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# INDIGENOUS POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

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## AND THE TIDES OF CHANGE

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*by Michelle Deshong*

The past 12 months have emerged as a critical year for political engagement due in part to the complexity of a hung parliament, with both sides of politics seeking to present a firm stand on policy issues and claim legitimacy in their decision-making. It has been a year of unpredictability and significant political change, offering many challenges for parliament and the political leadership. Public debate on issues as diverse as the carbon tax, asylum seeker policy, Indigenous representation and gendered politics has been emotive and occasionally vituperative. This paper will examine the way gender and race debates may impact on the formal participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women specifically within the current political landscape.

In October 2012 we witnessed the height of the gender debate with the then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, confronting Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, on his views about women in politics. Since her accession to office in 2010, Ms Gillard had been subjected to a range of criticisms that in her opinion, continued to reflect stereotypical views of the role of women and drew particular attention to the treatment of women in public life. Whilst these undercurrents persisted the Prime Minister responded strongly to what she (and many observers) regarded as the Opposition Leader's inappropriate attitudes and behaviour. 'Misogyny, sexism, every day from this leader of the Opposition ... that is all we have heard from him'.<sup>1</sup> It was a fight back, a calling if you will, of mistreatment and discriminatory rhetoric towards the Prime Minister and women generally.

The Australian public has also seen the Government employ some political tactics which seemed out of step with tradition and generally-accepted wisdom. In January 2013 Gillard announced that the general election would be held on 14 September—some eight months away. Some believed this to be a masterstroke, while others considered it a very risky move by the Prime Minister. For the most part though it was suggested Gillard was attempting to show confidence that she had the support

of the Australian public and was willing to put that to the test, especially with continued speculation about Kevin Rudd plotting a comeback.

Subsequent to the election announcement, and perhaps also drawing on the moment, Gillard made another calculated move. On 22 January 2013, the issue of Indigenous women in the Parliament was placed high on the agenda with Gillard announcing that Nova Peris would occupy Labor's number one spot on the party ticket for the Northern Territory Senate seat in the upcoming election, essentially making a 'captain's pick'.<sup>2</sup> There are two Senate seats for the Northern Territory and party politics are such that invariably one goes to Labor and one to the Liberals/Nationals. The candidate with the top spot on the ticket is almost certainly elected, hence this is the first time an Indigenous candidate has been picked in what is to be considered a winnable seat. If successful, Peris would be the first Aboriginal woman in the Federal Parliament and the first Aboriginal Labor Senator. It was a clear signal the Government recognised it needed to do more to engage with Indigenous women within the political process, however the execution of the announcement drew considerable criticism across many sectors of the Australian community. The move overrode the Australian Labor Party ('ALP') and Northern Territory branch processes, sidelining the current sitting Labor Senator, Trish McCrossin, after 15 years of service. It was particularly important given that Peris was outside the party at the time of the announcement.<sup>3</sup> Thus the selection was enveloped in a number of critical factors including Indigenous politics, party politics and process.

The selection of Peris as the key candidate was as peculiar in its timing as it was in its execution. Peris is a successful Indigenous sports woman and as such has lived a large part of her life in the public eye. Nova Peris was the first Indigenous person (and Indigenous woman) to win an Olympic Gold medal when she played for the Hockeyroos in 1996.<sup>4</sup> She was proclaimed as Young Australian of the Year in 2007 and has since gone on to work in youth

and education sectors. Despite Peris' prominence the 'captain's pick' drew criticism from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community. The move not only affected Senator Trish Crossin but also seemingly overlooked Marion Scrymgour, an Indigenous Labor member and former Northern Territory Education Minister who was intending to run against Crossin for pre-selection for the Senate ticket<sup>5</sup>—further impacting party process. In July 2013, Kevin Rudd (since being reinstated as Prime Minister in July 2013) subsequently affirmed support for Peris after consultation with the Northern Territory Labor executive.<sup>6</sup>

Backlash from the Aboriginal community questioned Peris' commitment to the people of the Northern Territory, her community work, and her understanding of the diverse issues faced by Indigenous people. As Alison Anderson noted, 'I don't think Territorians know her, especially Aboriginal people out in remote communities'.<sup>7</sup> Prominent Aboriginal sovereignty campaigner, Michael Anderson, condemned the Prime Minister's choice of Peris saying, 'I don't have the confidence in her ability to stand up for the hard fight that is coming our way ... Ms Peris is only being used as a public relations exercise for Labor'.<sup>8</sup> Yet other Indigenous leaders, such as former ALP national president Warren Mundine, lent his support to Peris saying it had 'corrected a wrong within the Labor Party'.<sup>9</sup> This in turn meant that Peris found herself at the centre of media attention, having to defend her position but also face criticism in relation to her gender and cultural identity. Within these events it may be assumed that all Indigenous people relate as a homogenous group and must support each other all the time. In fact, the opposite can also be true and this was witnessed in extremes in this particular case. There is a high level of expectation and responsibility from the Indigenous community more broadly for any Indigenous person moving into high profile roles and the rhetoric about tokenism or cynical political gestures does not permeate the discourse in the same way for non-Indigenous representatives.<sup>10</sup> Given the complexity of this issue consideration is given to what has transpired in relation to Indigenous representation in recent times.

In 2010, Australia welcomed its first Aboriginal member of the House of Representatives when the Liberals' Ken Wyatt was elected for the Western Australian seat of Hasluck. Prior to 2010, Hasluck had been held by Labor but witnessed a swing of 1.42 per cent toward the Liberals.<sup>11</sup> As a marginal seat the circumstance of having three Indigenous candidates (Dot Henry as an Independent and Glenice Smith for the Greens) out

of seven increased the possibility of an Indigenous representative being elected. The appointment of Adam Giles as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in March 2013 signalled another pivotal moment, with Giles becoming the first Indigenous head of government in Australian history.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps arising from a consequence of this new spotlight on Indigenous politics a record number of Indigenous people have nominated as candidates for the 2013 federal election. This in itself may demonstrate the willingness and capacity of Indigenous peoples to be considered on merit as worthy contributors, it may also be recognition that some of the pre-conceived or assumed barriers to elections have been overcome. Indigenous candidates are also moving away from the more traditional affiliation with the Labor Party and are now starting to mobilise across many parties to seek change. As demonstrated through both Wyatt and Giles, non-Labor parties have had more success in electing Indigenous representatives. In the Northern Territory elections in 2012 there was a record number of Indigenous candidates across all electorates and in particular in the bush seats. The analysis showed significant voter shift away from Labor with a 6.7 per cent swing against Labor in the context of a strong Indigenous voter turnout. As a result the Northern Territory Parliament now has seven Indigenous members, a majority of whom are in the Country Liberal Party ('CLP').

The Queensland seat of Leichardt will be an interesting electorate to watch. It is one of the largest electorates in the country, stretching from Cairns to Cape York and the Torres Strait, thus containing a significant Indigenous population. Two local Indigenous men are vying for election against the Liberal incumbent MP, Warren Entsch. Innisfail resident and previous Community Development Officer, Billy Gordon,<sup>13</sup> will contest the seat for Labor whilst Bruce Gibson from Hopevale is an Executive Director of Indigenous Employment Business Opportunities and will stand for the newly established Palmer United Party. Both Gordon and Gibson are first time candidates. The electorate of Leichardt is considered a marginal seat but in 2010 saw a 4.66 per cent swing to the LNP.<sup>14</sup> National level opinion polls suggest that Entsch will be returned. Regardless of the outcome, results in specific Leichardt polling booths will merit close attention. The Palmer United Party has also made a concerted effort to engage and support Indigenous candidates with negotiations taking place around the country. Clive Palmer announced recently that his party would be fielding six Indigenous candidates across Australia.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst many of these candidates are nominating in regional areas, Sean Armistead is contesting the seat of Melbourne for the Liberal Party. Sean is originally from Darwin and works as the manager of an Indigenous employment program in the corporate sector. Melbourne was traditionally a Labor seat until Adam Bandt stood in 2010, becoming the first Greens candidate elected to the House of Representatives. Armistead is a first time candidate and is contesting a large and diverse field in a significant urban electorate. It appears, however, that Adam Bandt will have the numbers to retain the seat, with polls revealing a high satisfaction rate for the Greens Deputy leader.<sup>16</sup>

Australia's First Nations Political Party was established prior to the Northern Territory elections and registered with the Australian Electoral Commission on 6 January 2011.<sup>17</sup> The Party encourages membership from all Australians, but specifically supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to stand as candidates in all state, territory and federal elections. As such the Party has announced the pre-selection of two Indigenous candidates for the 2013 federal election in the Northern Territory. Rosemarie Kunoth Monks OAM is a well-known leader and campaigner for rights and recognition of Indigenous people and will stand for the Senate. Kenneth Lechleitner previously contested the seat of Lingiari in 2010 as an Independent and will this time stand for the First Nations Political Party. The incumbent, Warren Snowdon, has held the seat of Lingiari for Labor since 2001, but was only able to secure a small margin in 2010 after a 7.4 per cent swing against the Labor.<sup>18</sup> Opinion polls suggest that if Snowdon is returned it will again be by a very small margin, however there is potential for a swing to the CLP. It is unlikely that either of these Indigenous candidates will be successful in their campaign, but an analysis of the Indigenous vote will be particularly valuable, especially following the Northern Territory election outcomes in 2012.

Senate seats will also be contested by other Indigenous candidates in South Australia and Western Australia. Ribgna Green is a Jaru man from Halls creek in Western Australia and has a long history of campaigning and leadership in Indigenous affairs. He will stand as an Independent for election in South Australia. Across the border in Western Australia, David Wirrapanda has also nominated as a National Party representative on the Senate ticket. His nomination will see him vying for the sixth Western Australian Senate spot pitting him against Greens Senator Scott Ludlam.<sup>19</sup> Wirrapanda, like Peris, has had a stellar career in sport and has utilised his profile to advance the David Wirrapanda Foundation that provides mentoring programs for Aboriginal young people. Unlike

Peris though, Wirrapanda has not experienced any public criticism or backlash following his announcement to enter politics. Notably, the circumstances and the processes are different in terms of Senate seats but it does further highlight a disparity in the way women are scrutinised in the public sphere.

This mobilisation demonstrates a willingness amongst Indigenous people to be proactive in political engagement. Some success can be measured by the increased number of Indigenous candidates standing and a further analysis of marginal seats and voting trends. However, the broader question is still looming, in terms of when will Indigenous candidates be pre-selected in winnable seats, and how can we address the ongoing under-representation of Indigenous women? It is perhaps not by accident that both Indigenous women standing as candidates are in the Northern Territory. This may be due to the fact that the Northern Territory has had considerable representation of Indigenous women in its Parliament and that they have been an integral part of the political environment. If this is the case, how can this be replicated in other states and territories to invoke the same level of engagement and formal representation for Indigenous women across the country? The possibility of parties engaging in affirmative action strategies such as quotas and development/mentoring opportunities for Indigenous women will be one of the fundamental ways to address this void.

The other aspect to consider is what impact, if any, the sexism debate has had on Indigenous women in particular. The public furore exposed a range of behaviours and attitudes towards women that were both unwelcome and unsettling. In the broader context, suggestions were made that the deployment of the so-called 'gender card' meant that the Prime Minister demanded special treatment because she was a woman. Indigenous women are not isolated from this debate as we have seen in the case of Peris where she had both gender and cultural issues to contend with. The impact of intersectional discrimination may be quite an important consideration for them, their families and their community when seeking positions of political office.

The Prime Minister claimed that sexism had marginalised her participation and had the capacity to do the same for many women. It was observed that when faced with this public controversy 'other women watching will potentially stay out of the political game', prompting them to ask why they would want to be subjected to that level of scrutiny and criticism.<sup>20</sup> When this is considered, Indigenous women may be hesitant to take on roles in public life and

subject themselves to denigration not only based on their gender but cultural identity and race as well. Julia Gillard (as former Prime Minister) noted in a press statement that 'Australians would have been more outraged at her treatment as a women if she were black', providing an analogy that 'If I was the first Indigenous Prime Minister, and Tony Abbott had gone out and stood next to a sign that said ditch the black bastard, that would have been the end of a political career'.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, the white privileged feminist debate versus racism debate does not wash. As witnessed in the case of Peris, there is no evidence to suggest that race or ethnicity would not be a matter for public debate. This may remain one of the most difficult challenges to overcome.

The 2013 federal election will be a game changer on so many levels. Apart from the debate around our two-party preferred system, policy positions and leadership of the parties, the impending change in Indigenous representation may be a benchmark for the future. Sometimes it takes one or two to pave the way for others and the numbers of Indigenous candidates remains promising. The ensuing debate and analysis of the result will be critical for Indigenous Australia in the future.

\* This article looks at a range of Indigenous candidates standing for election and is not a comprehensive coverage of all candidates.

*Michelle Deshong is a PhD Candidate at James Cook University and an international advocate for gender equality. This article was accepted prior to the 2013 election.*

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#### Portraits of Landscape Series

Vanessa Russ  
Indian ink and water on Arches paper, 2012  
Images courtesy of the Mundaring Arts Centre

