

Australian feminists campaign to promote ex-PM Julia Gillard

Patrick O'Connor and Peter Symonds
18 March 2014

The class character of feminist identity politics has been graphically revealed in an ongoing campaign to promote former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard as a shining beacon for all women. Her parliamentary colleagues removed Gillard from the party leadership last June in a desperate bid to avert an electoral debacle for the Labor Party. She has since returned to public life, courtesy of the feminist movement.

After Gillard quit parliament following last September's election and the victory of the Liberal-National Coalition, high profile feminist author Anne Summers sponsored two public appearances at Sydney's Opera House and Melbourne's Town Hall. These events were sold out, with several thousand well-heeled and well-connected people paying up to \$68 a ticket.

The proceedings were broadcast live and nationwide. The upper middle class audience fawned over Gillard as she replied, unchallenged, to sympathetic questions fed by Summers, then by selected audience members, about her personal trials and tribulations as the country's first female prime minister.

Summers' interviews were followed by another "public tribute" for the ex-PM late last year in Melbourne, organised by the Victorian Women's Trust lobby group, under the slogan, "credit where credit is due." Next came a lengthy interview with CNN's celebrity journalist, Christiane Amanpour, once again focussing on gender and alleged anti-Gillard misogyny.

The campaign has extended into print, with the publication of several widely-promoted books devoted to extolling Gillard's term as PM. Among the most prominent is journalist Kerry-Anne Walsh's *The Stalking of Julia Gillard: How the media and Team Rudd contrived to bring down the Prime Minister*, which is being developed into a television mini-series, starring Rachel Griffiths as Gillard.

The political purpose of this very conscious campaign is to create a figurehead and spokesperson for a layer of well-off women who aspire to top jobs in corporate boardrooms, government and the state apparatus. They are utterly uninterested in and contemptuous of the interests and lives of ordinary working class people—men and women alike.

Summers epitomises the class outlook and ambitions of this grasping social milieu. An article by Summers in her quarterly magazine, *AnneSummersReports*, hails the appointment of Christine Lagarde as head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Janet Yellen as US Federal Reserve chief. For Summers, what is important is that Lagarde and Yellen are

women. That they happen to be ruthless representatives of the American and international financial aristocracy is a matter of complete indifference.

Summers would happily embrace a latter-day Margaret Thatcher were she to reach the pinnacle of global financial power. Indeed, Lagarde has been one of the driving forces behind the IMF's austerity program, which has wreaked havoc on the lives of millions, particularly in Europe, while Yellen is nothing but a mouthpiece of Wall Street. Summers makes no reference to what these two women have actually done. Instead, she concludes her article by expressing frustration that more Australian women are not wielding the levers of economic power.

For Summers and her ilk, Gillard's installation as prime minister represented a breakthrough for the female sex. The day after Gillard ousted Kevin Rudd as Labor leader on June 24, 2010, Summers opined that there was "no denying this moment of history." But more had to be done. "Just look at the upper echelons of business, the military, the churches and the federal public service, and you will see that women are as rare in these arenas as female prime ministers once were," she wrote. "Now this barrier is broken, perhaps it is time to address the others."

While Summers was musing on the bright new opportunities potentially at hand for a group of affluent women, millions of working people were justifiably shocked at the anti-democratic coup that unseated Rudd. Literally overnight, a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers engineered Rudd's ouster behind the backs of Labor ministers, party members and the population as a whole. The entire affair hung over Gillard like a bad smell throughout her term in office, and she was never able to get rid of it. The more she implemented the militarist, anti-working class policies demanded of her by Washington, the banks and the corporate elite, the more the popular hostility to her government deepened.

Diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks later revealed that the Labor coup plotters were "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra. The cables made clear that the Obama administration had become increasingly hostile to Rudd's unwanted diplomatic initiatives, launched without reference to Washington, to ease rising tensions between the US and China. His efforts cut across Obama's "pivot to Asia"—an aggressive strategy aimed at asserting unchallenged US domination throughout the region, undermining China and encircling it militarily in preparation for war.

Gillard, who assiduously cultivated her pro-US credentials through Australia-US and Australia-Israel leadership forums for years, was long identified by the US embassy as a reliable replacement to Rudd. In her first public appearance after knifing Rudd, she demonstrated her fidelity to Washington by posing for a photo op with the US ambassador, flanked by US and Australian flags.

The centrality of Australia to the US war plans became apparent in November 2011, when Obama chose to announce his “pivot” in the Australian parliament, rather than the White House. During the visit, Gillard and Obama signed an agreement to station American Marines in Darwin and allow greater US access to other military bases, placing the Australian population on the frontline of any conflict with China.

Domestically, Gillard functioned as the unabashed representative of the major corporations and banks. Her government presided in Australia over the shift that was taking place internationally from stimulus to austerity, as the business elite insisted that the working class bear the burden of the huge bailouts of the banks and corporations following the 2008-09 global financial crisis.

Unmentioned in any of the tributes to Gillard was the fact that her Labor government was responsible for deep cuts to government spending. For 2012-13, her final year in office, expenditure actually fell by 1 percent in cash terms, for the first time since Treasury began tabulating such data in 1970-71, and a record 3.2 percent in real terms. Education and health were hardest hit, suffering outright cuts of 2 percent and 1.1 percent. Welfare recipients, especially single mothers, were badly affected as spending failed to match inflation.

Gillard’s policies deepened the gulf between rich and poor. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, her first two years in office saw the incomes of the top 10 percent rise by 14 percent, while the bottom 10 percent gained just 3.2 percent. Over the same period, the combined personal wealth of the country’s 200 richest individuals (approximately the top 0.001 percent of the population) increased from \$134.2 billion to \$181.2 billion, or 35 percent.

Gillard used her long-standing relationship to the trade unions to enforce the draconian Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation, which she steered through parliament in her former capacity as Rudd’s minister for workplace relations. When Qantas took the unprecedented step of grounding its airline in 2011, Gillard’s FWA tribunal banned all industrial action and imposed an arbitrated settlement that slashed jobs and conditions. Construction workers, Victorian nurses and NSW public sector workers were all threatened with huge penalties when they defied the FWA’s laws.

Drawing on the reactionary traditions of Laborism, Gillard sought to divert attention from the worsening social crisis being created by her government’s policies by scapegoating asylum seekers. Her government reinstated and extended the reviled Pacific Solution, initiated by the previous Howard Coalition government, which condemned hundreds of men, women and children to indefinite detention in squalid camps in Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

Again, these details of Gillard’s record were overlooked in her public appearances before the crowds of adoring admirers,

underscoring the fact that her feminist promoters continue to endorse her *because* of her anti-working class policies, not *in spite* of them. After all, they and their constituency have materially benefitted from the very policies responsible for expanding their corporate career opportunities in finance, and the media, along with their property and share values. At the same time, these policies have plunged millions of ordinary people into unemployment, poverty, insecurity and debt.

Those thousands of women who flocked to Gillard’s events see her as the embodiment of their own ambitions. As far as they are concerned, the high point of her prime ministership was her parliamentary tirade last October when she denounced then opposition leader Tony Abbott as a misogynist. Her “misogyny speech” gave vent to the frustrations of this social layer, and their insistence on more access to the levers of power, which is why it went “viral” on the Internet, not only in Australia, but around the world. Predictably the “misogyny speech” took centre stage at all of Gillard’s events.

Again barely mentioned was the fact that on the very same day she made the speech, Gillard’s government slashed welfare entitlements for tens of thousands of single parents, mostly women. When asked why, Gillard defended the measure, declaring that the “modern progressive task” was to compel everyone into the workforce. “That is where all of the dignity comes and all of the choices come,” she declared. “You and I have had many choices in our lives, we’ll have many more choices in our lives, and that comes because we’ve had the benefit of paid work.”

These remarks were warmly applauded by her audience, for whom paid work on substantial salaries provides many lifestyle “choices.” This is a world apart from the experiences of the vast majority, increasingly confronted with the “choice” of either paying the mortgage or rent, or providing their families with enough to eat.

Like all forms of identity politics—whether based on gender, race or sexuality—feminism expresses the class interests of a complacent, self-satisfied social milieu preoccupied with their own individual development and lifestyle. It has been assiduously promoted for decades, especially by various pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, to deny the primacy of class and the class struggle in political and social life. Its political purpose above all has been to sow divisions among workers on the basis of “identity” to keep them trapped behind the reactionary nationalist, pro-capitalist politics of Laborism and trade unionism.

The only way to defend and advance the basic class interests of the working class—for decent, well-paid jobs; for access to free, high quality education, health care and child care; for genuine democratic rights and a future free of militarism and war—is to develop a new independent political movement of the working class, based on the program of socialist internationalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact