

The Australian Labor government and the “mummy bloggers”

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A significant expression of the acute crisis surrounding Australia's minority Labor government has been the elevation of the identity politics of feminism to the centre of political life.

Before taking leave over the Christmas period, Prime Minister Julia Gillard hosted 25 so-called “mummy bloggers” and feminist online publishers at a December 10 function in Kirribilli House, the prime minister's official Sydney residence. The event followed a similar afternoon tea in June at the same venue. Gillard and other Labor ministers have this year repeatedly made themselves available for online interviews on several of the most prominent blogs. The sites are aimed at a privileged middle-class layer, featuring articles and discussion forums on various lifestyle and parenting issues, relationships, celebrities, and fashion.

The feminist “rebranding” of Gillard is part of the Labor Party's desperate efforts to prevent, or at least limit, the electoral rout it faces at next year's federal election. Gillard became prime minister in June 2010 through the antidemocratic Labor Party coup against Kevin Rudd. Her installation marked a significant lurch to the right in Labor government policy. On foreign policy, the Gillard government has aligned with the Obama administration's provocative “pivot” against China. Domestically, Gillard has carried out a deepening austerity drive in the name of delivering the financial markets a balanced budget. The government is widely despised by millions of ordinary working people, and Gillard herself regarded as an illegitimate prime minister.

Wooing the “mummy bloggers” is aimed at galvanising the support of a layer of the affluent upper-middle class behind the Gillard government. Those invited to hobnob with the prime minister operate websites that are reportedly read by 2.5 million women. Some of the sites are offshoots of the major media conglomerates, while others were initially created by individuals, but have since developed into fully fledged business operations. One of the most prominent, *mamamia.com.au*, was established in 2007 by Mia Freedman, a former editor of the women's and girls' magazines *Cosmo*, *Cleo*, and *Dolly*. The site is now managed by Jamila Rizvi, a former Labor government staffer. It generates lucrative advertising revenue from articles submitted by unpaid writers, and from “sponsored posts” directly commissioned by

corporate advertisers.

Mia Freedman embodies the milieu with which Gillard is currying favour. She is the daughter of stock market investment manager Laurence Freedman, who reportedly has a personal wealth greater than \$100 million. Her husband, Jason Lavigne, ran a liquor sales business and attended Harvard Business School before becoming chief executive of the *mamamia* website.

A blog post titled, “How I met the PM and became part of the ‘strategy’”, by Angela Priestley of *womensagenda.com.au* gives a flavour of the discussion at Gillard's Kirribilli function: “I heard women use the opportunity to talk about other issues that matter to them: sexism at work, getting ahead in their career, childcare and how having a female prime minister has changed the perspective among some young girls about what opportunities and careers they can pursue. Plenty of lighter issues also entered the conversation: which social media tools the prime minister prefers (she asked how Pinterest works), what's on the menu for Christmas lunch and holiday plans (Gillard will be spending the break with her mother in Adelaide). Some women brought a little something for the host—handmade crafts, a box of cherries, Christmas decorations and even a miniature reindeer named ‘Julia’.”

The event underscored the politically fetid character of feminism. The “issues that matter” exclusively concern the career-paths and lifestyles of the affluent. Above all, Gillard's feminist supporters want greater access to corporate boardrooms, parliament, top media management, elevated positions in the courts and other institutions of the ruling elite. They are entirely indifferent to the plight of the millions of working-class women struggling with the more prosaic problems of holding down a job and covering escalating household expenses while trying to fulfill their family responsibilities.

The chief architect of Labor's “feminist” strategy is Gillard's director of communications, John McTernan. A former adviser to the British Labour government and a right-wing Blairite, McTernan wrote a comment for the *Guardian* immediately after Gillard's installation as prime minister in June 2010, declaring: “Abbott's appeal to the Liberal base is more than balanced by his difficulty with women voters...”

Women are probably the key swing group in the forthcoming election.”

In the end, what characterised the campaigns of both the Labor and Liberal parties for the August 2010 election was an extraordinary lack of any discussion or debate on policy issues. Instead the two leaders, Gillard and Liberal opposition leader Abbott, traded vapid and empty slogans. Ahead of the 2013 election, they are even less able to discuss questions of policy. Both parties are pledged to implementing unprecedented austerity cuts to welfare, public health and education, and other basic social services—but cannot openly canvass their agendas, for fear of unleashing the deep opposition that exists among ordinary people towards the bipartisan commitment to the interests of the ultra-wealthy. Instead the entire political and media establishment has elevated one scandal after another, sensationalising never-ending vitriolic parliamentary personal attacks, and the most recent concocted controversy over Abbott’s supposed sexism and misogyny.

This toxic situation underscores the depth of the crisis confronting the ruling elite, which is struggling to forge a political instrument capable of advancing the wage-slashing and budget-cutting measures being implemented in Europe and the US without triggering an eruption within the working class.

For its part, the Labor government is seeking to emulate President Barack Obama’s combination of right-wing, pro-corporate policies with a “progressive” gloss, based on the promotion of identity politics.

In late September, McTernan travelled to New York to meet with senior Barack Obama pollsters. A fortnight later, Gillard unleashed the “misogyny” speech against Abbott in the federal parliament. “Labor officials believe they can learn a lot from the Obama campaign team,” the *Australian Financial Review* reported last month. “Sophisticated databases allowed the campaign team to identify individual voters’ concerns and target them with direct messages. This is being credited as a major factor behind the coalition of women, blacks and Hispanics who carried the election for Mr Obama.”

The reality is that the 2012 US presidential election was marked by unprecedented disillusionment and hostility towards the major parties, reflected in a sharply lower voter turnout. Obama received 7 million votes fewer than he did in 2008, as ordinary people, disgusted with the Democratic president’s right-wing and militarist record, repudiated the former candidate of “hope” and “change.” To the extent that various layers of American society voted on the basis of the illusion that Obama and the Democrats represent a “lesser evil” to the Republicans, the Gillard government sees his re-election campaign as a model for holding onto office on the same “lesser evil” basis.

The middle class pseudo-left organisations play a central role in this endeavour. After agitating for Labor Party victories in the 2007 and 2010 elections, they have now rushed to endorse Gillard’s “misogyny” line. Socialist Alliance’s *Green Left*

Weekly, for example, reported on October 20: “PM Julia Gillard’s sharp serve against opposition leader Tony Abbott’s sexism gave many, especially women, long overdue cause to fist-pump the air and think, ‘Finally, a point for us.’... [A]rguably, this is the first time Labor has taken on the Liberals about any issue of substance since Gillard first became prime minister.”

A point for *us* ? To whom is the article referring? Certainly not to the tens of thousands of single mothers who, on the very same day as Gillard’s “misogyny” speech, were forced onto the poverty level unemployment benefit, instead of the previous single parent pension, suffering a loss of more than \$100 a week as a result of new Labor legislation. This, and not the speech, was the real “issue of substance”, on which the Labor and Liberal parties were, once again, in perfect agreement. The misogyny speech was yet another Labor ruse to avoid any mention of Gillard’s policies, from her collaboration with the US-led vendetta against Julian Assange, her support for imperialist intervention in Syria, to her brutal treatment of refugees and her privatisation agenda for health and education.

The pseudo-lefts occasionally wring their hands over some aspects of some of these policies, but only so as to promote the bankrupt conception that demonstrations and other campaigns can pressure Labor to the left. Irrespective of what measures Gillard enacts, the middle class outfits are united behind the need to re-elect the government, precisely on the basis that it represents a “lesser evil” to the Liberals. Representing a privileged layer of the middle class, the ranks of these organisations are deeply hostile to the working class, conscious of the fact that their own lucrative careers within the trade union bureaucracy, academia, local government and the media and publishing world are largely tied to the Labor Party’s fortunes.

The pseudo-lefts have been at the forefront of the promotion of identity politics throughout the past several decades, elevating gender, sexuality and race to the centre of political life and repudiating the primacy of the class struggle. On this basis they have deliberately worked to prevent the development of a unified, independent political movement of the working class that will break free from the bureaucratic and nationalist straitjacket of the Labor Party and the trade unions and mobilise against the capitalist profit system itself. It is by no means accidental that Gillard and her strategists are depending on these reactionary political conceptions for the very survival of her government.



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