“Sex on the Hustings”:
Labor and the construction of ‘the woman voter’ in two federal elections (1983, 1993)

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university institution.
Synopsis

The basic aim of this thesis is to describe and analyse how ‘the woman voter’ was constructed within Labor discourse during the Hawke/Keating years. My domain of investigation is electoral politics, in particular the federal election campaigns of 1983 and 1993. These elections flank the beginning and the end of the Labor decade, a period of great significance to both the development of Labor politics specifically and Australian politics in general. The elections of 1983 and 1993 were campaigns in which the Party made a concerted effort to attract women’s votes. Through a reading of the various texts associated with these two campaigns, I explore the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as a ‘new’ political subject position within Labor discourse.

The dominant influences on the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as a new subject position were Labor discourse and feminism, or more precisely Labor discourse affected by the incursion of feminism from the 1970s onwards. This thesis describes and analyses how this subject position has been produced and reproduced within Labor discourse. The gender gap research developed for the 1983 federal election constitutes one of the more important technologies that work to construct ‘the woman voter’ within Labor discourse. A reading of the texts associated with the 1983 campaign reveals the character of ‘the woman voter’ as a caring figure. However, as the Labor decade progressed, ‘the woman voter’ is articulated in Labor discourse as a more complex figure, focused on her responsibilities both in the home and at paid work. A reading of various texts associated with the 1993 election campaign shows that ‘the woman voter’ is constructed as a carer-worker; this subject position is broadly consonant with the objectives liberal, economic government. Certain modifications within this basic subject position can be observed in Labor’s anti-GST campaign materials, which made an appeal to the woman voter as consumer.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements and declaration</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td>12-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials, theories and methodologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2</strong></td>
<td>55-97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Labor discourse during the Hawke-Keating years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3</strong></td>
<td>98-136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm allies and natural enemies: the relationship between Labor and the feminist movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4</strong></td>
<td>137-181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting on women: gender gap research and the 1983 federal election</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5</strong></td>
<td>182-227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The woman voter’ as carer-worker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 6</strong></td>
<td>228-268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The woman voter’ as consumer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>269-285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>286-306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Three weeks before the 1983 federal election, journalist Douglas Wilkie wrote an opinion piece in Sydney's *Sun Herald* newspaper entitled “Sex on the Hustings”. In this piece, he marvelled at the growing number of newspaper reports on the personality and sex appeal of the newly elected Labor leader Bob Hawke and his Liberal Party opponent Malcolm Fraser.¹ He saw this as a clear sign that both parties were attempting to woo the women’s vote: “who'd have thought that sex-appeal would run away with the votes?”, Wilkie wrote (1983: 9). This emphasis on the sex appeal and personality of the two candidates signals a belief on the part of the media and the major parties that the votes of Australian women would have a significant influence on the result of the 1983 federal election.

The federal election of 1983 saw Bob Hawke elected Prime Minister and marked the beginning of what commentators term “the Labor decade”. It also marked the beginning of what I see as modern Labor’s interest in women voters and women’s issues. This interest would continue, albeit with different levels of intensity, throughout the Labor decade. By the term “Labor decade”, I refer to the era beginning with Bob Hawke’s 1983 election victory and ending with Paul Keating’s first and last election victory in 1993. The significance of this period – both to the Labor Party and to Australian politics in general – should not be underestimated. It was during the Labor decade that the Party:

... won five successive federal elections and presided over a substantial restructuring of the Australian economy toward deregulation and privatisation, and of the Australian state toward a peculiar combination of
nationalist republicanism and the articulation into the political system of new social movement interests such as feminism, multiculturalism and environmentalism (Burgmann & Milner, 1997: 53).

The inclusion of ‘feminism’ amongst the other new social movements that intersected with Labor during this period is important to this thesis. In the early 1970s, the Labor Party recognised that the rising feminist movement could become a potential source of new votes. The prospect that an emerging ‘woman’s vote’ might advantage Labor was a catalyst for Labor’s engagement with the organised feminist movement. During the Hawke-Keating years, the Labor Party formed important relationships with sections of the organised feminist movement, particularly groups like the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL). In addition, this period saw an increase in the numbers of feminists within the Party and the growth of the femocracy. It was these women – feminist activists from groups like WEL, Labor feminists and the femocrats - who were able to inform policy and develop campaign strategies for the Party throughout the Labor decade, but particularly for the elections of 1983 and 1993. Despite these productive relationships between Labor and parts of the feminist movement, it was never simply an easy movement of feminist ideas, however moderate, into Labor politics. Rather there was a process of translation, in which feminist demands were shaped to synthesise with the Labor politics at that particular moment. Hence, certain feminist ideas were absorbed and rearticulated within the confines of Labor discourse.

In this thesis, I show how the subject position of ‘the woman voter’ was shaped by Labor discourse during this crucial period in the Party’s history. One of the more important shifts within Labor discourse during the Hawke-Keating years was the strategic connection with new social movements such as feminism. Thus, ‘the
woman voter’ emerges as a new subject position shaped mostly by Labor discourse, but also influenced by a particular kind of feminist agenda.

**Aims of the thesis**

The basic aim of this thesis is to describe and analyse how the new subject position of ‘the woman voter’ was constructed within Labor discourse during the Hawke-Keating years. My domain of investigation is “the electoral competition of political parties” during federal election campaigns (Rose, 1996b: 145). The federal elections of 1983 and 1993 are the major campaigns of interest. These elections flank the beginning and the end of the Labor decade. They were also elections in which the Party made a concerted effort to attract women’s votes. Through a reading of the various texts associated with these two campaigns, I explore the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as a ‘new’ political subject, or more precisely, a new subject position within Labor discourse.

Implicit in my analysis is the recognition that ‘women’ are not a stable or easily definable category of persons. As Mueller comments, it was the dream of the suffragists, in the United States, Britain and Australia, that women would vote as a bloc and thus introduce “new issues, new candidates, and new directions” into mainstream politics (1988: 25). This notion of a “women’s voting bloc” depends largely on a vision of women as a “unitary and natural category” of persons with shared and specific experiences and interests (O’Connor, 1999: 34; Mueller, 1988: 26). The suffrage movement attempted to mobilise women voters based on this group identification (Mueller, 1988: 264). However, women have never voted as a
“sex class” (Nash, 1998: 101). Indeed, the idea that ‘women’ are an easily discernable and definable societal group is unsustainable. Both supporters and critics of women’s enhanced political identification have attacked the idea that ‘women’ are a unified and stable group of persons. Rather, the category ‘women’ is fractured along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and countless other trajectories of identity.

The most thoroughgoing critique of this notion of ‘women as category’ has emerged out of the work of feminists and other commentators who draw on post-structuralism, critical race studies and post-modernist theory. Indeed, there is an extensive and well-established feminist project contesting “the eternal natural object ‘woman’ or ‘women’” (Morris, 1988: 54). Furthermore, theorists like Nikolas Rose, building on the work of Michel Foucault, have focused on how subjects are constructed in multiple and shifting ways across different discursive contexts. Rose argues that:

Human beings are not the unified subjects of some coherent regime of government that produces persons in the form in which it dreams. On the contrary, they live their lives in a constant movement across different practices that subjectify them in different ways. Within these different practices, persons are addressed as different sorts of human being, presupposed to be different sorts of human being, acted upon as if they were different sorts of human being (1996: 35).

If we accept that ‘women’ does not correspond to “any unified and unifying essence”, then a key issue becomes how ‘women’ are constructed as a category of persons within different discursive contexts (Mouffe, 1992: 373). Instead of
positioning ‘women’ as a “natural”, “predetermined” and unvaried category of persons (Pettman, 1992: 2), this thesis looks at the ways in which ‘women’ are differentially positioned as subjects in discourse, often in “contradictory and irrational” ways (Kendall & Wickham, 1999: 54). Fundamentally, I am interested in how subject positions are constructed by “certain discursive deployments” (Prado, 1995: 116). Such an approach requires a practical and technical kind of analysis. Hence, this thesis will focus directly on the practices that situate women in particular “regimes of the person” (Rose, 1996: 25), practices that circulate within various political, electoral, policy and governmental discourses.

Hence, the work of post-structural and Foucauldian theorists are an important influence on my analysis. Equally, however, I utilise the work of various feminists working within a number of theoretical traditions. Indeed, whilst my theoretical and methodological framework is largely influenced by Foucault and Rose, I have adopted a more pluralist approach to utilizing secondary materials. For example, in Chapters 2 and 3, I make extensive use of the work of many commentators on the Labor Party, party politics and gender politics in Australia whose theoretical approaches are distinctly un-Foucauldian. This work provides some important insights in relation to questions of gender and electoral politics, questions that have oftentimes been ignored in work utilising theories of governmentality. Thus, my use of poststructuralist theory is complemented by broader feminist accounts of the State, party politics, new social movements and so forth.
Chapter summaries

In my first chapter, “Materials, theories and methodologies”, I set down the terms and conditions of my analysis. First of all, I define ‘the Australian Labor Party’ and ‘a federal election campaign’. In addition, I provide some background on the 1983 and 1993 elections. I then explore the various theoretical concepts that frame my thesis. In my analysis, I draw heavily upon the work of Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose and other theorists inspired by their work, such as Mitchell Dean. The kinds of theoretical concepts coming out of Foucauldian analysis that are relevant to my thesis include ‘discourse analysis’, ‘subject-constitution’, ‘governmentality’, ‘liberalism’ and ‘economic government’; these concepts are described and some analysis is given. I also introduce other analytical concepts that may not be in the Foucauldian tradition but are important to feminist theory, in particular the dichotomies of sameness/difference, public/private, class/gender and production/consumption.

Adopting a discursive analysis requires a certain methodological approach to my empirical materials. This chapter addresses how I obtained certain primary materials and how these primary materials are treated in my analysis. Furthermore, on the question of methodology, I explore my unique position as critic of Labor discourse, a participant in Labor culture and an active Labor feminist. Hence, this chapter provides the theoretical and methodological framework for my investigation of the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as a new political subject position within Labor discourse.

My second chapter, entitled “Defining Labor discourse during the Hawke-Keating years”, is an exploration of the shape and content of Labor discourse. I offer a description and critique of Labor politics in its general form in preparation for an
analysis of Labor discourse as it emerged during the Hawke-Keating years, a seminal period for the Party’s politics and culture. Within the context of my discussion of the Party under Hawke and Keating, I explore Labor’s relationship with new social movements, the articulation of consensus politics and the distinctions between and continuities with the Whitlam period of government. More generally, I explore the various definitions of ‘liberalism’, as a political ideology but more importantly as form and mentality of government (Dean, 1999: 51). I continue to draw on Foucauldian theories of ‘governmentality’, canvassed in Chapter 1, in a discussion of Labor discourse as an ethics of government. Such an analysis is essential to my exploration of how the new subject position of ‘the woman voter’ emerged within Labor discourse.

Chapter 3, entitled “Firm allies and natural enemies: the relationship between Labor and the feminist movement”, extends my discussion of the shape and content of Labor discourse during the Hawke-Keating years. A key feature of Labor politics is its masculinism; this is not addressed in Chapter 2 but it is a central aspect of my analysis in Chapter 3. Here I discuss the ethos of ‘mateship’ and ‘egalitarianism’ as it circulates within Labor discourse. The firmly entrenched nature of Labor’s masculinism has meant that the Party’s relationship with the feminist movement has been a precarious one. However, during the Labor decade the Party did enjoy a tentative relationship with sections of the organised feminist movement, a relationship forged in the process of developing both government and Party policy on women’s issues. In this chapter, I attempt to define the modern feminist movement in Australia and its attitude to mainstream political parties like Labor. I focus on two debates that I argue structured feminist attitudes and involvement with Labor, namely, the class/gender divide and the question of feminist methods. I explore
these debates with reference to the (supposed) divisions within the feminist movement, specifically between the Women's Electoral Lobby and the broader women's liberation movement of the time. Finally, the femocracy is defined and analysed in the context of Labor’s influence on both its emergence and its development. The position and role of Labor feminists is also touched upon, in preparation for a more extensive discussion in Chapter 4. Both the femocrats and Labor feminists occupied a vital position - situated between government, Party and the feminist movement - in terms of developing women's policy and advocating a kind of feminist reform from within government. An understanding of all these issues provides an important backdrop to my exploration of how a certain feminist politics influenced Labor discourse generally and the construction of ‘the woman voter’ specifically.

Thus, in the first three chapters of this thesis I attempt to describe and analyse the dominant discursive influences on the construction of ‘the woman voter’, namely through the incursion of feminism into Labor discourse. In Chapter 4, entitled “Counting on women: gender gap research in the 1983 federal election”, I describe and analyse how this subject position has been produced and reproduced within Labor discourse. Here I focus on the technical and the practical, the ways in which ‘the woman voter’ is rendered into discourse as a visible and calculable subject position. In the context of my discussion here, the gender gap research developed for the 1983 federal election constitutes one of the more important technologies that works to construct ‘the woman voter’ within Labor discourse. This gender gap research combines both political numbers and experiential knowledge produced largely by Labor feminists. As a foundation for this analysis of the gender gap as a technology, I explore the sameness/difference divide and its impact on the
conventional construction of ‘the woman voter’ before the development and deployment of gender gap research in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The conventional view of ‘the woman voter’ as apolitical and conservative posed a real problem for Labor feminists who were pushing for internal reform in the Party. I will show how Labor feminists used gender gap research as a persuasive tool in their attempts to convince the Party leadership that women voters were worth targeting in election campaigns. Thus, Chapter 4, with its focus on certain technologies of subjection, provides the technical basis for an exploration, in the final two chapters, of the content of ‘the woman voter’ as a new political subject position within Labor discourse.

In Chapter 5, my primary focus is on the nature of ‘the woman voter’ as a new subject position within Labor discourse and her emerging character during the Labor decade. Entitled “‘The woman voter’ as carer-worker”, this chapter illustrates how ‘the woman voter’ was articulated and rearticulated in various ways throughout the Labor decade. In the 1983 election campaign, ‘the woman voter’ was constructed and addressed largely as a caring figure, concerned with the security and prosperity of her home and family; a reading of the 1983 gender gap research reflects this. However, there were significant shifts within this subject position as the Labor decade progressed. By the 1993 federal election, ‘the woman voter’ emerged as a carer and a worker, or more precisely, a ‘carer-worker’; a reading of various policy texts produced at this time (including the second National Agenda for Women, the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ report Women in Australia and Labor’s child care policy) illustrates this. I explore the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as carer-worker with reference to the public/private divide, namely how this divide has informed articulations and interpretations of the needs and desires of ‘the woman
voter’. This modification within the subject position of ‘the woman voter’ – from simply ‘carer’ to ‘carer-worker’ - is broadly consonant with the political rationalities of Labor discourse as a form of advanced liberal, economic government. One of the often stated objectives of the Party, as explored in Chapter 2, has been to encourage social justice for disadvantaged groups whilst ensuring economic prosperity for the nation. In their role as carer-workers, women were able to contribute to the market whilst maintaining their private responsibilities in the home. In this way, the construction of ‘the woman voter’ as carer-worker did not substantially disrupt the working lives of men or the gendered division of labour.

In the final chapter, I extend my discussion of ‘the woman voter’ as a new subject position within Labor discourse, this time with an exclusive focus on the 1993 election campaign. Entitled “The woman voter’ as consumer”, this chapter shows how the Labor Party sought to appeal to the ‘the woman voter’ as consumer. The construction of ‘the woman voter’ as consumer can be viewed as a modification within the more established subject position of carer-worker. This innovation is consistent with Labor’s sponsorship of “co-operative capitalism” (Johnson, 2000: 30), which is itself broadly consonant with Labor discourse as form of liberal, economic government. In this chapter, I also explore Labor’s 1993 election campaign. This was Paul Keating’s first campaign as Prime Minister and I discuss how it was necessary that he undergo a particular transformation to distance himself from his persona as Treasurer. I then engage in a reading of Labor’s anti-GST campaign and how ‘the woman voter’ was constructed as consumer. I provide some background about the gendered character of consumption and the various connections between women, practices of consumption and sites of consumption. It is largely through these practices and places of consumption that ‘the woman voter’ as consumer is
constituted. I argue that one of the ways in which this subject-constitution took place was through the use of images of “ordinary women” and images of “everyday life” in Labor’s anti-GST campaign.

In sum, this thesis utilises certain analytical concepts (such as Labor discourse, feminism and liberalism) and certain conceptual dichotomies (specifically sameness/difference and public/private) in its analysis of how the ‘new’ political subject position of ‘the woman voter’ is constructed within Labor discourse during a certain time (the Hawke-Keating years) and within a certain discursive context (the federal election campaigns of 1983 and 1993). It focuses on particular technologies and regimes of subjection, how new subject positions (such as ‘the woman voter’ as carer-worker and consumer) are formulated in ways that are consistent with the precepts and operations of liberal, economic government.

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1 Such stories included “Sexy Bob mobbed by two faithfuls” and “Sexy Mal a hit with the girls” (Michelle Marr (1983) Daily Telegraph. 17 February 1983, 3).
2 Writing within the American context, Mueller comments that the bulk of social and political science research into women’s voting patterns confirms that we are “not a homogenous bloc” and our political orientation varies “depending on age, marital status, and workforce participation” (1988: 51). Similarly, Susan Ryan stated on numerous occasions that “women are not a homogenous group in electoral terms” (1982a: 24).
3 In his memoirs, Peter Walsh states that “the assertion that Australian women are ‘unanimous’ about anything is patently ridiculous” (1996: 250).