

THE ADVENT OF A WOMAN



“I am deeply concerned that the advent of a woman in the Parliament of this country is not exactly to be considered as a popular innovation.”

So said Millicent Preston Stanley as she stood on the floor of the Legislative Assembly on 25 August 1925; the first woman in NSW to do so as an elected member of Parliament. “Some honourable members,” she continued, “have been kind enough to suggest that women should be protected from the hurly-burly of politics. This attitude of mind may do credit to the softness of their hearts [but] I think it may also be taken as evidence of a little softening in their heads.”

Thus began a short but significant political career. A conservative and a feminist, Millicent had for many years been in the NSW Women’s Liberal League, Sydney’s Feminist Club, the Women Justices Association and the Nationalist Party. Walking up the steps of Parliament House as the Nationalist Party member for the Eastern Suburbs, she entered a space designed for and ruled by men; a lone figure in a House not favourably disposed towards ‘petticoats in parliament.’

Millicent was labelled by some on the bench as a ‘she-devil’ and a ‘battle axe,’ but she rounded on her critics with the assertion that “women have a contribution to make to the life of the nation which only they can make.” Millicent distinguished herself as a competent and driven politician, supporting the Nationalist agenda while advocating fiercely for an improvement in mortality rates at childbirth, reform in child welfare legislation and more equitable custody rights in divorce.



Premier Jack Lang described Millicent as “determined” and as the “skirts and brains of the Nationalist Party.” The Herald went so far as to decree that “it will probably become incomprehensible why we ever considered it wrong for women to vote or to enter parliament.”

Unfortunately, Millicent’s time in the ‘bear pit’ was short-lived as she was unsuccessful contesting the seat of Bondi in 1927. Such a setback did not deter this formidable woman, however, and she continued to be a powerful political and social force right up until her death on 23 June 1955, aged 72. She undoubtedly helped set in motion the changes that, although slow, would eventually lead to more women entering the NSW Parliament.

A speech such that has never been heard before

On the day Millicent Preston Stanley rose to give her first address, she was watched by the 89 male members of Parliament and a full public, ladies’ and press galleries. All waited with a mix of excitement, anticipation, and incredulity as NSW’s first female politician readied herself to speak. For women, this moment was the culmination of a long-fought battle for a seat in the Legislative Assembly Chamber. And by all accounts, Millicent did not disappoint.

“It was a speech such as has never been heard before,” enthused the Examiner. “She showed not the faintest trace of nervousness and as her voice rippled on, touching on all matters affecting the welfare of women, she held her audience, both members and spectators, spellbound.” The Herald meanwhile praised her well-reasoned, temperate and concise performance. Her tongue was a “stiletto ripping into Labor’s policy” and the benches “writhed and squirmed under the lash of it.”

“I know there are men in this Chamber who consider that there is no sphere for women in politics,” Millicent proclaimed, lamenting the fact that at a time when over 20 countries had

sent women into their parliaments, Australia’s politicians still possessed “the extraordinary belief that men can interpret women’s legislation better than the women can do it themselves.”

Unsurprisingly, Millicent’s speech was frequently interrupted by comments from the benches. “I don’t mind interjections,” she retorted after yet another exchange, “but I would rather they were intelligible.” It is reported that the Serjeant-at-Arms had to suppress the applause from the Ladies’ Gallery.

Millicent’s speech was a turning point for gendered politics, even though she herself was a little dubious. “I’m not fool enough to suppose my going into the House is going to make any sweeping alteration,” she wrote in *Punch*. But, as this exhibition shows, Millicent may have underestimated the impact she and those who followed her would have on the Parliament for generations to come.

You can read Millicent’s full speech on the [NSW Parliament website](#).

A play on politics



In the 1920s, Australia followed the centuries-old common law principle which empowered fathers as the natural guardians of their legitimate children; a position that angered Millicent and many post-suffragette feminists.

Before entering the NSW Parliament, Millicent had fought a long campaign on behalf of Emelie Pollini; an actress who had been denied custody of her daughter after separating from her allegedly drunk and out-of-work husband. Drumming up community support for legislative reform, Millicent presented a petition to the Minister for Justice, Thomas Ley, in May 1924. The petition was rejected, but marked the start of a long and relentless campaign for change.

In 1926, Millicent re-entered the fray; this time as an elected member. Using the momentum of the petition and the support of the community, she tabled a Private Members’ Bill seeking legislative reform. The Bill was rejected and denied a second reading. By the time she lost her seat at the 1927 election Millicent was “thoroughly disgusted” with the cycle of “deputations, agitations, intimidations, organisations and having pushed the Bill in Parliament and out of Parliament.”

However, with characteristic determination and resourcefulness, Millicent adopted a rather remarkable strategy to keep the Bill on the agenda: she wrote, financed and performed in a political play.

Whose Child presented a fictionalised tale that combined elements of the Emelie Pollini case with Millicent’s own experiences in the Parliament. Advertised as a “tense, throbbing drama of real life interest to women,” the play opened at the Criterion Theatre in November 1932. Among the audience members were the Prime Minister, the Premier of NSW, the Sydney Lord Mayor, their wives and the new Minister for Justice, Mr Lewis Martin.

Casting herself in the role of the female parliamentarian, Millicent delivered her lines with all of the passion and energy she could muster. According to the *Herald*, such was the power of the performance that during the play Mr Martin sent a note backstage which said “the play will produce a great end.”

In September 1933, Martin introduced a Bill into the Legislative Assembly which was passed in October 1934 with only a few minor amendments. The Guardianship of Infants Act 1934 established equal guardianship rights for the mother and father, and positioned the child’s welfare as the “first and paramount” principle for the Court in determining custody.

See over the page for suggested for further reading.

A FIT PLACE FOR WOMEN

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Would you like to learn more about Millicent?

If you are intrigued by the life and times of Mrs Preston Stanley, we encourage you to peruse the following papers prepared by Dr Wendy Michaels, Conjoint Fellow in the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle. Dr Michaels has a particular admiration for Millicent, and has spent many, many months researching her life and recording the challenges and triumphs of this political pioneer.

Click the links below to read some of Dr Michael's papers:

- ***The Final Factor: Achieving Maternal Rights in 1930s New South Wales*** (2016) VIDA Blog of the Australian Women's History Network
- ***Child Custody and the Father-right Principle*** (2016) Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies
- ***The Final Factor: What Political Action Failed to Do*** (2013) Lilith A Feminist History Journal
- ***The Play's the Thing: Whose Child Prompts the Guardianship of Infants Act 1934*** (2011)