

A snapshot of current trends for women in leadership

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The recent decision by Canada's new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to appoint equal numbers of men and women to his [cabinet](#) made headlines around the world. The issue of gender representation has also been prominent in Australia this year, with the debate about gender equality escalating across the political divide.

In July, for example, delegates at the [ALP National Conference](#) committed the party to a quota of 50 per cent female representation in parliament by 2025, extending its current quota of 40 per cent women, 40 per cent men and 20 per cent either gender. In August some [Liberal MPs](#), including [Prime Minister Tony Abbott](#), supported a recommendation made in a Menzies Research Centre discussion paper on [gender and politics](#) that a target—rather than a quota—be set to increase female representation in the Liberal Party's organisation and parliamentary ranks. More recently, former Labor Prime Minister [Julia Gillard](#) has voiced her opinion that equal representation of women would bring merit and diversity to the Commonwealth Parliament, noting that it could only be achieved through quotas.

In this same period, a [Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee inquiry](#) was considering the merits of the [Australian Government Boards \(Gender Balanced Representation\) Bill 2015](#), introduced by independent [Senator Nick Xenophon](#) in June 2015 to legislate the current policy on gender representation for government boards. The policy, introduced by the Gillard Labor Government in 2010 and maintained by the current Coalition Government, provides for a gender diversity target of 40 per cent men and 40 per cent women, with 20 per cent of board members to be made up of either gender. In its [recent report](#) the majority of the Committee supported the policy of gender balance for government boards, but maintained that the proposed targets for gender balance were not the 'best way to achieve this goal'. The Committee majority recommended that the Senate not pass the Bill.

Given this recent attention on ways of addressing the continuing under-representation of women, the Parliamentary Library provides a snapshot of current trends in Australian parliaments, ministries, leadership positions, government boards and the Australian Public Service.

MPs in parliaments

- The Parliamentary Library's latest analysis of data for *Composition of Australian parliaments by party and gender* as at 30 September 2015 shows little change in the gender balance in Australian parliaments over the past year.
- At the Commonwealth level, women currently represent 26.7 per cent of the House of Representatives and 38.2 per cent of the Senate.
- In Australia as a whole, women comprise 30.6 per cent of lower or single houses and 35.1 per cent of upper houses for those jurisdictions with a bicameral parliament.

Ministries

- Following recent changes to the [Commonwealth ministry](#), female representation increased from 16.7 per cent (25 men and five women) to 19.4 per cent (25 men and six women). The gender balance in the federal cabinet also changed, from 10.5 per cent (17 men and two women) to 23.8 per cent (16 men and five women). According to [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) data as at 1 January 2015, state and territory ministries comprised 89 men (76.1 per cent) and 28 women (23.9 per cent).

Parliamentary, political and vice-regal leadership positions

The number of women in Australian parliamentary, political and vice-regal leadership positions has declined sharply in the last year:

- In 2014 women comprised 46.7 per cent of presiding officers in Australia's parliaments. By November 2015 that figure had declined to 26.7 per cent, with only four jurisdictions having a female presiding officer (NSW, Tasmania, ACT and the Northern Territory).
- Only one woman currently holds the position of head of government or opposition leader (Annastacia Palaszczuk, Premier of Queensland) out of a total of 18 positions. This represents a decline from three in 2014.
- As in 2014, women hold three of the seven vice-regal positions in Australia (currently in Tasmania, Western Australia and Victoria). The Governor of Victoria (Linda Dessau) is the first woman to be appointed to that role.

Government Boards

- The most recent [report](#) (2013–14) on the gender balance of Commonwealth Government boards shows that as at June 2014 women held 39.7 per cent of the 3,206 board positions on 387 Australian government boards and bodies. This represented a decline from the 2013 high point of 41.7 per cent, although it should be viewed within the context of the Smaller Government agenda which reduced the number of boards and board positions during this period.
- The report also showed that as at June 2014 women represented 30.8 per cent of the 455 chair and deputy chair positions on Commonwealth Government boards and bodies, a decrease from 31.1 per cent in 2013.

Australian Public Service leadership

- The gender balance in [Australian Public Service leadership](#) positions has remained unchanged since 2013, with women occupying 40 per cent of Senior Executive Service positions and 47 per cent of Executive level positions.