurprising given that there is strong evidence to suggest that the media tend to pay little attention to female politicians unless they provide sufficient fodder for stories that promote them as being 'different' — that is, someone standing noticeably apart from the masculinity of political power and intrigue while also standing away from the conservative norms of traditional Australian femininity.

Fifty years on from the time when Dame Annabelle first entered federal parliament, Australian politics and society were very different. The number of female politicians had risen significantly, but they were still a minority; thus most were accustomed to being 'courted and feted' by the media in the hope of finding 'a touch of colour and difference in the "blokey" world of politics'. 18 All politicians were vulnerable to public scrutiny; however, in the case of women, that scrutiny had reached new levels of intrusive inquiry that made many of them very anxious about being too accessible to the media. It was a case of trying to balance the need for media coverage while simultaneously maintaining an acceptable level of personal dignity and privacy. The issue is a challenging one for all politicians, but arguably one that the media make even more difficult for women. Cheryl Kernot spoke of the real fears she held for her family and how she 'was stalked at home by the media [and] couldn't go out'19. This was in December 1997, soon after the Sydney Morning Herald had published a profile of Kernot headed, 'the other side of Saint Cheryl', in which her affair with a former pupil was revealed.²⁰ It did not seem to matter to the newspaper that the affair had been conducted more than 20 years earlier and well after the pupil-teacher relationship had ended. It was perhaps more than coincidental that the story went to press on the day Kernot was due to be preselected by Queensland Labor for the seat of Dickson.²¹

There is little doubt that the release of the story and its timing was politically motivated, but there appears to have been scant regard given to the Kernot family and the implications for the man involved and his family. There is also no doubt that the exposure of such a personal matter was damaging to Kernot, both personally and professionally. In the eyes of the media, and much of the Australian public, however, the revelations were justified because of her public position. She had crossed the female moral boundary by engaging in the affair and, in doing so, had — figuratively speaking — lost her 'sainthood' and became a 'sinner'. Nonetheless, by publishing the article, its author Paul McGeough and the Sydney Morning Herald had broken an unwritten rule concerning the secrets of Canberra. A succinct interpretation of the rule is 'don't ask, don't tell', especially when the topic concerns sexual secrets.²² If this was a case of breaking the rule in an attempt to score political advantage, then it was clearly a case of applying one rule to women and another to men. A decade earlier, Janine Haines suggested that many of her male political colleagues 'had a friend on the side', but 'observers turned a blind eye to male indiscretions on the grounds that it was acceptable. However women who engaged in similar behaviour were derided.'23

Thus the exposure of this very personal information about Kernot confirmed that the sexual double-standard in politics that Janine Haines had threatened to expose more than a decade earlier was alive and well in the corridors and bedchambers of Canberra. Moreover, it was a weapon with the potential to do much more harm to female politicians than to their male counterparts. Although Kernot survived that particular attack, she would find out only too well a few years later that the Australian media could be relentless in their pursuit of political scandals, particularly those involving women and sexual indiscretions.

On reflection, it must be assumed that the media were aware of this past imprudence at the time of Kernot's defection to the Labor Party in October that year, or — more likely — that they were aware of her continuing affair with Gareth Evans that had begun in 1994, and were seeking ways to discredit her in the public's imagination. Much of the media interest, and more particularly the political satirists, concentrated on producing representations of Kernot as a brazen seductress or a romantically desirable woman. She was variously drawn in cartoons that showed her in bed with Labor leaders Kim Beazley and Gareth Evans,²⁴ and as Juliet on the balcony being serenaded by the same two men.²⁵

Those representations were a long way from the media attention she received back in 1993 when she was then considered to be a rising star in the Democrats. At that time, political reporter Alan Ramsey sang her praises and publicly posed the question: 'Is this woman Australia's best politician?'26 Back then, the media treated her most sympathetically and continued to place a considerable amount of emphasis on her dual roles of politician and wife/mother. Kernot's domestic life regularly featured in commentary about her achievements and personality. For example, Janet Gibson, a reporter for Channel Nine's A Current Affair program, emphasised in a story at the time: 'Cheryl Kernot's idea of a personal victory is to be a good mother to 10-year-old daughter Sian.'27 Consequently, the public saw her

as an 'ordinary' wife and mother who managed those duties along with those that came with being a federal politician, and they embraced her for it.

This was, of course, three years prior to her carefully executed defection to the Labor Party in October 1997. The announcement of her move left even her own staffers shocked and surprised, and subsequently alienated many of her former supporters. The media were quick to seize the opportunity to lampoon the woman, conducting much of their 'comment' through cartoons heavy with sexually suggestive innuendo that suggested her wooing to the Labor Party involved something more than just political strategising. Many have argued, though, that Kernot was her own worst enemy and, as such, much of the unkind media treatment she received was stimulated by her own actions.

The following year, in March 1998, she suffered a most vicious personal attack from Liberal backbencher Don Randall. Randall claimed that Kernot was having an affair with Gareth Evans and sullied her reputation with the words: 'She is about as honest as Christopher Skase and Nick Bolkus, she is about as loyal as Benedict Arnold, and has the morals of an alley cat on heat.'28 The allegations were not only stinging, but they struck directly at two of the most fundamental beliefs about women. First, that they are inherently more honest and trustworthy than men; and second, that society expects 'decent' women to hold, and adhere to, unassailable moral values. Randall was subsequently forced to publicly apologise. However, in light of the allegations, Kernot's later appearance on the cover of the Australian Women's Weekly dressed in bordello-like attire of a shimmering red evening gown replete with a feather boa might be considered a huge error of judgment that only served to damage her reputation for integrity and effectiveness as a female politician.²⁹ Clearly political cartoonist Nicholson thought so. His characterisation of her as a seductress included the reference 'with apologies to Mae West' and showed Kernot uttering the sexually suggestive line: 'Is that a policy in your pocket or are you just pleased so see me?'30

Whether Kernot was her own worst enemy or not became a subject of heated debate following the 2002 public disclosure of her five-year affair with Gareth Evans.31 Her adulterous relationship with one of the Labor Party's most senior men was certainly newsworthy, and it cannot be denied that the revelation was certainly a catalyst for the media's turn against Kernot. Comments from all quarters were scathing, often offensive, and certainly very personal and demeaning. Much was made of the problem caused by Kernot allowing political life to be clouded by personal issues. Nevertheless, Gareth Evans escaped such harsh judgment — even though he was a willing participant in the affair and, more importantly, had misled Parliament by denying Randall's allegations at the time they were raised. There were few reports in the mainstream media admonishing him for his actions, and satirical media comment was relatively scarce in comparison to that meted out to Kernot. One of the most amusing was that of an image of Christine Keeler sitting provocatively on a chair. Her face had been digitally altered to replace Keeler's face with that of Evans, thereby intimating that Evans was a masculine version of Keeler, and thus a protagonist in the whole political (and personal) affair. The image was accessible to thousands of people through its posting on an internet site, but it was not published in the print media.

Many argue that gender was not the main issue, however, and that 'Cheryl was on a suicide mission the minute she went to the Labor Party'. That may have been the case. Nevertheless, the imbalance of media coverage given to the two central characters in the illicit affair would suggest that gender *did* play a significant part in the production of negative media representations of Kernot. By 2002, she really had travelled the political road from saint to sinner.

That brings us back to Pauline Hanson, who has also been placed in the opposing camps of 'saints' and 'sinners', but for different reasons. Like Kernot, Hanson has also been caricatured and vilified in the media in ways that are very different to those experienced by male politicians. As mentioned earlier, she was a very different type of woman to that the Australian media associated with political life. She was a single parent and small business owner from a working-class area — a modern day Aussie battler. That image was supported by her personality and public persona, in that she lacked the poise, finesse and well thought-out articulate speech Australians expected from their political candidates. She was, in effect, a type of 'anti-politician' whose views struck a chord with many Australians. Hanson was a political enigma whose public avowals brought many to the verge of laughter or rage, but thousands of others to their feet in a sign of congratulation and approval.

Her political naiveté and often nervous public appearances saw her labelled by many as a 'bumbling political amateur',³³ but she appealed to many others who saw her as a crusader. This was one of the reasons why the continued negative publicity Hanson received in the media only seemed to enhance her public support.³⁴ A large proportion of that support came from men, especially those living in rural areas. Journalist Nicolas Rothwell acknowledged her appeal when he stated: 'Don't overlook or deny the most obvious thing about Pauline Hanson. In the eyes of many, she is an attractive, sexually alluring woman ...'³⁵ Similarly, the historian Marilyn Lake emphasised her popularity with a significant number of Australian men when she declared:

When feminists advocate the election of more women to parliament, we can be sure they don't have women like Pauline Hanson in mind ... it is men who comprise the majority of her candidates — and it is men who fall at her feet and sweep her up into their virile arms. Make no mistake, Pauline Hanson is a man's woman.³⁶

Subsequently, while Hanson was constantly attacked in the media for trumpeting simplistic and racist policies, there were thousands of people — and particularly men — across Australia who listened eagerly to what she had to say. For the media, Hanson's novelty value, overt sexuality, controversial attitudes and simplistic approach to complex issues proved irresistible to journalists.³⁷ Her response of 'please explain' to a journalist who suggested her views were xenophobic became part of everyday parlance, and was even included in a rap song along with the words, 'I don't like it' — another phrase taken from a Hanson media interview.

As Marilyn Lake deftly argues: 'Hanson intrigued the media because of her sexual difference from men; as a woman, she functioned as "other"; however, she demonstrated the shaky voice of a vulnerable woman, flaunted her sexuality and combined her obvious femininity with a strong character.³⁸ Even during her Queensland state election campaign in 2001, when one would have thought her energies would have been concentrated on political matters, she made the interesting and decidedly non-political disclosure that she was planning to launch her own fashion label.³⁹ She certainly was a hard one for the media to pigeonhole.

Clearly, then, gender played a big part in the rise of Hanson and her elevation to celebrity status. Media reporting of 1998 and 2001 Queensland state elections charts her rise to celebrity status. Nevertheless, the media's preoccupation with Hanson failed to deliver her the support necessary for a sustained political career. Media coverage of Hanson generally ignored constructive discussion of important political issues, preferring to denounce outright her policies and ridicule her simplistic approach to complex issues. This is not to argue that Hanson was an erudite politician, but it demonstrates the inability of the media to go past her gender and perceived feminine naiveté to recognise her potential as a genuine political force in the country. They concentrated instead on her personality, 40 and used her physical appearance and amateurish public performances to continually parody her. This same type of treatment is rarely directed towards male public figures, and much less towards men in Australian politics. Although Hanson's political fame shone brightly for a short time, she failed to harvest the initial groundswell of grassroots support. Her success, though short-lived, was certainly remarkable given the widespread condemnation she received in the mainstream media.

Interestingly, Hanson has risen from the ashes of a demolished political career and a gaol term to once again emerge as a celebrity. She has harnessed the continuing media interest in her on a personal level to project a new, softer and even more feminine image than before. In women's magazines, she appears modelling designer clothes and speaking of her latest romance. In the popular television show *Dancing with the Stars*, she demonstrates that she still has a strong element of determination and the 'have a go spirit' by learning physically demanding ballroom dancing routines to be judged, often mercilessly, in front of the Australian public. Hanson has thus reinvigorated her celebrity status by stepping away from her image as a crusading politician and reinventing herself as an interesting but strong and desirable woman.

In conclusion, I would like to refer to a comment made by Amanda Vanstone. A few years ago, Vanstone told the media that 'any woman could succeed in politics if they had the right stuff even though there were cultural differences between men and women'. I would suggest that Vanstone is only partly correct. Perhaps it would be easier for women to succeed in the masculine world of politics if it was also the responsibility of the media to consider 'the right stuff' in terms of their representation of political women, and discard the gendered dichotomy that threatens equal, open and fair comment regardless of gender.

Notes

- Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 15 September 1998: 1, 4.
- ² Courier-Mail (Brisbane), 4 March 1996: 3.
- 3 Courier-Mail, 4 March 1996: 3.
- ⁴ Pauline Hanson, maiden speech in federal Parliament, 10 September 1996.
- ⁵ Hanson, maiden speech.
- 6 Cathy Jenkins, 'The More Things Change: Women, Politics and the Press in Australia', Ejournalist. 2(1) (2002): 2.
- Jenkins' study covers the period beginning with Edith Cowan in 1921 and ends with Joan Kirner in 1990, but also considers more recent coverage.
- ⁸ Jenkins, 'The More Things Change': 6.
- Private lives were defined as those covering: spouse, children, relatives, physical appearance, dress, personality, age and background. Public lives were defined as those issues relating to: education, work or profession, community, politics and sport.
- Jenkins, 'The More Things Change': 14.
- Elizabeth van Acker, 'Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests: Saviours, "Sinners" and "Stars", paper delivered at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 29 September-1 October 2003: 3.
- van Acker, 'Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests': 2.
- Pippa Norris, 'Women Leaders Worldwide: A Splash of Color in the Photo Op', in Pippa Norris (ed.), Women, Media and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 161.
- Julia Baird, Media Tarts: How The Australian Press Frames Female Politicians (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2004): 2.
- 15 Courier-Mail, 8 August 1980.
- Leigh Young review of Waveney Browne, A Woman of Distinction (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1981) in Courier-Mail, 19 September 1981.
- 17 See, for example: Courier Mail, 24 March 1980, 19 September 1981, 8 December 1982, funeral notice 1 September 1986, and 2 April 1987.
- 18 Baird, Media Tarts: 1.
- 19 Cheryl Kernot, cited in Karen Ross, Women, Politics, Media (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002): 103.
- Paul McGeough, 'The Other Side of Saint Cheryl', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 1997.
- Baird, Media Tarts: 173.
- See Rhonda Breit, John Harrison, Martin Hirst, Trina McLellan and Desley Barlett, 'Ethics in Journalism and Cheryl Kernot: A Colloquium', Australian Studies in Journalism, 10-11 (2001-02): 33-57.
- Baird, Media Tarts: 201.
- Weekend Australian, 18-19 October 1997: 2.
- 25 Australian, 16 October 1997: 3.
- Ramsey, cited in Baird, Media Tarts: 167.
- Martin Hirst in Breit et al, p. 47.
- Don Randall, Adjournment debate in Parliament, 12 March 1998 cited in Hirst, 'the domestication of a 'feral' Cheryl in Breit et al, 'Ethics in Journalism and Cheryl Kernot': 44-45.
- van Acker, 'Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests': 11.
- ³⁰ Cartoon cited in 'Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests': 11.
- Rosemary Neill, 'Affair Exposes Double Standard', Australian, 5 July 2002: 11.
- 32 Christine Wallace, cited in Baird, Media Tarts: 181.

- Bruce Johnson, 'Two Paulines, Two Nations: An Australian Case Study in the Intersection of Popular Music and Politics', *Popular Music and Society*, 23(1) (2003): 54.
- ³⁴ Catherine Lumby, Gotcha: Life in a Tabloid Word (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999).
- Nicolas Rothwell, 'Thirteen Ways Not to Think About Pauline Hanson', in Tony Abbott et al. (eds), *Two Nations* (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1998): 161–68.
- Marilyn Lake, 'Pauline Hanson: Virago in Parliament, Viagra in the Bush', in Abbott et al., Two Nations: 114.
- van Acker, 'Media Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests': 13.
- 38 Marilyn Lake cited in van Acker, 'Media Portrayals of Politicians and Women's Interests': 13.
- ³⁹ Jenkins, 'The More Things Change': 20.
- Peter Clack, 'Hanson Savaged, Cheated by Relentless Media Ridicule', Australasian Business Intelligence, 20 January 2002.
- Sunday Mail (Brisbane), 30 June 2002.