

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Striving for equality in the halls of power

POLITICS
EMILY MCAULIFFE

Australia still has a way to go before it sees equal representation of men and women in politics, but these tireless campaigners and advocates are helping to close the gender gap.

Aged 10, Juliana Addison stormed into her local milk bar. “Paperboy wanted?” she huffed. “Why not a paperboy or a papergirl?” The shop owner said he didn’t think a girl would want the advertised job. “Do you want the job?” he said. Addison replied no – she didn’t have the right kind of bike, after all – she just wanted the sign changed. The owner told her to borrow her brother’s bike and meet him at 6.30 the next morning. Addison became the local papergirl for the next three years, and when she resigned, the owner advertised a ‘papergirl’ position.

This experience taught Addison – now the Victorian state member for Wendouree – that it was one thing to demand a change, but it was another to

be the change. That’s why, when the opportunity to join the University of Melbourne’s Pathways to Politics for Women program came up in 2017, she couldn’t turn it down, even though the logistics seemed “impossible”.

How would she get to Melbourne from Ballarat by 6pm every Thursday, while also tackling the never-ending list of domestic duties that come with raising a family? And would she even get in? Surely the program, capped at 30 participants a year, was competitive, she thought.

“I had all these doubts and I think that is something that women who are thinking about putting their hand up or putting themselves forward face – there’s always a thousand reasons not to do it,” Addison says. “It’s always going to be, it’s not the right time, or I want to have kids, or my career is just taking off, or I can’t afford to do it... you can talk yourself out of it.”

Addison feels these doubts particularly afflict women wanting to get into politics, but says it’s easy to forget the countless reasons to push these doubts aside and go for it, as she was repeatedly told throughout the Pathways program by speakers such as senators Penny Wong, Jacqui Lambie and Sarah Hanson-Young.

The non-partisan Pathways to

Politics for Women program was founded by Carol Schwartz in partnership with the Trawalla Foundation and Women’s Leadership Institute Australia (both chaired by Schwartz), and aims to increase the participation of women in politics by giving participants skills and knowledge that will help them successfully run and lead in public office. (Similar state-based programs now also run through QUT and UNSW.)

For Schwartz, who has been named one of Australia’s most influential women in *The Australian Financial Review* and ‘leading philanthropist’ by Philanthropy Australia, among other accolades, it was seeing one woman – Julie Bishop – sitting at the cabinet table in the Australian Parliament in 2013 that prompted her to start a program that would help more women get into politics.

“I thought to myself, you know, here we are – [this is] the ultimate decision-making body in the country, and it only has one woman,” she says.

“When you think about it, politics is really where major decisions are made for societies and communities, and if you don’t have equal representation, then it means you’re not taking into consideration what the needs are of 50 per cent of the community.”






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Licia Heath speaks at a 'meet the candidates' gathering ahead of the Wentworth by-election in 2017.

“There’s no better place to get something done than in that political chamber where you’re making decisions about policy outcomes that have an influence on everything else from that point on.”

LICIA HEATH

Another woman who found herself increasingly frustrated by the types of decisions being made by Australian politicians is Licia Heath, CEO of Women for Election – an organisation that aims to create gender parity at all levels of government in Australia.

Heath attended Women for Election’s inaugural conference in 2017 and says the experience “fizzed her up adequately” as she was on the board five months later, then ran in the high-profile Wentworth, NSW, byelection in 2018.

Like many other women, Heath says she had hesitations about running for public office, mostly because others put fear in her.

“They said, ‘Don’t do it, Licia, they’re going to go through your garbage, they will scour your social media and find the emblems on your kids’ T-shirts from school and they’ll harass them’ ... It was one thing after the other. But none of it happened,” she says, adding that if we keep telling women that politics in Australia is toxic, it will only help maintain the status quo.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve heard it – [women saying] I don’t want to run because I saw what happened to Julia Gillard. And there’s a couple of things to focus on there – firstly, women doing our courses are unlikely to be

prime minister. For every Julia Gillard, there have been 20 women on the backbench where that has not happened. For many women in council chambers, it hasn’t happened, for many women in state politics, it hasn’t happened. Not everybody has a horror story.

“I’m not saying certain things don’t happen to some women, but we need to understand that it doesn’t happen to everyone and the benefits you can achieve from being involved in politics far outweigh the negatives.”

Heath feels strongly that women need to be confident to run for public office if they want to create positive change in society.

“The most misunderstood thing about politics is that in order to get something done you need to do it outside of politics,” she says.

“That is the biggest trick the devil ever played on the electorate, I think. Thinking that if you want to get something done, you can’t do it in politics, you have to do it outside, is garbage.

“There’s no better place to get something done than in that political chamber where you’re making decisions about policy outcomes that have an influence on everything else from that point on. It’s the best place to get things done.”



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