

## **From ladies in waiting to women in power? Women in executive government in Australasia**

Marian Sawer and Jennifer Curtin<sup>1</sup>  
Australian National University and University of Auckland  
[marian.sawer@anu.edu.au](mailto:marian.sawer@anu.edu.au), [j.curtin@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.curtin@auckland.ac.nz)

This paper describes and compares women's gradual entry into executive government in Australia and New Zealand. Despite the fact that both countries were pioneers of women's political rights, it was not until the 1980s that all-male Cabinets were popularly perceived as odd and unrepresentative. Since then the Labour Parties of both countries, and the mobilisation of women within and around them, have been largely responsible for the increased presence of women in parliament and in Cabinet. Historically Australasia has been known for its 'democratic experiments' and one of these has been the election of ministers in Labour governments by Labour members of parliament. Conservative leaders follow the more usual international practice of choosing their ministers, who as with Labour, now include an increased proportion of women.

In educational and occupational terms, women ministers increasingly come from similar backgrounds to their male colleagues. This does not mean, however, that they are allocated similar portfolios. Women still disproportionately hold nurturing portfolios such as education and health. The holding of such portfolios has not proved a barrier to the achievement of leadership positions, but there is a tendency for women to inherit such leadership when their government is in trouble and in urgent need of 'rebranding'. Feminist ministers and heads of government in both countries have been identified as critical actors who have introduced measures to promote gender equality. For this pattern to continue into the future, however, there is a need for a clear constituency for such measures, which are often introduced at a political price. This paper is largely based on a snapshot of women in executive government in the ten Australasian jurisdictions (nine Australian and one New Zealand) in 2009 and comparisons with data from an earlier survey. However, some note is made of subsequent developments, such as the accession of Australia's first women prime minister in 2010.

---

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Gillian Evans, Kirsty McLaren and the Parliamentary Library for their assistance in compiling the Australian data.

## Background

Australia and New Zealand share a common political inheritance as former British colonies on the other side of the world to the 'mother country.' By the end of the nineteenth century they had gained a reputation as advanced democracies, with votes for all women in New Zealand in 1893 and in South Australia in 1894. By 1902 most women (c. 99 per cent) became eligible to vote and stand for parliament nationally in Australia – there had been slippage in relation to Indigenous voters in the 1902 *Commonwealth Franchise Act*.

While having much in common, politically and culturally, the traditional Westminster system evolved in different ways in the two countries: New Zealand has a classic unitary system and a unicameral parliament while Australia has a federal system of government and bicameralism both at the federal level and in five of its six States. Australia began experimenting with proportional representation (PR) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and all of its bicameral parliaments use PR for the election of one of their chambers. New Zealand stayed with single-member constituencies until 1996, when it moved to a mixed-member proportional system (MMP) and multi-party governments. Historically, the basic political cleavage in both countries has been between Labour<sup>2</sup> and conservative parties. Inherited party loyalties have been strong until relatively recently, when there has been a weakening of party identification in both countries and increased volatility and drift among young voters to parties such as the Greens. Despite increased fragmentation of the party system, particularly in New Zealand, long-standing Labour and non-Labour parties are still the major players in government formation. In New Zealand the dominant conservative party is the National Party, while in Australia it is the Liberal Party of Australia, which at the federal level is usually in coalition with the rural-based Nationals.

In the Westminster tradition, all ministers must be elected members of parliament. Where there are upper houses, as in Australia, governments are formed in the lower house but ministers also come from the upper house. For example, at the federal level about a third of the ministry generally come from the Senate. By convention, political parties control the method of Cabinet selection and this may differ across parties. On the

---

<sup>2</sup> The spelling of 'Labor' differs in the two countries, with the Australian Labor Party dropping the 'u' while the New Zealand Labour Party has retained it. Where the parties are referred to collectively, the original spelling is used for the sake of convenience.

conservative side, party leaders appoint all ministers (or shadow ministers) and allocate their portfolios. However, where conservative parties are in coalition, the leader of the junior party or parties will nominate who is to fill their positions. Labour parliamentary parties in both countries have been notable for electing their front bench, although the leader allocates portfolios. From 2007 the Australian Labor Party started moving away from the principle of election of the ministry by the parliamentary party, but Australian Prime Ministers still need to accommodate factional preferences as well as the concerns with geographical representation that are usually a factor both in federal and in unitary systems. Gender became a significant consideration from the 1970s and in New Zealand the inclusion of Maori became salient at the same time. In New Zealand Labor leaders could issue 'guiding principles' to influence the choices of the parliamentary party (McLeay 1995: 62).

In Australia, at the federal level there has generally been a two-tier ministry since 1956, with not all ministers in Cabinet. Usually there will be about 20 ministers in Cabinet, with another 10 outside. Women are consistently better represented in the ministry as a whole than in Cabinet, although the difference is usually slight (for example, 23 per cent versus 20 per cent after the 2007 election) At the State level all ministers are still included in Cabinet. In New Zealand, the use of outer-ministries took hold in the mid-1980s and while several women began their executive careers in this way, the process has been complicated with the adoption of MMP, with outer-ministries being allocated to minor-party members of parliament (MPs) as an aspect of the coalition formation process. As at the federal level in Australia, in New Zealand there are generally about 20 ministers in Cabinet and a maximum of six outside.

### **Evolution of women's presence in the Australian and New Zealand executives**

It took a long time in both Australia and New Zealand before the absence of women from parliament and from executive government became widely regarded as a 'democratic deficit'. Despite the mobilisation of women during the Second World War, when many gained leadership experience, the post-war period saw a reaffirmation of the priority of domestic roles. When women did start entering Cabinets in the 1940s the pattern differed in Australia and New Zealand and these histories will be dealt with separately here.

In Australia the first women to gain ministerial office were all from the conservative side of politics and there were only eight of them in the whole period from 1947–79. The first was Florence Cardell-Oliver, appointed to the Western Australian Cabinet in 1947 in an honorary capacity but given a full ministerial portfolio after two years. She had been involved in campaigning for free milk and as Minister for Health was able to introduce free milk for Western Australian school children. The next was Dame Enid Lyons, appointed to federal Cabinet in 1949, also in an honorary capacity. She was the widow of a former Labor Premier who had become a conservative Prime Minister. She had won a party room battle to extend childhood endowment policy to first children, a popular election policy that assisted the conservatives to present themselves as the party of the family (Lyons 1972: 107, 109). When appointed as a Cabinet Minister, Lyons remarked that, in the absence of a portfolio, she was in Cabinet ‘to pour the tea’.

The pattern of Conservative pre-eminence in bringing women into government changed dramatically in the 1980s, a decade in which the mobilisation of women in the 1970s made its mark in the Labor Party and Labor women started to enter parliament in a more permanent way. Between 1980 and 1989, 28 women were appointed as ministers in contrast to the eight women appointed in the previous 30 years (Black 1996: 39). Of the 28 appointed in the 1980s, the vast majority (25) were from the Labor Party.

The consciousness-raising of the 1970s and the increased presence of women in parliaments in the 1980s began to make all-male Cabinets look odd and unrepresentative. One effect of this raised consciousness was that women became 'over-represented' in Cabinets relative to their parliamentary representation. Jeremy Moon and Imogen Fountain, in their pioneering study of women as ministers in Australia, calculated that women constituted 14 per cent of parliamentarians but 20 per cent of ministers at the State level in 1992 (Moon and Fountain 1997: 458). Such over-representation no longer existed in 2009, when women were under-represented in ministerial positions overall, despite some exceptions (see Table 2). The following tables present data on women in the ministry as a whole rather than just in Cabinet, in the interests of comparability with the earlier study.

\* Table 2 about here \*

In 2009 women parliamentarians were under-represented in the ministry in six of the nine jurisdictions and significantly under-represented in one (Western Australia). If we look more closely at the latter case, however, we find that women make up only 17.5 per cent of the parliamentary Liberal Party, the dominant partner in the Coalition Government (as against 17.6 per cent of the ministry). This reminds us that in parliamentary systems the pool of eligibles for appointment to the ministry consists in members of the governing party or parties, not members of parliament as a whole. The reason for the great disparity between parliamentary presence and presence in the ministry in Western Australia is that the parties with comparatively high representation of women (the ALP and the Greens) are not in government.

There has been a great increase in the numbers of women in parliament, largely due to the quotas adopted by the ALP in 1994. The Labor Party has also been responsible for the entry of Indigenous women both into parliaments and into Cabinets. The first Indigenous women were only elected to parliament in 2001, but by 2008 they had entered Cabinet in both NSW and the Northern Territory and in the Northern Territory an Indigenous woman (Marion Scrymgour) was Deputy Chief Minister. In terms of other forms of diversity, women from non-English-speaking backgrounds have been elected for both Labor and non-Labor parties, although it was the federal Labor Government elected in 2007 that made another breakthrough. It included a woman Cabinet member (Senator Penny Wong) who combined two 'firsts', being both an Asian-Australian and an 'out' lesbian.

Because the conservative parties in Australia have been putting fewer women into parliament, a conservative coalition government, such as that elected in Western Australia in 2008, will have fewer women in its parliamentary party to draw on for its ministry. On the other hand, if we compare the presence of women in Labor ministries to their presence in the pool from which such ministries are drawn, rather than to their presence in parliament as a whole, the degree of under-representation is even more significant (see Table 2). While quotas oblige the party factions to preselect women for parliament, they do not apply to the selection of the ministry, a process still largely controlled by the factions.

In New Zealand there was also a slow start to the entry of women into executive government. Only three women ministers were appointed during the period up to 1979, but unlike in Australia, where all ministers appointed in this period were from the conservative side of politics, in New Zealand two out of three were Labour. For example, Mabel Howard became New Zealand's first women Cabinet Minister in 1947, after only four years in parliament. She was Minister of Health and Child Welfare until Labour lost the election in 1949. When Labour returned to power in 1957 Mabel Howard was still a parliamentarian, and was made Minister of Social Security and Minister in Charge of the Welfare of Women and Children. Meanwhile, Hilda Ross, a National Party MP, had become New Zealand's second woman Cabinet Minister in 1949, also after only four years in parliament and, like Howard, was given responsibility for the welfare of women and children, and later, social security. In 1972, the first Maori woman minister, Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, was made Minister of Tourism, Associate Minister of Social Welfare and Minister for the Environment in the Labour Government. She remains the longest-serving woman parliamentarian, with 29 years in parliament from 1967 to 1996.

Despite the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s, the National Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, maintained an all-male cabinet throughout National's nine-year period in government (1975–1984). It was not until the election of a Labour government in 1984 that any further women ministers were appointed. Since 1984, 32 women have served as ministers in New Zealand.

Political scientists Rebecca Davis (1997: 76) and Alan Siaroff (2000: 198) argue that women's best chance of being in Cabinet is immediately following an election. The data in Table 3 reflects this approach: only post-election Cabinet appointments have been counted, with the results of reshuffles between elections excluded. And, in contrast to the Australian data, these figures represent only women in Cabinet and do not include ministers outside Cabinet.

\* Table 3 about here \*

Just as there has been a steady increase in women's parliamentary representation over the past 25 years in New Zealand, so too can we see an increase in proportion of women in Cabinet over the same period. And, just as Labour is credited with driving the increase in the former, so too have they been responsible for pushing up the percentage of women ministers. The first significant rise occurred in 1984 with the election of the

fourth Labour Government, and the proportion increased further with Labour's re-election in 1987. The National government elected in 1990 included two women in its Cabinet, one of whom was Finance Minister. But it is not until Labour became the Government in 1999 that we see another significant increase in women's ministerial presence.

The 'over-representation' of women ministers evident in Australia in the earlier period, is not a feature of the New Zealand executive. Only in 1999 and 2002 do we see a higher proportion of women in Cabinet than the proportion of women in parliament. This outcome has two likely explanations. First, women in the Labour Party have, since the late 1970s, sought to ensure that women candidates are selected for safe seats to enable them a chance to build a political career. This progress was augmented by the introduction of MMP, which enabled more Labour women to enter parliament via the party's list. These women provided the incoming Labour government in 1999 with a core group of experienced women able to take up positions in Cabinet.

Second, Rebecca Davis (1997: 19-20) finds that there is a correlation between women Prime Ministers and the proportion of women Cabinet ministers. However, to date there have been too few women leaders at the cross-national level to test whether this is a causal relationship. (but see in this volume the chapter on Latin America).<sup>3</sup> For example, Norway's Gro Harlem Brundtland was known for her commitment to the appointment of women (as was Chile's Michelle Bachelet more recently), but UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, by contrast, was the only woman in her cabinet. In New Zealand, Helen Clark's first Cabinet included seven women, but Jenny Shipley's included only one other woman. Yet, given Shipley could choose her Cabinet, while Clark could not, what does this tell us about women leaders selecting women Ministers? Certainly it is the case that the Labour Party's 'participatory' convention meant Helen Clark could not select her own Cabinet. However, her support of women's representation was well known by women in caucus, and Labour's 'representative' convention of ensuring Maori and women be elected to Cabinet was upheld during her term in office. In addition, the norm of Labour leaders making their caucus colleagues aware of their ministerial

---

<sup>3</sup> Bochel and Bochel (2008: 431) find a statistically significant relationship between the sex of the council leader and the proportion of council cabinets who are women. However, not all council leaders have the power to choose their cabinet, so it remains unclear whether the sex of the leader is the determining factor.

preferences, through informal channels, meant Clark no doubt had some indirect influence on Cabinet selection.

Since 2002, the proportion of women in the New Zealand Cabinet has plateaued at 30 per cent, while the proportion of women in parliament has continued to increase, once again leading to an 'under-representation' of women in the executive compared to the legislature. One interesting feature is that with the election of the National government, the proportion of women in cabinet has not declined (unlike past years). This suggests that a contagion effect between Labour and National in terms of women's representation, the beginnings of which emerged in the 1990s, has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A question which inspires several studies on women's participation in the executives concerns the portfolios women held. What of the other major finding of Moon and Fountain (1997); that women tend to be over-represented in welfare portfolios? We shall follow the categorisation of portfolios used by Moon and Fountain to compare the situation in 1997 and today. They use a categorisation based on that used by Richard Rose (1976) to differentiate three types of government activity. First *defining* activity, which includes defence of territorial integrity, maintenance of internal order and the mobilisation of finance (to which we would add the co-ordinating of government). Second, the mobilisation of *physical resources* (such as roads, railways, communications). Third, *social* portfolios attending to the well-being of citizens (including education, labour, health, welfare and culture).

It should be noted, though, that this categorisation is unavoidably approximate. Many portfolios encompass more than one of Rose's general types of government activity.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many ministers, especially in the smaller Australian States and Territories, hold multiple portfolios. We have classed these ministers according to their first-listed portfolio, which has led to a slight over-emphasis on the number of state-defining portfolios. For instance, Katy Gallagher, the ACT Treasurer, also holds the portfolio of

---

<sup>4</sup> We have been guided by Moon and Fountain's decisions on difficult cases, but have made different decisions where the focus of activity or the boundaries between portfolios have changed. Thus, while Moon and Fountain designated the environment a 'resources' area, we have classified the current federal portfolio of Environment, Heritage and the Arts as 'well-being'.

Health and Industrial Relations (from November 2009), but is counted only as 'state-defining'.

Moon and Fountain show that over a span of 26 years (1970–1996) women held a disproportionate share of the social portfolios, most markedly at the Commonwealth level. So while governments became relatively keen to have some female presence in their ministries, this was still largely confined to the nurturing portfolios as was the case around the world as women first entered executive government. In 2009 women held the education portfolios in five of the nine Australian jurisdictions and their experience at Commonwealth/State ministerial meetings could approximate that of an Irish Minister of Education at intergovernmental meetings in the European Union: 'I can go to a European Council meeting now, and all the Education Ministers are women. It's a kind of branding almost' (quoted in Sykes 2009: 40). Women have also been disproportionately allocated health portfolios in Australia, and in 2009 held such portfolios in five of the nine jurisdictions (although not the same five where they held the Education portfolio). As we shall see below, holding social portfolios has not necessarily been a barrier to high office. In 2009 two women Deputy Premiers and one woman Deputy Chief Minister held health portfolios, an indication of the political sensitivity of this portfolio with its 'hot button' issues such as waiting times for surgery.

\* Figure 1 about here \*

What is interesting is the extent to which this gender stereotyping of portfolios persists and how it corresponds to gender differences in issue priorities expressed by women voters. We have already seen there has been a substantial increase in the number of women in the 'pool' from which Labor ministries are drawn. Increasingly women also come from similar backgrounds to their male colleagues, most manifestly coming from backgrounds in paid political work whether for Labor politicians or unions and often having law degrees.

Despite these increased similarities in occupational backgrounds women are still unlikely to be allocated the same kind of portfolios as their male colleagues. The evidence is that women are still disproportionately represented in the social portfolios. In 2009 wellbeing or social portfolios made up 34 per cent of all portfolios in Commonwealth,

State and Territory governments, but 59 per cent of the portfolios held by women (Figure 1). As in the earlier period, in 2009 women were significantly more over-represented in social portfolios at the Commonwealth level than at the State level.

One of the issues for women has been the way their entry into executive government and responsibility for 'big-spending' departments has coincided with discursive shifts in the English-speaking democracies towards neo-liberalism and demands for cuts in public expenditure (Sykes 2009). Although allocated 'nurturing' portfolios women have had to take responsibility for such cuts or else lose favour with their colleagues. In Australia Senator Susan Ryan's resistance to cuts while Education Minister in the 1980s speeded her political demise. On the other hand, one study of OECD countries has found that the allocation of social portfolios to women has generally resulted in more women-friendly social policy (Atchison and Down 2009: 17).

While over-represented in social portfolios, women remain particularly under-represented in 'defining' (security, defence, economic) portfolios. These portfolios made up 29 per cent of all portfolios in Australia but 14 per cent of those held by women. At the Commonwealth level the disparity was even greater in 2009, with no women holding 'defining' portfolios. It should be noted that at this level of government it has been the conservative parties that have been somewhat more inclined to appoint women to economic portfolios (for example, Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, Minister for Finance 1980–83, Senator Helen Coonan, Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer, 2001–04). The reason may be a combination of the professional backgrounds of the women concerned and their pursuit of such portfolios.

In terms of the third category of portfolios, resource mobilisation, there was slightly more gender balance. This category is more important at the State than at the Commonwealth level, and makes up 38 per cent of all portfolios and 28 per cent of those held by women (see Figure 1).

Despite assumptions that social portfolios are 'soft' and of low prestige, the holding of such portfolios has not necessarily posed a barrier to women becoming head of government. The first woman to become a head of government in Australia was Rosemary Follett in the Australian Capital Territory in 1989, at the first election after the

achievement of self government. She held the non-traditional positions of Treasurer and Attorney-General in addition to that of Chief Minister and was the first woman to attend a Premiers' Conference, after 88 years of federation. However, the next women to become heads of government were Dr Carmen Lawrence in Western Australia in 1990 and Joan Kirner in Victoria in the same year. They held the more traditional Education portfolios at the time they became Premier. They both inherited governments that were in deep trouble and in urgent need of a new look. Both women lost their first election as Premier, thanks to the political damage their governments had sustained before they took office, for example, financial mismanagement in Victoria and serious corruption scandals in Western Australia.

The first woman to be elected as a State Premier was Anna Bligh in Queensland, who became Premier in 2007 and won the State election of 2009. She had held the Education portfolio for almost five years before taking on economic portfolios when she became Deputy Premier. Women Chief Ministers had successfully contested elections in the two territories, including Clare Martin who led the Labor party to victory for the first time in 23 years of self-government in the Northern Territory. All women heads of government in Australia have led Labor governments, with one exception in the Australian Capital Territory. In 2009 Kristina Keneally, became Labor Premier in NSW in similar circumstances to her predecessors in Western Australia and Victoria – a Labor government that was in deep trouble due to mismanagement and corruption scandals.

In New Zealand, as in Australia, women have always been more likely to hold social rather than defining portfolios (Figure 3), and they almost never hold resource portfolios. It does appear that as the number of women in Cabinet increases, so does the range of portfolio allocations (although this has not been the case with the most recent National government, with five of the six portfolios held by women defined as social). And, over the past 25 years a smattering of women have held key defining portfolios: Ann Hercus was Labour minister for Police as well as Welfare between 1984 and 1987, Ruth Richardson was National's Finance Minister between 1990 and 1993 and, in the current National Government, Judith Collins is ranked sixth in the Cabinet line-up as Minister of Police.

\* Insert Figure 2 about here \*

Moreover, just as is the case in Australia, being responsible for social portfolios does not preclude women becoming head of government. In 1997 Jenny Shipley took over the leadership of the governing conservative National Party to become New Zealand's first Prime Minister, even though her ministerial experience was in Health and Women's Affairs. Helen Clark's rise as leader was more incremental; she became a minister in 1987, Deputy Prime Minister in 1989 and Labour Leader in 1993. During this time her portfolio responsibilities were also predominantly social: labour, housing and health. In 1999, New Zealand experienced an internationally unusual election campaign where the two major parties were both led by women. Most media reported that the 'gender factor' had been neutralised as a consequence – that is, because both leaders were women there was little media focus on their gender during the campaign (Curtin 1997). Helen Clark won the 1999 election and went on to become New Zealand's longest-serving Labour Leader.

While categorisation of portfolios is a useful means for analysing the position of women in executives, it is also the case that Cabinet positions are informally ranked, with portfolios such as finance, national security and foreign affairs having significantly more weight and prestige than what are often considered softer or more traditionally 'women's' portfolios, such as health and welfare. But portfolio ranking also depends on the national context, the particular government's agenda, the size of the budget allocation, and the personalities involved. Certainly finance would always be central to a government's platform, but in New Zealand, defence ranks lower than trade and police while the health portfolio always ranks in the top six. Over the past ten years the Attorney-General and Treaty of Waitangi portfolio has been ranked as high as fifth and was a portfolio held by Margaret Wilson before she went on to become New Zealand's first woman Speaker of the House.

Formally, the head of executive government in both Australia and New Zealand is the Governor General (representing the Queen) and, at the State level in Australia, the Governor. The first woman Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, did not take office in Australia until 2008, 18 years after Dame Catherine Tizard had become New Zealand Governor General. New Zealand's second woman Governor General, Dame Silvia Cartwright, was appointed in 2001. Up until now, it has been Labour Governments in

both New Zealand and Australia that have been responsible for all appointments of women as governors, with one exception in South Australia.

### **Factors explaining women's access to the executive**

In both Australia and New Zealand political parties are the key to access to executive positions and we would expect parties of the Left to have a greater commitment to all forms of social equality, including gender equality, than parties on the Right. However an 'in principle' commitment to equality may be complicated by industrial unionism and religious ideology. In both countries Labour parties were created as the political arm of the trade unions and focused on the achievement and protection of a family wage, sufficient for a male breadwinner to be able to support a wife and children at home. While the focus on the male breadwinner created obstacles to women's equality, these obstacles were overcome more readily in New Zealand than in Australia, where Catholic family ideology resulted in barriers for women such as the marriage bar in public sector employment, lasting for much longer. New Zealand Labour lacked the Irish Catholic 'machine' politics and strongly institutionalised factional system found in the Australian labour movement and was historically more open to standing women as candidates. While only six women were elected to parliament between 1933 and 1946, four were from the Labour Party and at no time since 1946 has the number of National women elected exceeded the number of Labour women politicians (Curtin 2008a).

In both countries it was women's movement mobilisations in the 1970s that brought about major changes and it was the Labour parties that were more responsive to the new social movements than their conservative counterparts. In both countries Labour women campaigned for party reform in the wake of crushing electoral defeats and Labour women's organisations were reinvigorated and/or new ones created. In New Zealand the women-only branches established at the time of the party's founding are still a feature of the party today (Devere and Curtin, 2009). The relative absence of strongly institutionalised factions in the New Zealand Labour Party meant that progress was smoother and the Labour Women's Council began to play a significant role in party policy-making (Curtin 2008b). It provided the leverage that enabled the feminisation of the party: three different women held the position of party president from 1986 and by

the late 1990s women formed a majority of party membership (Grey and Sawyer 2005, 180).

In Australia Labor women had to contend with strongly entrenched factional power structures; careers in the party depended on factional support. The factions were largely controlled by men, although women relatives of factional leaders sometimes played trusted roles. Long-established and vigorous women's organisations in the party could fall victim to factional warfare, as when the left-dominated NSW Labor Women's Committee was abolished by a right-dominated State Executive, after existing for more than 80 years. However, although women were divided by factional loyalties, they did develop cross-factional campaigns for quotas that would apply both to the party organisation and to party preselections. Quotas were first achieved on a voluntary basis in 1981 but progress was very patchy; there was another campaign resulting, in 1994, in mandatory quotas: preselections would be nullified and reopened by the national executive if quotas were not fulfilled. As a result of these gains by Labor women, reinforced by the creation of the feminist ginger group, EMILY's List (see below), the ALP now puts far more women into parliament and into ministries than does the conservative side of politics. However, as we have seen, there is a shortfall of women in Labor ministries as quotas do not extend to this level.

Another variable affecting the entry of women into parliament and hence into the pool for ministerial positions is the electoral system. In Australia women have generally been better represented in houses of parliament elected by PR than those elected from single-member electorates, as clearly seen in the contrast between women's representation in the Senate (elected by PR) and in the House of Representatives. Women have always been better represented in the Senate and it has provided the same number of women Cabinet Ministers as the House of Representatives, despite being the smaller house from which only a third of the ministry is usually appointed. Hence PR in the Senate has been an important pathway for women into the Executive. In general, it can be argued that bicameralism and federalism provide additional pathways to executive office; it should be noted that in Australia women have held a higher proportion of ministries at the subnational than at the national level, including the position of head of government.

The picture in New Zealand is somewhat more complex. In classical Westminster mode, New Zealand had a first-past-the-post electoral system until 1996. However, despite the first-past-the-post electoral system being renowned for constraining women's electoral opportunities, New Zealand was exceptional in electing comparatively high numbers of women. Prior to the first MMP election in 1996, women's representation had already reached 21 per cent without the adoption of party gender quotas. With the adoption of MMP in 1996, the representation of women in parliament increased to 28.3 per cent and in 2008 reached a high of 34 per cent. The entry of large numbers of women did not require party quotas, as in Australia, but rather owed much to the feminisation of the New Zealand Labour Party. However, the rise in women's parliamentary presence in 1996 did not have an immediate impact on women's representation in Cabinet. The latter increased significantly only after the election of a Labour-led government in 1999. This reflects Siaroff (2000, 209) and Davis' (1997: 88) findings that while increasing the number of women in parliament matters to women's access to Cabinet, the relationship is also influenced by which party is in government.

It is also worth noting that New Zealand's parliament has been more open to its Indigenous people than its Australian counterpart. Four electorates reserved for Maori were established in 1867 and when women were granted the vote in 1893, this right applied to all women, including Maori. The first Maori woman MP Iriana Ratana, was elected in 1947 to represent one of the four Maori electorates. Since then, Maori women have increased their presence in parliament, representing both general and Maori electorates and, with the advent of MMP, have pursued political representation through a wider range of parties, including the newly established Maori Party (2005). Currently (2009) there is one Maori woman in the New Zealand Cabinet and one, the co-leader of the Maori Party, in the outer ministry. By contrast there has never been an Indigenous woman in the Australian federal parliament or ministry, although there have been Indigenous women in the Northern Territory Cabinet since 2003 and one in the NSW Cabinet since 2007.

### **Do women in the executive represent women?**

It can be argued that 'the ladder to power is a triangle, and the closer you are to the top the less room there is to move' (Dowse 2009: 4). Often women ministers have little room to move, due to government commitments, Cabinet solidarity and the constraints

imposed by financial markets and public opinion. Nonetheless, feminist ministers and heads of government in Australia and New Zealand have been identified as critical actors who introduced measures to promote gender equality. Following are some examples only – more systematic work is required to assess the relative significance of ministerial gender and contextual factors such as party ideology and an organised women's movement. It was in response to women's movement mobilisation that all political parties developed and campaigned on 'women's policies' in the 1980s, which in turn feminist ministers were appointed to implement, albeit not without struggle.

The first woman head of government in Australia, Rosemary Follett, Chief Minister of the ACT, shocked the local newspaper by her commitment to the appointment of women to 50 per cent of positions on government advisory bodies; she sent back lists submitted by ministers if they did not contain enough women's names (Sawer & Simms 1993: 154). A senior federal Labor Minister in the 1980s, Senator Susan Ryan, was responsible for the *Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984* as well as the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986* – both of which were highly controversial at the time, although strongly supported by women within the Labor Party as well as within the broader women's movement. Joan Kirner, as Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands in the Victorian Government, initiated the highly successful Rural Women's Network as well as being one of the women ministers who advocated for the capital endowment of the Victorian Women's Trust, making it both financially viable and independent of government. After losing office as Premier, and with the support of another woman ex-Premier, Dr Carmen Lawrence, Kirner went on to establish EMILY's List, a significant source of support for Labor women candidates who have made pro-choice and gender equity commitments. As a body associated with the Labor Party but not under party control, EMILY's List has also functioned as an effective oversight body for the implementation and renewal of the party's electoral quotas for women.

Another way in which women ministers can express gender equity commitments is through their selection of departmental heads and ministerial staff. Susan Ryan, while federal Education minister, was responsible for the appointment of the first woman to head a federal department. At the State level, Kirner and Lawrence also appointed the

first women to head departments.<sup>5</sup> Generally women ministers have also been more likely to appoint women to their staff, including in senior positions. For example, in 2009 women formed a majority (55 per cent) of the 412 ministerial staff at the federal level in Australia, but many were in traditionally female positions such as receptionist, diary secretary or office manager. However, women ministers were disproportionately likely to appoint women to the position of chief of staff – 71 per cent of women ministers had female chiefs of staff, compared with 40 per cent of ministers as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

In New Zealand, there has been some increase in the number of women selected for government-nominated positions over the same period that there were more women Ministers in Cabinet. In 1998, women accounted for just over 200 of the (re)appointments to Crown company boards; by 2002 just under 400 (although the total number of appointments also increased over this period, meaning the proportion of women did not change significantly) (MWA 2002). By 2006, the percentage of women who were ministerial appointments on state sector boards and committees stood at 42 per cent (HRC 2008).<sup>7</sup> Small increases are also evident in the proportion of women Chief Executives appointed to head government departments. In 1999, prior to the arrival of the Clark government, there were six women chief executives (16 per cent) and by 2008, this had increased to nine (23 per cent), seven of whom were heading 'social' departments, and only one of whom was head of a large department (in terms of staff and budget). So while some progress has been made in female ministerial appointments, it hardly represents a significant change over ten years, and more analysis is needed before we can claim that this increase is a result of there being more women in Cabinet.

As already mentioned, we cannot assume that increasing the numbers of women in the Cabinet will necessarily lead to the substantive representation of women. The Cabinet, in Westminster systems at least, is protected by the convention of collective responsibility, whereby secrecy and confidentiality around the processes of executive

---

<sup>5</sup> Ryan appointed Helen Williams to head the federal Education Department in 1985, the first woman to be the head of a department at the federal level. Kirner appointed Ann Morrow to head the Victorian Education Department in 1988 and Lawrence appointed Marcelle Anderson to head the Western Australian Department of Cabinet in 1990.

<sup>6</sup> See the Parliament House Occupants' Directory, 21 December 2009.

<sup>7</sup> The category of State Sector Boards and Committees is more encompassing than the previous mentioned category of Crown company boards and so these two periods are not comparable.

deliberation make it difficult to reveal the extent to which women ministers have represented, acted or spoken for women. Moreover, the ideological profile of the party in government will impact on the influence of women ministers, whether or not they are feminist in orientation.

In the case of New Zealand, Labour women ministers have been more active than their National counterparts in advancing women's 'interests' if measured in terms of policy outputs. Women ministers in the fourth Labour Government (1984–1990) were critical to the passage of pay equity legislation, increasing expenditure on child care, implementing rape law reform and unpaid parental leave, and ensuring family benefits were not abolished during a period of neo-liberal economic reform. Between 1999 and 2008, women ministers again made an impact through their support for paid parental leave, increasing entitlements for working families, reinstating the role of trade unions, raising the minimum wage and renewing New Zealand's commitment to its reporting obligations under CEDAW (Curtin 2008b; Curtin & Devere 2006). By contrast, the two most high-profile National women ministers of the 1990s, (Ruth Richardson, Minister of Finance, and Jenny Shipley, Minister of Social Welfare), oversaw a radical overhaul of the welfare state and labour market in New Zealand. Family payments were cut, targeting was introduced and individual work contracts became the norm, decimating trade unions and stalling any progression on the minimum wage – all of which had a negative impact on women and children (McClelland & St John 2006). However, analysis of Jenny Shipley's work as Minister of Women's Affairs suggests that she attempted to advance other policies for women, but was constrained by the overarching strategic direction of the National Government (Curtin & Teghtsoonian 2010).

Finally, understanding the impact of women ministers in New Zealand is complicated by the introduction of MMP in 1996. This change has led to the formation of coalition or minority governments with support arrangements involving minor parties. As a consequence, (minor) ministerial portfolios or government spokesperson positions are often given to members of smaller parties. There have been several recent examples where women have used their position as outer ministers or government representatives to leverage policy outcomes favourable to women. For example the advent of paid parental leave was due in no small part to the work of an Alliance MP, Laila Harre who was Minister of Women's Affairs (1999–2002) (Curtin & Teghtsoonian 2010). Similarly,

three member's bills introduced by Greens MP Sue Bradford were supported (and passed) under the Labour government all of which could be seen as of benefit to women. These included removing the defence of 'reasonable force' when smacking children (*Crimes Amendment Act 2007*), allowing mothers in jail keep their babies for longer and, applying the adult minimum wage to 16 and 17 year olds (see McLeay 2009). Thus, it appears there are several interrelated factors, both institutional and political, that need further exploration if we are to explain when women ministers will act for women.

## **Conclusion**

Although Australia and New Zealand were pioneers of women's political rights, in both countries it took many decades before the arrival of second-wave feminism made women's absence from parliament and public decision-making into a political issue. Women's movement mobilisation has achieved progress in both countries, although it has been somewhat slower in Australia than in New Zealand. In both countries reform of the Labour Party has been crucial in increasing access by women to parliament and hence to the pool for ministerial office. The reforms took different routes in the two countries, requiring the introduction of party quotas in Australia, where factional barriers to women were stronger, but not in New Zealand where the Women's Council took on an increasingly important role. The factional structure of the Australian Labor Party remains a barrier to increasing the proportion of women selected for Cabinet, although the first woman Premier, Dr Carmen Lawrence, succeeded in having women make up a third of her Cabinet in 1990 and this figure was later matched by Queensland Premier Anna Bligh. While Labor's electoral quota, the election of Labor governments and women Premiers have enhanced women's executive presence in Australia, this success is still contingent on factional support, which in turn inhibits cross-factional 'sisterhood'. And even Julia Gillard (Australian Prime Minister from 2010), has been subject to gendered criticism for remaining 'deliberately barren' and hence out of touch with the experiences of ordinary 'mums and dads' (Sawer 2009: 171).

In New Zealand, women's activism within the Labour Party has been particularly effective, resulting in the election of Labour women to influential positions in the party hierarchy and their selection for safe electorate seats. Safe seats have enabled women

to position themselves for ministerial office, and ultimately the party leadership. Under Helen Clark's leadership as Prime Minister there was a significant increase in women's executive presence with a record-setting 33 per cent of women elected to her first Cabinet, and with three women (out of three) ministers outside cabinet.

As we have seen, proportional electoral systems bolster the proportion of women in parliament and expand the pool of potential women ministers in both countries. Although the adoption of a proportional representation system in 1996 led to an increase of women in the New Zealand parliament, thereby increasing the pool of female talent, this is only part of the story. Women prime ministers and a sustained presence of high profile women ministers over the past decade appears to have resulted in a 'normalisation' of women's presence in executive politics. That the centre-right National government has maintained the same proportion of women in Cabinet as its Labour predecessor suggests as much. Similarly in Australia, conservative governments now have difficulty resisting expectations of female presence in the ministry. While the previous conservative Prime Minister, John Howard, said that to worry about the sums was 'patronising' and 'old-fashioned' (when the number of women in his Cabinet dropped), clearly he was whistling in the wind.

Whether this upward trajectory in both countries can be sustained over time will depend on a range of factors: a continuing supply of experienced women MPs; a continuing recognition by parties on both the Right and Left of the need for inclusive executive representation; and, continuing pressure from organised women to ensure such recognition.

## References

- Atchison, Amy and Ian Down. 2009. 'Women Cabinet Ministers and Female-Friendly Social Policy'. *Poverty & Public Policy*, 1 (2), Article 3: 1–23.
- Black, David (1996), *Women Parliamentarians in Australia 1921–1996*, Perth: Legislative Assembly.
- Bochel, Catherine and Hugh Bochel. 2008. 'Women 'Leaders' in Local Government in the UK', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61 (3): 426-441.
- Caldwell, John, Bruce Missingham and Jeff Marck (2001), *The Population of Oceania in the Second Millennium*, Australian National University, Health Transition Centre (<http://htc.anu.edu.au/pdfs/Oceania%20manuscript.pdf>; retrieved April 2010).
- Curtin, Jennifer. 2008a. 'Gendering parliamentary representation in New Zealand: a mixed system producing mixed results' in Manon Tremblay (ed.), *Women and Legislative Representation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 191–202.
- Curtin, Jennifer. 2008b. 'Women, Political Leadership and Substantive Representation: the Case of New Zealand', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61 (3): 490–504.
- Curtin, Jennifer. 1997. *Gender and Political Leadership in New Zealand*. Research Note 14 1997-98, Parliamentary Library.
- Curtin, Jennifer and Heather Devere. 2006. 'Global Rankings and Domestic Realities: Women, Work and Policy in Australia and New Zealand'. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 41 (2): 193-207.
- Curtin, Jennifer and Katherine Teghtsoonian. 2010. 'Analysing Institutional Persistence: The Case of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Aotearoa/New Zealand'. *Politics and Gender*, forthcoming December.
- Davis, Rebecca Howard, *Women and Power in Parliamentary Democracies*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Devere, Heather and Curtin, Jennifer. 2009. 'Rethinking Political Connections: Women, Friendship, and Politics in New Zealand', in *Rethinking Women and Politics. New Zealand and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Kate McMillan, John Leslie and Elizabeth McLeay. Wellington: Victoria University Press: 87–111.
- Dowse, Sara. 2009. 'A different kind of politics', *Inside Story*, 17 December: 1–6.
- Grey, Sandra and Marian Sawer. 2005. 'Australia and New Zealand', in *Sharing Power: Women, Parliament, Democracy*, edited by Yvonne Galligan and Manon Tremblay. Aldershot: Ashgate: 171–87.

- [HRC] Human Rights Commission. 2008. *New Zealand Census of Women's Participation*, Wellington: Human Rights Commission
- Lyons, Enid. 1972. *Among the carrion crows*. Adelaide: Rigby.M
- McClelland, Alison and Susan St John. 2006. 'Social policy responses to globalisation in Australia and New Zealand, 1980-2005'. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 41 (2): 177–191.
- McLeay, Elizabeth. 1995. *The Cabinet and Political Power in New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- McLeay, Elizabeth. 2009. 'Spare the Rod? The story of how Sue Bradford, Green Party MP 1999-2009, fought for the rights of New Zealand children and changed the law'. Paper presented to the Public Leadership Workshop, 26-27 November, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Moon, Jeremy and Imogen Fountain. 1997. 'Keeping the gates? Women as Ministers in Australia, 1970–96', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32 (3): 455–66.
- Murray, Rainbow (2009), "Was 2007 a Landmark or Let-Down for Women's Political Representation in France?", *Representation*, 45, 1: 29-38.
- [MWA] Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2002a. *Briefing to the Incoming Government July 2002*. Wellington: The Ministry of Women's Affairs.
- Rose, Richard. 1976. 'On the priorities of government: A developmental analysis of public policies'. *European Journal of Political Research* 4 (3): 247–89.
- Sawer, Marian. 2009. 'Women and the 2007 federal election', *Australian Cultural History*, 27 (2): 167–74.
- Sawer, Marian. 2010. 'Women and elections', in *Comparing Democracies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, edited by Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris. London: Sage: 223–48.
- Sawer, Marian and Marian Simms. 1993. *A woman's place: Women and politics in Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Siaroff, Alan. 2000. 'Women's Representation in Legislatures and Cabinets in Industrial Democracies', *International Political Science Review* 21 (2): 197–215.
- Sykes, Patricia Lee. 2009. 'Incomplete empowerment: Female Cabinet Ministers in Anglo-American Systems', in *Dispersed Democratic Leadership: Origins, Dynamics and Implications*, edited by John Kane, Haig Patapan and Paul t'Hart. New York: Oxford University Press: 37–58.

Wilson, Janet and David Black. 2009. *Women parliamentarians in Australia 1921–2009*, Canberra: Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia.  
 <[http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/7N3T6/upload\\_binary/7n3t64.pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/7N3T6/upload_binary/7n3t64.pdf)>

**Table 1. Women as a percentage of Australian parliamentarians and ministers, 1 November 2009**

Parliament	Women as % of Labor MPs*	Women as % of Labor ministers or shadow ministers <sup>#</sup>
Commonwealth**	35.7	23.3
New South Wales	32.9	31.8
Victoria	36.5	25.0
Queensland	49.0	33.3
Western Australia	35.1	38.8 <sup>##</sup>
South Australia	41.7	26.6
Tasmania	27.8	40.0
Australian Capital Territory	42.9	40.0
Northern Territory	41.7	25.0

\*Numbers are aggregated for both houses where the parliaments are bicameral as the ministry is drawn from both.

\*\*Commonwealth is the term for the federal level of government in Australia.

# Both Cabinet Ministers and Ministers outside Cabinet are included here, but not Parliamentary Secretaries.

**Table 2. Women as a percentage of Australian Labor parliamentarians and ministers 1 November 2009**

Parliament	Women as % of Labor MPs*	Women as % of Labor ministers or shadow ministers <sup>#</sup>
Commonwealth**	35.7	23.3
New South Wales	32.9	31.8
Victoria	36.5	25.0
Queensland	49.0	33.3
Western Australia	35.1	38.8 <sup>##</sup>
South Australia	41.7	26.6
Tasmania	27.8	40.0
Australian Capital Territory	42.9	40.0
Northern Territory	41.7	25.0

\*Numbers are aggregated for both houses where the parliaments are bicameral as the ministry is drawn from both.

\*\*Commonwealth is the term for the federal level of government in Australia.

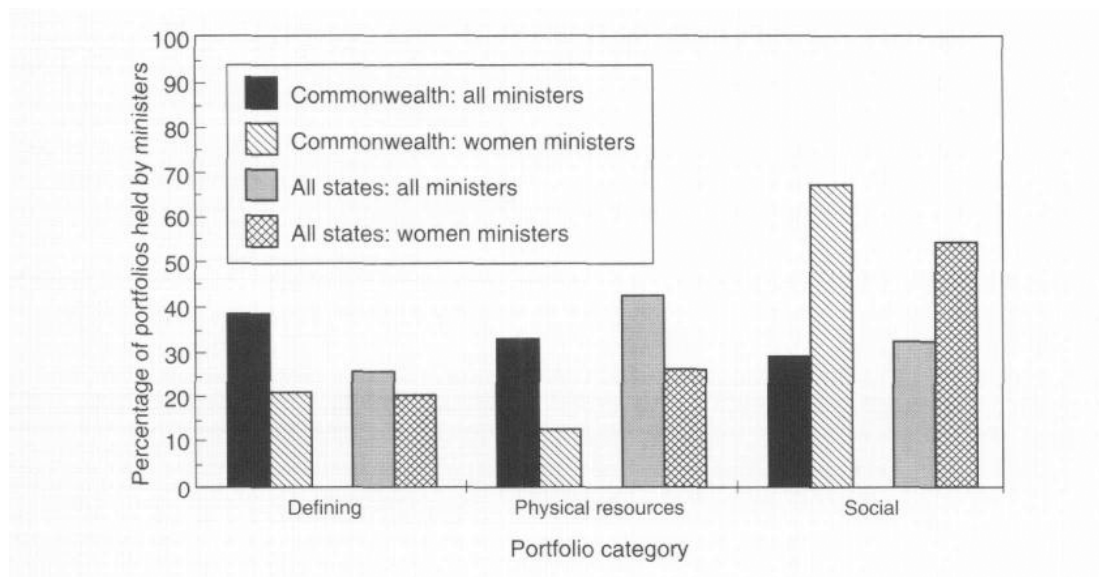
# Both Cabinet Ministers and Ministers outside Cabinet are included here, but not Parliamentary Secretaries.

## Labor shadow ministry.

**Table 3. Women as a percentage of New Zealand parliamentarians and ministers 1981–2009**

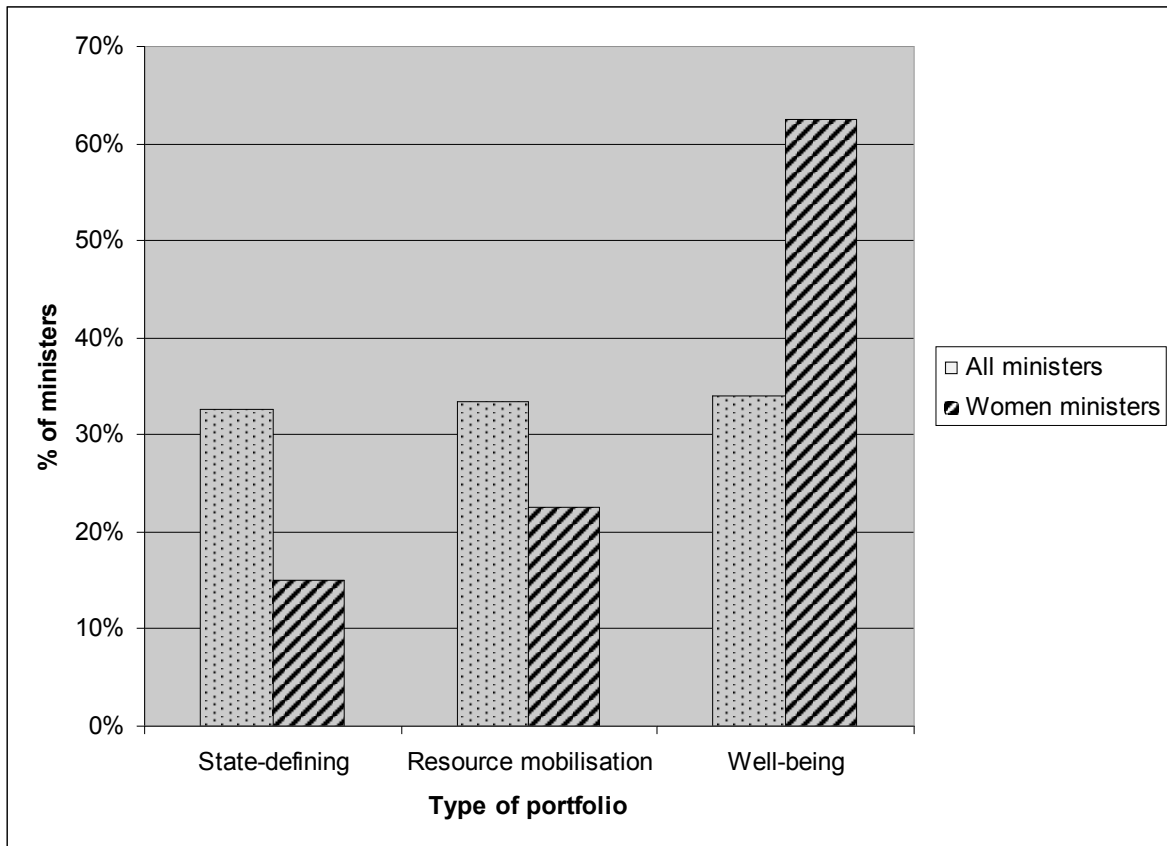
Election Year/ Govt	Women as % of MPs	Women as % of ministers*
1981 National	8.7	0
1984 Labour	11.6	10
1987 Labour	14.4	15
1990 National	16.5	10
1993 National	21.2	5
1996 National	28.3	11
1999 Labour	29.2	35
2002 Labour	28.3	30
2005 Labour	33.1	30
2008 National	34	30

**Figure 1 Categories of portfolios held by all ministers and by women ministers in Commonwealth and State Governments 1970–96.**

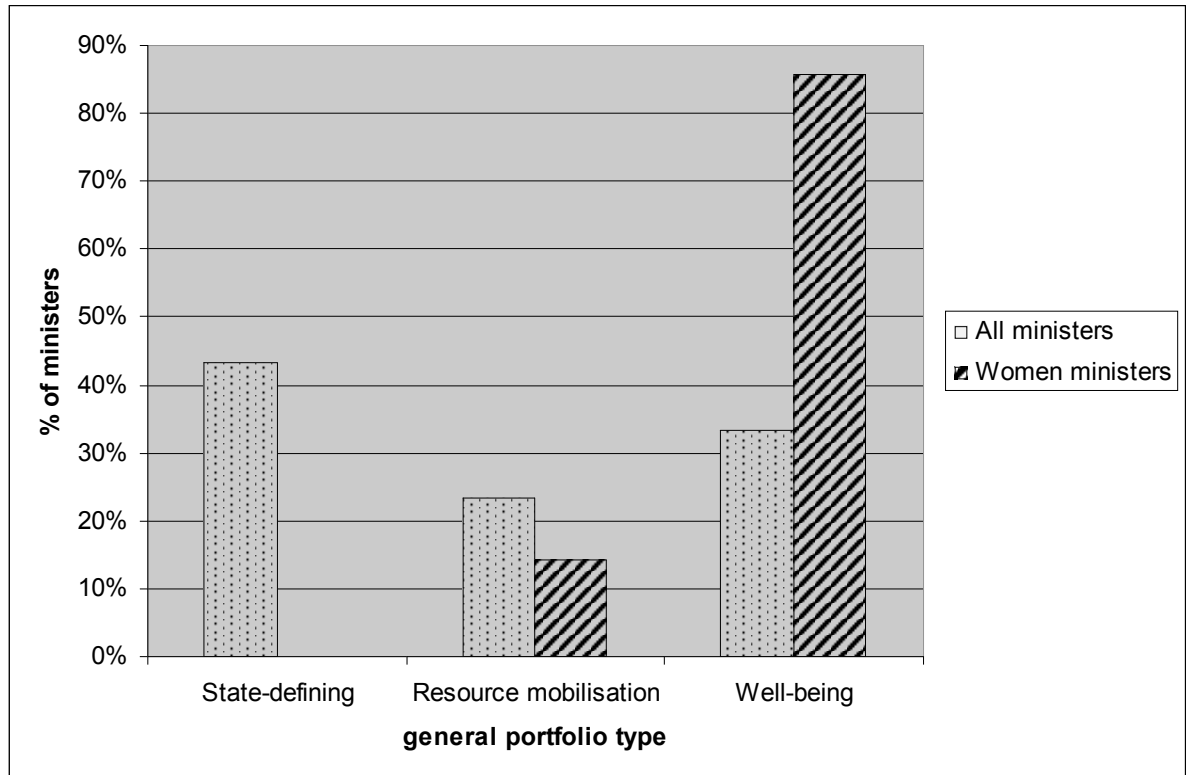


Source: Moon & Fountain 1997, 463.

**Figure 2 Categories of portfolios held by all ministers and by women ministers in Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments 1 November 2009.**



**Figure 3 Categories of portfolios held by all ministers and by women ministers in the Commonwealth Government 1 November 2009.**



**Figure 4 Categories of portfolios held by New Zealand women ministers, 1984-2009**

