

# The Vanguard's Voice: a Feminist Analysis of Female Political Potential within the Masculinist State

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*This analysis presents two comparative examples of the first female Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and former Prime Ministerial Chief of Staff, Peta Credlin, which demonstrate twofold how women in the political environment are inherently positioned as threats to patriarchal state processes and subconsciously adopt masculine behaviours in their professional practice. This reveals the coercive nature of the patriarchal state as it fundamentally subverts female political advancement and actively shapes political spaces to reproduce patriarchal hegemony.*

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**Keywords:** Australian Labor Party, Australian Liberal Party, hegemony, professionalism, Federal politics, female leadership, internalised misogyny

## Introduction

Political hierarchies and social conventions in modern Western history have been fundamentally shaped by gender differences, largely centring male advancement premised on the subordination and struggles of women. The role of the state throughout modern history has been integral in centring political hierarchies and structuring social convention. Alongside this, movements for women's change have not always emphasised challenging the patriarchal motivations in the state framework but have certainly attempted to deconstruct patriarchal oppressions manifest on a personal platform. This analysis presents two contrasting examples which illustrate the power of the patriarchal state and its diverse manifestations – Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was positioned as a political 'vanguard' who challenged the structural gender hierarchy in politics but was also coerced into reinforcing patriarchal standards in her policies, and former Prime Ministerial chief of staff, Peta Credlin, who observably embodied masculine leadership traits in demonstrating how internalised misogyny perpetuates patriarchal norms. It is evident that patriarchal hegemony is a coercive power upon which the state is fundamentally constructed, historically diminishing female agency and hindering women's political empowerment in a contemporary context.

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## The Patriarchal State

One cannot assess the inherent patriarchal mechanisms of the state without first understanding the nature of patriarchy and its capacity for engagement with the political sphere. Throughout modern history, the state has been unconditionally legitimised through a deeply patriarchal structure. Simone de Beauvoir (2010, p.767) wrote of women being 'ruled' by men through various but connected structures, but argued that women will progress due to increasing access to economic and educational opportunities. In response to Beauvoir, however, recent political analysis suggests a continued disenfranchisement of women from the dominant model of successful and acceptable 'personhood' which patriarchy has entrenched (Vintges, 2017, p.12).

Zajicek and Calasanti (1998, p.506) shift the analytical lens to examine the state through a feminist approach, explaining modern feminism to often be comprised of three strands which do not all necessarily concur. Liberal feminism, the dominant strand of the contemporary movement, does not view the state as intrinsically patriarchal, but rather as one which represents hegemonic patriarchal interests. Radical feminism presents the state as the oppressor in and of itself, expressed through patriarchal control. By contrast with the latter two approaches which seemingly view men as a homogenous group, socialist feminism acknowledges contextual factors of race, gender and class which shape the state (Zajicek and Calasanti, 1998, p.507). This article recognises a need to portray characteristics of the state which benefit and uphold patriarchal norms, rather than an evaluation of which feminist framework is most accurate; thus, theoretical elements of all three approaches can be useful in analysing masculinist examples within the state.

Within the understanding of patriarchy, contemporarily adopting philosophical analysis of Hannah Arendt is useful in deconstructing the power dynamics underpinning collective thinking and 'space' in societies (Bauman, 2003, p.53; Arendt, 1958, p.10), particularly in a domestic political context when examining the reciprocity between the electorate and how the nation state is shaped. Arendt suggested that 'what makes man [sic] a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals' (1970, p.82). The patriarchal state is said to narrowly delineate acceptable types of work for women and then devalue this work which proves destructive to the woman's space and their professional development (Bauman, 2003, p.67). This patriarchal 'violation' has dire effects on the social and economic advancement of women, most particularly in spaces of leadership and policy, and actively contributes to inequality of political opportunity across genders. In the present discussion it must be noted that much feminist analysis in this area has been situated solely within political and economic characteristics of Western nations with some form of democratic framework not necessarily present in a wealth of non-Western nations (Zajicek & Calasanti, 1998, p.506). This renders the bulk of feminist state analysis incomplete and presents limitations for a holistic assessment of the patriarchal state; however, for the purposes of this discussion and its relevant case studies, the body of work constructing the Western liberal state will be referred to.

It has been long-established that exercising control over female opportunities and behavioural standards in constructing a particular type of 'woman' is politically necessary in maintaining the modern state (Thornton, 2006, p.152); although twenty-first century feminism has indicated an intention to dismantle such notions of inequality within the modern state, the broader case and treatment of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard indicates that the existing system continues to 'mould' female leaders in its own repressive image. Simply by virtue of Gillard's successful background in politics, she already embodied the 'vanguard' threat to Australian political tradition even before publicly platforming a discourse about her gender (Hunt et al., 2014, p.723). The embedded and conservative conventions of the state gravely limited Gillard's potential as a feminist trailblazer in politics. Her repertoire of 'disappointing' female-focused policy actions undermined her vanguard status – cuts to paid maternity leave and welfare support for single parents, most significantly affecting single mothers, compounded her broader social justice failings including her position against same-sex marriage and support for offshore asylum seeker processing (Coudray, 2016, p.278). This is not to be attributed to Gillard as an individual exercising her personal policy motivations; indeed, her predecessors expressed similar policy actions but were received differently, suggesting that a litmus test of a much higher standard had been set for Australia's first female Prime Minister from the outset.

### **Masculinist Motivations**

Employing Rhode's landmark analysis of female political performance within the state framework (1994, p.1207), Gillard's shortcomings in female-focused policy are symptomatic of women's internalisation of norms which the patriarchal system has necessitated for political success. In this way, female leaders, even at the pinnacle of authority, are overcome by the same masculinist motivations as that which fundamentally comprise the system. Hunt et al. (2014, p.727) draw on the Gillard case study to illustrate the wider problematic picture of the patriarchal state; the limitations thrust upon Gillard's tenure impacted the political consciousness and professional goals of women in a twofold nature – some women perceive her as a 'role model' pushing back against male authority, while her highly-publicised leadership experiences also inspire a greater fear of gendered 'backlash' against women in leadership roles. The overarching response from women indicates an uneasiness towards political engagement, ultimately resulting in less representation and positive opportunities in the political sphere. This somewhat cyclical process underpins patriarchal processes on which the state is founded – it is difficult to progress the status of women in politics, let alone dismantle the state in its current form, without holistic female empowerment (United Nations 2006).

The power of the patriarchal state extends beyond prejudicial stereotypes and further constructs models of femininity. It weaves a complex web through societal consciousness in encapsulating gendered discourses and images, value systems and codes which are performed by women but also maintained by external political and media actors. Several analyses concur that Gillard 'walked

the tightrope' in an attempt to overcome the double bind of masculine characteristics desirable for leadership while embodying the specific kind of femininity allowable in politics so as not to lose female electoral support (Williams, 2017, p.551; Lee-Koo and Maley, 2017, p.319; Sawyer, 2013, p.116). This raises the question of which avenue would be the least threatening to Gillard's, or any other woman's, leadership. Williams (2017, p.552) argues that the balancing act is nearly impossible as women are perceived as subversive 'vanguards' by default because of their gender and the traditional masculinist space of politics in which they are situated.

It would also be an option to attempt to avoid this bind; however, this inevitably includes complete co-option into a total masculinist style of leadership for the sake of conformity. Here, Hall and Donoghue discuss how this proceeds to sacrifice female ambition in limiting professional agency (2013, p.633). The effect of this is crippling twofold – Gillard embodied a perceived 'natural' incongruence being a woman and a senior politician, firstly facing the difficulty of overcoming the stereotype that women cannot undertake complex roles in the political arena; and secondly, having successfully combated this expectation of inferior competence, being regarded as 'cold' and 'too independent' because of this (2013, p.633). Wright and Holland (2014, p.463) highlight the complete removal of Gillard's political agency by conservative media such as The Australian newspaper, which merely framed her successes as a product of her party exploiting her gender. This purposely lacked any regard for Gillard's capacity to be motivated by ambition and positioned her as a utensil to further the political advancement and masculinist motivations of the government (2013, p.464). Further, the underlying and inherent factor of gender would remain a potential weapon to be used against the female leader at any time for any reason, regardless of how compliant they act alongside patriarchal practices. Patriarchal behaviours within the political environment ensure that this threat is constant and often subtle, policed by powerful external forces.

Public perceptions, too, specifically aided by mainstream media stakeholders, dramatically shaped Gillard's identity as a leader and her subsequent level of policy success. In a context where the electorate gives legitimacy to its political ruler and thus further defines the nature of the relationship between the two (Jackman, 2010, p.95), a rapidly-increasing media intensity seizing control of public opinion challenges this traditional democratic notion. What it perpetuates rather than challenges, however, is the embedded patriarchal values which delegitimise female leadership; men in politics, particularly every last Prime Minister before Gillard, are portrayed as individuals instead of 'gendered subjects', while Gillard's gender overrode her autonomous personhood, career successes and objectives (Williams, 2017, p.552). Regardless of her own opinion on the matter, Gillard was often positioned as 'representing' feminism, compounded when she corresponded to or exemplified the most basic feminist objectives and values such as the right of women to pursue careers in politics (Coudray, 2016, p.275). Indeed, her rise to political prominence ignited household conversations about gender and implored Australians to engage with gender on a more critical level than previously, with mixed results. This came to a head in 2012 in the galvanising 'misogyny' speech, representing the first glimpse

of Gillard autonomously confronting misogynistic commentary in both the parliament and externally. This was an all-or-nothing moment that brought a visible change in the ordinary gendered processes of politics; as Gillard's term progressed, more facets of society expressed a willingness to commit to a feminist discourse, particularly online media such as 'Destroy the Joint' (Coudray, 2016, p.275). The 'Destroy the Joint' movement on Facebook and Twitter represented a mobilisation of collective feminist action that had perhaps lain dormant in Australia prior to this time; it offered a 'renewal' of feminist action able to respond to conservative media voices such as Alan Jones (McLean and Maalsen, 2013, p.244). Although fleeting, it offered a suggestion of the female reclamation of masculine spaces, and a possibility for women to collectively mobilise in pursuit of further opportunity. In a liberal feminist framework, Gillard was rallying a broader catch-cry of 'equality' and, at best, challenging inbuilt masculinist assumptions in politics rather than pushing an institutional deconstruction (Coudray, 2016, p.276). While the former seemingly succeeded in galvanising fence-sitting public opinion and improved Gillard's public image into one of tenacity and strength, it also demonstrates that mainstream liberal feminism barely indents the ingrained patriarchal political superstructure.

The restrictions on Gillard's leadership and the professional empowerment of women more broadly is still worth considering in a liberal-democratic state framework despite assertions that such a framework, admittedly still patriarchal, has already championed 'gender equality'. Scholarly examination of gender inequality and women's advancement has often strayed into analysis of governance rather than the state structure (Morgan and Orloff, 2017, p.2). This is particularly relevant given the recent liberal-feminist push for gender quotas and positive discrimination in the party-politics sphere, with the goal of improving female representation and opportunity. Regardless, it is still beneficial to consider gender quotas in the structural state context. The state, laid bare, can be used as a vehicle for driving foundational changes in regard to any social issue (Morgan and Orloff, 2017, p.140). Here arises an untidy and false dichotomy, popularly used in conservative circles, between professional merit and quotas. The dominant inclination throughout political history is to reject the need for quotas, and ignore discriminatory structures set up by the state in doing so (Lee-Koo and Maley, 2017, p.320). It is undeniable that, while conservative-backed patriarchal convention has shaped the state from within, more liberal political actors seeking to oppose this, including the Australian Labor Party, may adjust their practices to the evolving context without radically reshaping their broader patriarchal ideologies (Zajicek and Calasanti, 1998, p.510). Quotas are an overwhelmingly liberal response to inequality problems within the state – the type of response which risks misunderstanding the deeply structural nature of institutionalised patriarchal oppression. Krook and Norris (2014, p.17) have called for a more systemic assessment of the state's problems with female political participation; the liberal-democratic state fails to design a contingency plan for when more women inevitably gain access to the political profession but are still coerced into denying their own femininity. Notwithstanding this, the liberal push for quotas does help refute the problematic 'merit' argument, wherein women may only access opportunities by co-opting acceptable masculine behaviours seen as meritorious, thereby rejecting their own individual qualities. Given the

longstanding precedent of female leaders' behaviours and interactions with the electorate – both of which are visibly dictated by patriarchal standards – an enforced quota would likely disrupt the masculinist notions of the state which prescribes constrained acceptable standards for female leaders.

### **Internalised Misogyny**

The enduring reaction to patriarchal oppression lived by women has inevitable flow-on effects for their internalised behaviours and perceptions; particularly observable in the political arena where female interactions adopt a tacit acceptance of patriarchal practices. Peta Credlin, former chief of staff to then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, simultaneously embodied patriarchal suppression of female professional autonomy and acted as a custodian for ultra-conservative policy within a government often embroiled in accusations of misogyny. During her highly-publicised six-year tenure as chief of staff to Abbott, Credlin embraced a 'disruptive' model of femininity which was closer to a hyper-masculinist antagonism (Lee-Koo and Maley, 2017, p.318). Critically, this behaviour is often seen in political circles where women consciously transgress both their individuality and acceptable standards of femininity for professional advancement. Significantly aided by media representations, Credlin soon gained a brutish political image which overshadowed her dedication to her role. She bore the weight of the responsibility in stemming the decline of Abbott's popularity – largely existent because of his own public image blunders – as government backbenchers grew suspicious of her decision-making power and demeanour of arrogance in shielding the Prime Minister from consultation (Eidenfalk et al., 2018, p.234). This is telling of the broader environment which comprises the working mechanisms of the state; a top-down patriarchal grip which institutionally condemns women's autonomy. Credlin, in her own right, frequently displayed strong-arm tactics which she felt necessary to ensure the survival of the Abbott government. This illuminates how women's professional labour 'props up' the successes of male leadership at the expense of their own image and professional advancement.

Internalised misogyny, as it is principally manifest in the passive acceptance of conservative gender roles and 'unawareness or denial of cultural, institutional, and individual sexism' (Szymanski et al., 2009, p.102), leads women who are political actors to increase and maintain patriarchal power by devaluing themselves. The subsequent resentment towards feminine traits and women generally is observable in Credlin's approach to political advisory in acts of 'horizontal oppression' (2009, p.103) such as ignoring the 'double-bind tightrope' model and assuming a thoroughly masculinist leadership role to the point of perceived 'emasculatation' of her employer, Tony Abbott (Lee-Koo and Maley, 2017, p.319). The Liberal Party as a whole provides a unique reflection of the internalised misogyny aspect of the patriarchal state. During the conservative backlash against Gillard's 'misogyny' speech in parliament, several prominent female Liberal Party members including Julie Bishop and Bronwyn Bishop acknowledged that they had received what they viewed to be sexist comments throughout their careers, but they did not 'play the victim card' (Donoghue, 2015, p.171). This portrays an opposing 'space' to the one in which Gillard's speech is

situated; through Arendt's framework, female Liberal Party members seemingly possess the faculty to 'act in concert' and become political beings on at least an outward level, but are impeded from reaching for a common goal (1970, p.82) due to the gendered limitations of the political structure, enforced internally by their party values. It is also legitimate that Gillard initially did not make an issue of her gender for fear of 'victim card' backlash rather than a conscious choice to adopt masculinist practices (Johnson, 2015, p.295). By contrast, Credlin represents an absence of choice in her intrinsic and automatic assumption of either a purely masculine professionalism or at least a sternly moderated femininity; she avoided any accusations of 'playing the gender card' by performing her gender in a traditional, acceptable fashion (Johnson, 2015, p.312). These contrasting examples create a clear dichotomy in the social ramifications of state-supported patriarchy, but both indicate the state-imposed restriction of women's behaviours to fit the mould of male-coded leadership which weakens their progress in the professional hierarchy. This framework coerces women to self-police their behaviours and image beyond the scope of the public service career requirements. For the institutional woman, politics remains a structure where they are unable to wholly 'organize...intend to act and to acquire power' (Arendt, 1958, p.270) in a way that is more abundantly afforded to men.

## Conclusion

The longstanding form of the state has limited ability to protect the interests of all women and continues to advance the collective position of men. The overarching patriarchal hegemony renders the state coercive in shaping women's behaviours and professional successes, evident in the policy decisions of Julia Gillard. It is insufficient to challenge the patriarchal system with surfacing liberal feminist measures upon which she based her image; rather, a dismantling of embedded value systems is necessary, particularly where women internalise their oppression as both a preserver and a result of patriarchal practices. This results in the behaviours of Peta Credlin who aligned herself with conservative values and, in turn, recited oppressive practices regardless of her gender. In a highly contemporary context, the success of the modern state is increasingly subject to media influence which legitimises patriarchal practices and discourses. The reciprocal nature between media stakeholders and the electorate ensures that patriarchal practices are reproduced and maintained, preserving the state in its current form. Although there were clear policy and social differences between Gillard and Credlin, the public and media responses to their validity as professional women were decidedly similar, indicating the overarching nature of patriarchal hegemony.

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