

*Shaking the ‘Bear Pit’ Foundations: The First Feminist in the NSW Parliament (1925-1927)*¹

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ABSTRACT

The all-male NSW parliament earned the soubriquet ‘Bear Pit’ in the nineteenth century when members’ verbal and physical behaviours began to resemble those of the blood sport, bear-baiting. The parliament remained a female-free zone until after the *Legal Status Act* 1918 granted women the right to stand for the Legislative Assembly, although it was another seven years before a woman won a seat. In 1925 endorsed Nationalist and feminist, Millicent Preston Stanley became the first woman to enter the chamber. Her election attracted considerable press coverage, the admiration of most women’s organisations and the condemnation of those for whom it constituted a transgression of the God-given order. The foundations of this historic House were further unsettled when she rose to speak. As Deborah Brennan suggests, Preston Stanley’s inaugural speech on 26 August 1925, in which she censured the views of men opposed to women in parliament had a ‘galvanising effect’, as did her *j'accuse* speech on 29 November 1926 in which she condemned the Government’s tactics as well as Minister George Cann’s attempt to bribe her to cross the floor and vote with Labor. This paper examines features of her feminist agenda, her method of pursuing it, and the responses to these two speeches. It argues her stance and her oratorical choices in these speeches were, in the short term, counter-productive, given the real politik of her situation.

The Bear Pit

‘The heavens won’t fall because a woman’s skirts rustle on the sacred benches’ said Millicent Preston Stanley, the first woman elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, although she had every intention of giving the parliamentary structures a jolly good shake. Before her election she had familiarised herself with the *modus operandi* of the Legislative Assembly and she was not oblivious to the challenges ahead of her, but ably prepared to meet them.

In the nineteenth century, ‘abusive language, personal invective, and occasional physical assault’ became a common feature of debate in the NSW Legislative Assembly. During 1886, the previously ‘infrequent incidents’ of verbal and physical combat became ‘one continuous round’ with members behaving not like English gentlemen but ‘chimney sweeps’. According to a ‘stranger in the colony’, the House had become a place where ‘personal squabbles of the most vulgar type are aired’ and ‘abuse is mistaken for argument, assertion for proof, and coarseness for force’.² Parliamentary behaviour had become so boisterous that the Assembly attracted the soubriquet, Bear Pit, in recognition of its resemblance to the blood

sport of bear baiting.³ Some spectators were appalled by the disorderliness, although others tended to own the image as a badge of masculine honour, as in ‘Our “Bear Garden”’.⁴

The bear pit descriptor of the NSW parliament remained in the public imaginary beyond the nineteenth century as the ‘masculine behavioural norms’ did not disappear but ‘continued to flourish’ into the twentieth century.⁵ They were certainly flourishing when Millicent Preston Stanley, took her seat on the opposition benches in August 1925. A Nationalist Party candidate, she was elected as one of the five representatives of the Eastern Suburbs electorate in Sydney. She had served her political apprenticeship in the Women’s Liberal League (WLL) founded in 1902 by Hilma Molyneux Parkes having taken on various roles in this and other Liberal organisations. Over the next decade or so, she honed her oratorical talents, developed her press contacts, expanded her networks with powerful conservative politicians, and fostered her political ambitions. Central to her ambitions was her determination to ensure legislation was enacted that would improve the lives of women and children. This goal had its genesis in her early childhood experiences. She had witnessed the death of her infant brother, her father’s desertion of the family, and her mother’s struggle to raise her remaining two children. As journalist, Mary Liddell noted, she had ‘early contact with matters of public moment’ having been brought up by a mother who took an ‘earnest interest in the welfare of women and children’.⁶ Millicent would later claim, with some justification, that she had ‘always been a feminist’, explaining that a feminist ‘believes in equal rights for men and women in all spheres’.⁷ Millicent certainly believed in equal rights for women and was determined to see these legislated in New South Wales.

Equality, fraternity, humanity

At the time of her election, Millicent was President of the Feminist Club of NSW whose motto was equality, fraternity and humanity and whose aim was to achieve equality of status, opportunity and payment between men and women in all spheres. After taking on the role of President in 1920, she announced an ambitious platform that focussed on supporting government legislation to improve the lives of women and children, vocational training for women, and motherhood endowment to allow married women financial independence. Under her presidency, the Feminist Club engaged in several public campaigns, organising deputations to Ministers to petition for better care for mental

defectives, a Chair of Midwifery at Sydney University to reduce infant and maternal mortality, and equal custody rights for mothers.

The endorsement of this woman, this feminist, by the Nationalist Party was not universally applauded amongst the ranks of this conservative political party. Millicent herself was aware that she held ‘some ideals which have not yet found a place in the Nationalist objective’, but she hoped she would be able to exercise ‘intelligent influence from within’.⁸ Her outspokenness attracted public criticism from Nationalist Party members. Captain Marks, for instance, a vocal opponent of her ambition to enter parliament asserted that ‘women’s ennobling sphere is encompassed by the four walls of her home’. Millicent, in a letter to the editor, cheekily pointed out that unless women could leave those four walls they would not be able to attend a polling booth to vote for him.⁹ In her role as party organiser, she grew accustomed to serving ripostes in equal measure to those who criticised her stance. So adept had she become at these retorts that the ‘swift return of a punching ball’ had become her oratorical signature.¹⁰

Millicent entered the NSW Bear Pit with a clearly-articulated feminist agenda and no intention of adopting a subservient role: she was there to stir things up. The issue for her was how to engage with the culture of this Bear Pit in order to achieve her feminist goals. Enid Lyons, the first woman elected to the federal parliament two decades later, considered that if a woman were to display any masculine characteristic, anything unfeminine in the parliament, it would be ‘fatal’.¹¹ While women had entered the public sphere in considerable numbers, prescribed gendered and classed behaviour norms had not yet adapted to this social change. Did Millicent consider the possibility, as she stepped into the breach, that her behavioural choices might be fatal? When she rose to speak did she weigh up any possible fatal effects that might follow from her oratorical choices?

Not a fit place

By 1925 seven decades of existence had firmly established the NSW Legislative Assembly as a male domain and fostered the perception that parliament was not a fit place for a woman. This view was not confined to men. The Australian Women’s National League, for instance, actively opposed women entering the legislature and novelist, Ethel Turner, thought that not only was parliament an unfit place for a woman but any woman entering parliament would lose her ‘womanliness’. As political historian, Marian Sawer points out, in some

sections of Australian society, ‘women’s entry into the male domain of public life was viewed as a serious threat to the social order and the social economy’.¹² However, it was not only such social attitudes, but also long-standing legal barriers that prevented women from parliamentary participation in NSW.

As political historian, Tony Cuneen has demonstrated, until 1918 the denotation of the word, ‘person’ applied only to a man unless specifically stated otherwise and only persons, that is to say only men, were eligible for election to the NSW parliament.¹³ When legislation was introduced in 1916 to amend this definition, the bill was defeated by opponents such as conservative MLC, Dr John Nash who considered women would be ‘unsexed’ by entering parliament and conservative Thomas Waddell who blustered that women were not capable of looking after both domestic and political affairs. The successful passage of another bill in 1918, was assisted by supporters such as Attorney General David Hall and Thomas Bavin MLA¹⁴ who argued that women had proven themselves worthy by the ‘spirit of devotion’ they had displayed during the war and the 1917 General Strike.¹⁵ The bill was supported by opposition leader, John Storey who suggested that women would improve both the ‘morale’ and ‘morals’ of parliament. Other supporters emphasised the view that the ‘fair sex’ would be useful helpers for men in the House. The *Women’s Legal Status Act 1918* opened a crack in the patriarchal parliamentary foundations, a crack that four women tried, unsuccessfully, to prise further apart in the 1920 election. Millicent’s candidature in the 1922 election also faltered, so she was undoubtedly reassured to find herself ensconced on the sacred benches at her second (almost thwarted)¹⁶ attempt in 1925.

The Lady Member

The 27th parliament opened on Wednesday 12 August 1925. It was a cold, wet, windy day. Members and guests arriving at Parliament House were decked out with mackintoshes and umbrellas. There were traffic jams outside in Macquarie Street and inside men and women jostled for seats in the public galleries. Millicent’s entry into the Chamber caused considerable excitement, as women tapped their umbrellas on the floor in eager anticipation of her performance. The press scrutinised her dress and demeanour. Complementing her gold-embroidered ‘gown of black Ottoman’ Millicent wore a ‘single string pearl necklace’,¹⁷ a black satin cloche hat adorned with gold braid and carried an envelope-style patent leather vanity bag. One reporter concluded that she looked very much

like the distinguished English actress, Miss Irene Vanbrugh.¹⁸ She appeared to be quite at home in the Chamber as she made her way to the back row of the Opposition benches where she sat, silently, taking copious notes throughout the proceedings. Her initial appearance suggested she would conduct herself according to conventional gender norms.

However, Millicent's presence in the Chamber posed a problem for the Sergeant-at-arms. His established form of announcement of the Speaker's entrance, 'Gentlemen, Mr Speaker' did not meet the demands of chivalry required by the presence of a woman in the House. James Dooley, the newly appointed Speaker, looking to the precedent set in Western Australia, where Edith Cowan became the first woman elected to any Australian parliament in 1921, advised the Sergeant-at-arms of the appropriate adjustment. The Sergeant-at-arms then ceremoniously announced to the Chamber, 'Hon. Members, the Speaker.' Nevertheless, some members continued to display uncertainty as to whether Millicent, herself, should be referred to as the 'Woman Member' or the 'Lady Member', their particular choices, perhaps, indicating their personal attitudes to the status of the woman in what many considered should remain a man's domain.

Millicent's obvious visibility, the lone woman amongst the eighty-nine men, prompted some members to articulate their concerns about her presence in the Chamber. Fellow Nationalist Party member, Albert Bruntnell, for instance, made clear he was not a supporter of 'women coming into the hurly-burly of political life' although he conceded, in line with prevailing perceptions of women's supposed superior virtue, that Millicent's presence might bring 'moral, material and spiritual welfare' to the House.¹⁹ Labor Member, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, expressed grudging admiration for her, although he articulated his regret that she was 'not on [his] side of the house'. However, he confidently asserted, she would support the various measures that would be brought in by the Government for the benefit of women and children. His confidence would soon be shown to be misplaced as Millicent rejected Labor's devious and dishonest truncation of the promised widows' pension legislation. Other members waited until she rose to speak before voicing their opposition to her presence and her feminist agenda.

A maiden speech

As Millicent sat silently through the Address in Reply and Censure debate, press reporters grew keen to know when she would deliver her maiden speech. They were determined not

to miss this historic occasion, and were, perhaps, curious as to whether she would live up to the reputation she had established for herself as ‘one of Sydney’s foremost lady speakers’²⁰ who had the ‘rare gift of holding an audience with a voice of magnetic sweetness’.²¹ Would her usual quick wit, fiery retorts and fearlessness in speech be restrained by her audience?

There was also speculation about whether the Speaker would give her the call ahead of other members based on the ‘chivalrous principle of ladies first’.²² Afterwards, however, one newspaper suggested she waited until the last day of debate since ‘A woman always wants the last word’.²³ Millicent did not get the last word in the Address in Reply debate, although the words she spoke certainly stirred the pot, as she had no doubt intended they should.

On 26 August 1925, the women’s gallery was crowded to suffocation. Women who had long anticipated the day when a woman’s voice would echo in the Chamber that had been the sole province of men for nearly three quarters of a century, viewed the scene from above, as Millicent herself had done so many times in preparation for this moment. As fellow Nationalist, Richard Ball resumed his seat, a number of members sought the call but it was Millicent who caught the Speaker’s eye, at last. As she stood at the end of the row of the opposition’s back bench, she could survey the cohorts of men in suits before her and glimpse above her in the gallery, women’s radiant smiles and approving nods as her resonant contralto voice filled the Chamber.

She may have been a novice in the House, but she was no neophyte orator. In her maiden speech she played to the members in the Chamber, the women in the gallery and the press who would report her ninety minute maiden speech. The descriptor, ‘maiden’ was particularly apt for Millicent’s first speech in the house: at the age of forty-two she was unmarried and undoubtedly still a ‘maiden’.²⁴ Aware of her primary audience, Millicent began her speech in an appropriately womanly manner:

In rising to address this Assembly for the first time one is necessarily conscious of a thrill of enthusiasm, for the echo of issues long settled are still here, the romance of great personalities long silent still linger, the traditions of a century that is gone are still evergreen and inspiring, making this Chamber the most historic spot in all Australia. It is a privilege to share in the traditions of this House – it is a greater responsibility to maintain them unsullied.²⁵

With these opening words she also captured her audience's attention in the galleries. She was aware the 'advent of a woman' in the parliament was not a 'popular innovation', she confided. She eased herself through this gentle ridiculing of the age-old assumptions about women's fitness for parliament into a more robust demolition of the prejudices of those men who sought to prevent women from participating in the legislature because they considered women lacked the capacity for reason. Men who held this view, she asserted, were 'enwrapped in the moth-eaten trappings of an age that is gone' and those who thought women should never have power were 'blinded and poisoned by their own prejudices'. She dismissed the idea that women were not fit for parliament, riposting that indeed some were not but that was also true of some men. Banning all women from parliament would be as illogical as banning all men. And, if parliament was really not a fit place for a woman, that was the most serious indictment of men who, after all, had created it. Her criticisms stung some of those in the Chamber although they were approved and applauded by women in the galleries, and indeed by some in the press.

Citing developments in the women's movement in other parts of the world, particularly the USA and Scandinavia, she argued that where women participated in the legislature, the resulting legislation was of the 'best character'. The enfranchisement of women that had occurred throughout the world in the past decade was not merely a passing phase but a new and permanent situation that would impinge on the men in this parliament. This was a warning to Members that she may be the first female in this parliament but she would not be the last. The audience in the women's gallery applauded although some of the men in the Chamber were stung by her increasingly caustic criticisms of their sex. The rumblings and *sotto voce* murmurings on the Government benches reportedly provoked her to say that she didn't mind interjections but would rather they were audible.²⁶

Millicent went on to censure the parliament's previously unsatisfactory legislative record, a criticism that she did not hesitate to apply to her own party when it had been in government as well as to the Labor party currently occupying the government benches. She argued that, because women were subject to the laws made by men, they suffered the consequences of inadequate legislation as well as the unfortunate results of men's neglect to legislate for the great questions of vital importance to women. Importantly, issues affecting women had ramifications beyond women: 'women's questions are national questions' and 'national

'questions are women's questions' became her mantra. Millicent's women's agenda included maternal and infant mortality, care of the feeble-minded, widows' pensions, health reform, and, although she did not mention it in her maiden speech, equal child custody for mothers and fathers. Despite the limitations placed on her as the lone woman on the opposition benches, these were the issues she would seek to have dealt with in this term of parliament.

When she turned her attention to the subject of Lang Labor's agenda as outlined in the Governor's speech, her tone became more severe. She declared the government's agenda to be filled with all sorts of 'flimsy things' that ignored the 'crying needs of the State'.

Maternal mortality did not feature but the reintroduction of the forty-four hour week did. Infant mortality was ignored in favour of the restoration of seniority for the 1917 strikers. The election promise of pensions for widows was to be truncated to pensions for widows with dependent children up to the age of fourteen. The appointment of women to the Upper House was a 'barren honour' since they were to be put there to 'chop their heads off'. She did not confine her criticisms to the Labor Government: the Nationalist and Progressive parties had also been tardy in supporting women's entry to parliament and were too focussed on rural/urban differences to deal with the issues that mattered. It was this, she contended, that had handed the election victory to Labor.

In my own way

The putative convention of hearing new members' first speeches without interjections was more often breached than observed in the 27th parliament. If Millicent expected to be heard in silence because of her newness in the House, her sex, or the significance of the historic occasion, she was to be disappointed. Indeed, she did not seem at all surprised by the first interjection from fellow Nationalist, James Arkins, who questioned her statements about maternal mortality. Responding to his question with 'I am coming to that in a few moments if the hon. Member will allow me to deal with the matter in my own way', she did not miss a beat, but went on, embedding the answer to his question in her argument. This was the kind of behaviour she had grown accustomed to engaging with in her platform speeches and she had a ready repertoire of techniques for handling interjections.

Nor did she seem perturbed by the interjections from the other side of the Chamber. These swiftly followed, as she sang from the same 'red scare' songbook that Prime Minister Stanley Bruce and Attorney General John Latham would use in the federal election three months

later. Labor had permitted the Industrial Workers of the World to infiltrate the party. The case of Donald Grant, former leader of IWW, one of the Sydney Twelve charged with conspiracy in 1916 who had joined the Labor party and had been elected to the Sydney City Council, was clear evidence of this. More alarmingly, the communist-inspired Seaman's Union under Jacob Johannsen and Tom Walsh were now ruling the waterfront. The real danger there, of course, came from the power behind Walsh – his wife, Adela Pankhurst Walsh, with her 'Bedlamic theories' of thrift clogging the wheels of industry and causing unemployment. Most treacherously, government interference in the bureaucracy and the judiciary showed that Labor was more concerned with looking after its own than with legislating for the good of the nation. This was clear in the vendetta prosecuted against treasury official, Bertram Stephens.²⁷

Government members, stung by her rabid anti-labor stance, attempted to pierce her composure with their interjections. As her speech became increasingly provocative, their interjections became increasingly vituperative. Some refuted her statements; one accused her of 'lack of knowledge of the facts' and lack of 'logic' in dealing with them; another alleged she was 'playing up to the people' in the gallery; and another taunted her with the defection of Mr Charles Oakes',²⁸ to which she responded with rapid fire, that he had been a Labor man once 'when the Labour party had a soul, but today it has none'. She had opened the party political floodgates inviting government members to reciprocate – and reciprocate they did.

Throughout her speech she showed no sign of being rattled by the onslaught, having developed sound strategies for dealing with hecklers during her years as a party organiser. She was adept at repeating the interjection, perhaps to ensure it was recorded in Hansard, and even naming the interjector before responding to it. Sometimes she sounded like a mother scolding recalcitrant children. On one occasion she said sternly: 'I am rather amused at the attitude of some hon. members. They appear to imagine that they have only to hit back and tell me that some Government somewhere, at some time, did something and I will immediately collapse'. Collapse she did not, nor did she resile from expressing her strong criticisms of the government, and riposting with counter-criticisms to those hurled at her.

However, having stirred emotions in the House with her contentious issues and stinging attacks, she brought her speech to a more demure end:

I only hope, realising as I do that every woman's question is a national question, that every national question is a woman's question, I shall be able to make a slight contribution to the bettering of conditions of the people of the State as a result of my sojourn in the House.

The heavens may not have fallen but when Millicent resumed her seat there were tremors of a kind on both sides of the Chamber. Fellow Nationalist, John Fitzpatrick, who spoke after the 'lady member', criticised her 'lecture' and implied she was more concerned with performing for the gallery than dealing with matters in the House. Labor Member, Major John Connell, referred to her 'oratorical ability' that was 'far above the average' but, given her comments about improving the plight of working class women, he criticised her membership of the very party that 'always fought the working man'. More overtly critical of the 'lady member' was Labor Member for North Shore, Cecil Murphy.²⁹ Somewhat insincerely, he complimented her on her 'eloquent language', criticised her inability to draw conclusions 'stamped with the hallmark of logic' equal to men; condemned her misrepresentation of Labor as 'blood thirsty bushrangers'; and censured her for not understanding the difference between speeches made 'on the hustings for the purpose of securing votes from electors' and parliamentary debate. Millicent may not have secured the approbation of all members but she had attracted admiration outside the Chamber.

Millicent's performance prompted a range of responses in the press. An *Evening News* reporter noted that 'her self-assurance had not deserted her'³⁰ while a *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter claimed that Millicent had demonstrated that she was 'armed to deal with that ever-present irritant, the interjector'.³¹ A Herald sub-editor added the sub-headline, 'A New Terror' to accompany a rather hyperbolic report that Millicent had 'brought terror into the Government benches'.³² Her performance was a 'raging, whirling torrent' that caused Labor members to 'writhe' and 'squirm'. Members on both sides of the House had certainly reacted to her provocations, but their responses were less akin to terror than to anger and contempt.

Devious, tortuous and sinuous practices

Millicent had proved herself able to handle the bear pit culture and to reciprocate in like manner the slings and arrows hurled at her. As her parliamentary term continued, however, she encountered less familiar plots and ploys both on the floor of the House and in the

parliamentary corridors that thwarted her attempts to introduce her desired legislation. She had listed her Private Members Infants Custody bill shortly after her arrival in the parliament but it did not appear on the Notices of Motion for a year. Following her bill's first reading on 2 November 1926 it was listed for a second reading on 16 November 1926. However, that day the total time set aside for Private Members' business was taken up by a myriad of questions without notice, many of which were Dorothy Dixers on the government side of the House. The bill was not given a second reading on that day nor was it listed again during her parliamentary term.

A similar fate met her attempt on 9 November 1926 to move that a bill be introduced to provide for the care, control and segregation of feeble-minded people. Her motion, the first on the Notices of Motion and Orders of the Day, was pushed aside by the manipulation of parliamentary procedure by Arthur Tonge, member for North Shore in collaboration with Health Minister George Cann. Tonge moved an urgency motion that his listed Motion No 2 should be considered as a matter of urgency. This strategy caused considerable dissension in the House, with Bavin and other opposition members pointing out the irregularity and inappropriateness of his urgency motion. However, Cann swiftly moved the gag. This ensured Tonge's Urgency Motion was put and passed and his Motion No 2 could be dealt with in the time set aside for Private Members' business. The time was then consumed with debate on Tonge's motion that included the establishment of a select committee. This protracted debate ensured that no time for Private Members' business remained to deal with Millicent's Motion No 1.

In the light of these two events earlier that month, it is not surprising that, on 29 November Millicent rose to her feet to deliver a stinging *j'accuse* speech during the Supply debate. She poured her vitriol on Cann, Tonge, and the Government, accusing them of 'devious, tortuous and sinuous practices'. The government had been in trouble for some time with internal rifts and the threat of defection by three members opposed to Lang. In September the Opposition, opportunely, moved a censure motion which Premier Lang managed to defeat with a compromise promise of an early election that appeased the government members threatening defection. Lang introduced the November Supply bill as a means of deferring this promised early election.

Delaying the election had become a priority for Lang because he wanted to change electoral procedures before another election so as to eliminate multi-seat electorates. He believed, erroneously as it would transpire, that single seat electorates would benefit Labor. Importantly also, Lang was determined to remain in power for the May 1927 visit to Australia by the Duke and Duchess of York to open the new federal parliament house in Canberra. The government needed at least four months' and ideally six months' Supply to facilitate Lang's plan. However, the numbers for the Supply bill's passage were not rock solid for the government. The threat of the government being defeated on the floor of the House was occupying the attention of Lang and other government members, particularly Minister George Cann.

Preston Stanley began her Supply Debate speech by asserting that 'If the Government could be trusted to keep its promises there would be very little objection to passing the proposals for granting of four months' supply'. However, her contention was that the Government could not be trusted. Her 'bitter experience' over the last few months, compounded by her recent encounters with the government's 'logrolling' had confirmed its untrustworthiness. During the fifteen months in the House, she had encountered roadblocks to her feminist agenda: her attempts to initiate action on infant and maternal mortality were glossed over while her initiative in introducing a Private Members' Infants Guardianship bill was thwarted. More egregious, was the government's 'trick' and 'stratagem' that allowed Tonge's non-urgent motion to usurp her more important motion for a Mental Defectives bill to deal with the pressing problem of the feeble-minded. However, it was not only these frustrations that aroused her ire but also the 'improper approach' made to her by Minister Cann, the previous Friday, 26 November. Logrolling, the trading of favours by reciprocal voting, may have been acceptable practice in the parliament but it was not, in her view, honourable or ethical.

She described the 'improper approach' made to her on the previous Friday as nothing more or less than a 'bribe': if she would support the government in the Supply bill she would be amply rewarded. Specifically, she could have the opportunity of having her Private Members Infants Guardianship bill and a Mental Health bill introduced into the House, along with other legislative measures she had been arguing for; she could dictate the terms of the budget; and she could even have the opportunity of setting the date for the election. In

return, she must cross the floor and vote with the Government on the Supply bill. In the House she quoted Cann's words: 'You can, if you are prepared, occupy a most important position in the political life of the country. You have only to cross the floor of the House and support the Labor Party on Monday morning and this is the position you will be in'. Was she tempted by this bribe? Could she compromise her values to achieve her feminist goals?

As Millicent told the House in graphic terms, she rejected Cann's offer on the grounds that she was 'not prepared to buy even that legislation at the price' of her integrity, honesty and honour. She read into Hansard the letter she had written to Cann following his offer the previous Friday, in which she stated that she 'could not think of casting my vote' as Cann had suggested 'even though it would place the fate of the Government in my hands and ensure the introduction and passage of legislation which I have so long advocated'. She justified her rejection on the basis that the Government was 'prepared to buy or barter or to bribe or to purchase' its position and she could not do so 'at such a price'. Cann should not have been surprised at her rejection given her statement in her maiden speech that she would 'never favour legislation evolved from the false and extreme theories of a Labour party'.

Is there anything wrong with that?

If her 1925 maiden speech had caused undulations, Supply Debate speech caused fiery eruptions as bear pit behaviours were unleashed. Not only had she rejected Cann's offer, but she had exposed him on the floor of the House. Not surprisingly, Cann shot back antagonistic retorts such as 'you are a squib', 'You are not sincere', and 'You are misleading the women'. Initially, he denied he had made the offer to her, and then affirmed he had done so, but without the Government's knowledge, and he then asked, rhetorically, 'Is there anything wrong with that?' – a question Millicent undoubtedly answered in the affirmative, although there is no Hansard record of her response. Cann also accused her of not having written the letter she read to the parliament. Challenged on this assertion, he responded, incredulously, that he didn't 'know who drafted it' but 'certainly' she did not. When the Speaker accorded Cann the opportunity to reply to her speech, he accused her of giving away confidences and being nothing more than Bavin's 'faithful vassal'. She was a 'fraud of a member' who was 'sailing under false colours' because she did not 'represent the womanhood of New South Wales', a point in which he was partially correct, albeit

misguided. Overlooking the fact that she represented an electorate not simply the ‘fair sex’, he judged her the ‘most callous representative of women who could be in the House’ and asserted she had ‘lost the confidence of the womanhood of this state’, a statement clearly at odds with the views of many women’s organisations which admired the stance she was taking.

Other members of the government joined in the chorus of antagonistic retorts: ‘You deserve all you get’, ‘Why should you have precedence over Mr Tonge’ and ‘Do you honestly believe that for the sake of a problematical two months you have the right to sacrifice those women and children’. These interjections indicated the distorted view that many members had about Millicent’s constituency, mistaking her as a representative of all women, rather than one of the five representatives of the Eastern Suburbs electorate. For Millicent, these responses highlighted the government’s ‘farcical’ and ‘absurd’ position, and the distorted way in which parliamentary business was managed.

Millicent’s own attempts to counter Cann’s assertions by offering a personal explanation were shut down by the Deputy Speaker, Major John Connell, who ruled she was ‘not entitled to reply to the statements made by the Minister so far as their general accuracy is concerned’. She would only be permitted to make a statement if the Minister had misquoted or misrepresented her. Millicent’s last words on the matter were an attempt to remedy Cann’s misquoting of her. Correcting his inaccurate representation of her use of language, she asserted she had never used, nor would she ever use, ‘such a term as “kidding”’. What she had said to him was, ‘neither party in the House was particularly favourable to the aspirations of women’. If it had not been clear previously, the stark truth of this statement was now indelibly impressed upon her.

Following this explosion, there was one lone voice who spoke publically in Millicent’s defence. Fellow Nationalist Tom Hoskins expressed his concerns about the depths to which the government would go ‘to get another two months lease of life’ even after it had lost the confidence of the people and condemned Cann for his behaviour to Millicent. ‘I want to tell the hon. Member that the unkind and unmannerly remarks he made this afternoon were not deserved’, he chided. However, once again, the Speaker shut down debate.

On the sacred benches

While the very presence of a woman in the parliament was an affront for some Members, Millicent's feminist agenda was altogether too much of a challenge for others who wished to preserve the patriarchal *status quo*. Equality was not even on the horizon. Her pursuit of this agenda in a way that contravened the 'gendered logic of appropriateness' was a provocation not to be tolerated.³³ As political historian, Marian Sawer argues, the 'delayed entry' of women into parliament meant that a confrontational discursive environment unreceptive to 'feminist policy perspectives' had been well and truly established.³⁴ The men on both sides of the House were unreceptive to Millicent's feminist agenda, and the more so because of her assertive, masculine oratorical style and her quick-witted retorts to their interjections. As Sawer further argues, a woman was judged by a 'double standard': if she exhibited gender appropriate behaviours, her parliamentary performance, measured against the 'supposedly gender-neutral norms of parliament' would judge her a poor performer. However, should she emulate these masculine behaviour codes, as Millicent did, she was determined to be 'exhibiting inappropriate traits'.³⁵ Millicent's behaviour flouted gendered behaviour norms by emulating the bear pit behaviours of the male members.

Although the heavens had not fallen when her skirts rustled on the sacred benches, there was undoubtedly turbulence surrounding the Chamber following her speeches. Neither speech prompted the kind of legislative action she had hoped to achieve as the first feminist in the parliament. The oratorical expertise she had acquired during her many years as a platform speaker was not valued and applauded in the parliament, and ultimately proved counter-productive for her agenda, at least in the short term.

While a woman's emotionality could be excused, Millicent's stiletto wit, assertiveness and criticisms of men were beyond the pale. Her confidence and assertiveness placed her in the category of the cantankerous, quarrelsome woman so frequently derided in the Biblical book of Proverbs. Her independent stance indicated that she did not intend to be a helpmate or handmaiden to the men. Any expectations that she would raise the morale and the morals of parliament were dashed by her performance. Parliament was clearly not a fit place for a woman as it did indeed 'unsex' them.

Was Millicent's display of unfeminine behaviour fatal? At the 1927 election, she found her level of party support slipping and, having been moved to the Bondi electorate, she was not re-elected. Arguably, her stance may have set back the cause for conservative women

desirous of serving in the NSW parliament for some time. It was almost five decades before another Liberal woman, Mary Meillon, was elected to the NSW parliament in 1973.

Nevertheless, Millicent went on to achieve much of her feminist agenda outside the parliament. And perhaps, amidst the flurry, and the interjections and ripostes, and the capricious use of the urgency motion and gag, Millicent had, in fact, sufficiently shaken the bear pit foundations to open a crack through which her feminist agenda would eventually make its way: The *Lunacy (Amendment) Act* and the *Guardianship of Infants Act* were passed in 1934.

¹ This paper was presented at the Australian Historical Association Conference, *Foundational Histories*, at the University of Sydney, July 2015.

² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1886, 5 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13616662>

³ Bear Baiting was prohibited by the *Cruelty to Animals Act 1835*.

⁴ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 30 October 1886, 32
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/71069355>

⁵ Marian Sawer ‘Entering too late? Women in parliamentary politics in New South Wales.’ Paper for 6th ECPR General Conference, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011.

http://www.ecprnet.eu/conferences/general_conference/Reykjavik/paper_details.asp?paperid=1011

⁶ *Evening News* 1 June 1925 p.6 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/113921462>

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald* 15 November 1934 p.4 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17141064>

⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 October 1924 p.2 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/28071257>

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 March 1922 p.10 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/15970714>

¹⁰ *The Argus* 6 April 1922 p.8 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4671019>

¹¹ Enid Lyons *Among the Carrion Crows* Sydney Rigby 1972 p.5

¹² Marian Sawer ‘Housekeeping the State: Women and Parliamentary Politics in Australia’ Papers on Parliament No 17 September 1992
<http://www.aph.gov.au/~/~link.aspx? id=4770FE53E2AC484480D2431A451B44C0& z=z>

¹³ Tony Cuneen ‘One of the ‘Laws Women Need’ – The Women’s Legal Status Act of 1918’

<http://www.forbessociety.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/tony9.pdf>

¹⁴ Thomas Bavin was a barrister, member of the University of Sydney Senate, and member of the Bar Council and would become leader of the Nationalist Party in 1925 when Millicent entered the parliament.

¹⁵ Millicent had been one of the initiators and managers in 1917 of the Women’s Loyal Service Bureau that had sought to support the war effort as NSW was affected by the General Strike.

¹⁶ Millicent was not initially endorsed for the Eastern Suburbs seat for the 1925 election. After challenging the committee’s decision she was included on the Nationalist ballot paper as an endorsed candidate.

¹⁷ *The Sun* 12 August 1925 p.7 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/223729568>

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 August 1925 p.8 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16235453>

¹⁹ NSWPD 19 August 1925 p.205

²⁰ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* 12 December 1917 p.3

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/138741904>

²¹ *Table Talk* (Melbourne) 29 May 1919 p.2 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/148563456>

²² *The Sun* 23 August 1925 p.3 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/223736639>

²³ *Truth* 30 August 1925 p.8 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/168717007>

²⁴ The term, ‘maiden speech’ fell out of use in the 1970s because of its patriarchal overtones and was replaced by the term inaugural address.

²⁵ NSWPD 26 August 1925 p.368

²⁶ *The Sun* 26 August 1925 p.10 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/223732911>

²⁷ Bertram Stevens would later enter the parliament and become Premier following the Lang government’s dismissal in 1932.

²⁸ Oakes had defected from the Labor Party and was at the time a member of the Legislative Assembly

²⁹ Cecil Murphy’s sister, Edith, married Millicent’s brother, Victor. Victor died in 1919. Millicent was close to her nephew and one of her nieces.

³⁰ *Evening News* 26 August 1925 p.10 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1139193500>

³¹ *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 August 1925 p.8 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16238455>

³² *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 August 1925 p.8 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16238420>

³³ Deborah Brennan & Louise Chappell 'No fit place for women?: Women in NSW politics 1856-2006' Sydney, University of New South Wales Press 2006 p.3

³⁴ Marian Sawer 'Entering too late? Women in parliamentary politics in New South Wales' Paper for 6th ECPR General Conference, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011 p.4

<https://ecpr.eu/filestore/paperproposal/415d3511-678d-41e9-a79d-2e2cadf581d3.pdf>

³⁵ Marian Sawer 'Entering too late? Women in parliamentary politics in New South Wales' Paper for 6th ECPR General Conference, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011 p.4

<https://ecpr.eu/filestore/paperproposal/415d3511-678d-41e9-a79d-2e2cadf581d3.pdf>