

The Wrap



SETTING THE EXAMPLE: *Women in leadership roles help to inspire others*

Equality goal for parliaments

More can be done to encourage women's participation in politics.

Equal representation of men and women should be the goal for all Australian parliaments, according to a group of women politicians who have broken through the male domination of state and federal politics.

While Australia has its first female prime minister, the group lamented that women are still seen as a novelty in parliament and are subject to more criticism than their male counterparts.

Speaking at a Commonwealth political forum in Canberra, Western Australian MP Lisa Baker said an average of less than 30 per cent female representation in parliament is not good enough for a country like Australia.

"More needs to be done to make politics attractive to women because we need more women in politics," Ms Baker said.

"Women bring a different perspective, they bring a rich and complex way of addressing issues which is sometimes different from the

way a man will address an issue and we have different life experiences."

As chair of a Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians committee, Ms Baker was the driving force behind the two-day w.comm forum at Parliament House, which gave young women from around the country a taste of political life.

She said politics is an attractive career choice for anyone wanting to make a difference in their community, but acknowledged it has clear downsides.

"This is a career which is extremely privileged. But the downside is obvious. You're entering a public life and elements of that can be very challenging."

One of these challenges is the simple act of choosing what to wear – an act that has occasionally helped some female MPs hit the headlines in a way they never intended.

One of seven women in the 17 member ACT Legislative Assembly,

Mary Porter said she was told at candidate school not to wear the colour pink because she'd be seen as weak. She said she's also often criticised for "not being mongrel enough".

"We do get criticised though more than the men, I think, because we are still a novelty and not the norm," she said.

Ms Porter said the young women at the w.comm forum had also identified party politics as a challenge to overcome.

"They haven't settled on where they might fit and they're actually quite frightened by the party machine. I think for some of them it's quite nerve racking."

Forum participant, and post graduate law student from Melbourne University, Nyadol Nyuon came to Australia in 2005 as a Sudanese refugee. Ms Nyuon said she admires the Australian political system for what it has achieved, but there's more work to be done.

"We live in a stable community, we live in a peaceful country, fundamental rights are respected ... so in a sense it works," she said.

"But as a person who has experiences as a refugee, topics such as boat people, issues of racism, Indigenous issues and human rights, I think definitely we can do better in."

Ms Nyuon said the forum helped provide a better understanding of political processes and personalities.

"I know if I was still in the refugee camp I would not have gone to university because I would not have been able to afford it, and who knows, maybe I would not have been alive.

"I'm looking forward to what I can do to say thank you to the Australian community for what it has done for me."

For that reason, politicians like Mary Porter hope that a political career is also on the radar for such young women because community work is where women politicians really excel.

"When we're not sitting I give a sigh of relief because I can get on with my real job, connecting with my community and being there for people," Ms Porter said.

"We know not all of these young women are going to be politicians, but I just hope that each one of them gets some insight that will help them make decisions, and get encouraged."

For more information on the w.comm forum and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, visit: www.wcomm.org •