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To cite this article: Susan Harris Rimmer & Marian Sawer (2016) Neoliberalism and gender equality policy in Australia, Australian Journal of Political Science, 51:4, 742-758, DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2016.1222602

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1222602

Published online: 30 Aug 2016.
ARTICLE

Neoliberalism and gender equality policy in Australia

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ABSTRACT
After a Coalition electoral victory in 2013, the Australian Office for Women was returned from the periphery to the centre of government. This was contrary to the expectation that women’s policy will be given greater salience under governments of the left rather than of the right. To unpack this puzzle, we examine institutional arrangements and policy directions under successive Labor and Coalition governments in Australia, including the abolition of intergovernmental bodies concerned with gender equality. We find that the influence of neoliberalism has resulted in a blurring of patterns of partisan difference over gender equality policy. There are some continuing partisan differences but also a common pattern of increased emphasis on international and regional rather than domestic policy. The notable exception to this pattern is in the area of gender-based violence.

In 2013 the Coalition parties in Australia committed themselves to returning the federal Office for Women (OfW) to the heart of government. Since 2004 the Office had been located 20 kilometres away, relegated to a line department dealing with family and community services.

Since the First United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, there has been global dissemination of the idea that governments need to develop formal machinery to ensure that all government policy meets women’s needs and promotes gender equality. Since the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995, this has generally been referred to as ‘gender mainstreaming’ and has become integral to reporting on progress under international treaties and roadmaps concerned with gender equality (True and Mintrom 2001). Guidelines for gender mainstreaming generally emphasise the importance of location at the centre of government where all policy can be monitored for gender impact including economic policy, which tends to be resistant to such disaggregated analysis (for example, OECD 2014: 152–53; UN 2005).

Why should it have been a centre right government that recognised the importance of such location? In 1977 and 2004 centre right governments had been responsible for moving the main federal women’s policy agency away from the heart of government. The 2013 decision might seem paradoxical, given the longstanding propositions of...
partisan theory that parties of the left are more likely to be favourably disposed to women’s policy agencies than parties of the right (for example, McBride and Mazur 2010: 102–03).

In contrast to the ‘politics matters’ position, recent literature has suggested that the adoption of neoliberal agendas has blurred the partisan differences previously found between ‘old politics’ parties (Schmidt 1996). Liberal traditions vary widely over time and place and ‘neoliberalism’ is a protean concept. Nonetheless, it is used here to refer to an ideological reaction to the welfare state inspired by Frederick Hayek, popularised by Milton Friedman and manifested in public choice theory. The reaction against the welfare state and increased reliance on market mechanisms has tended to have disproportionate impact on women (Larner 2000; Teghtsoonian 2004). Governments adopting neoliberal policies in turn tend to be hostile to analysis of the distributional impact of such policies. For example, Australian Labor governments in the 1990s were resistant to gender analysis of their initiatives in decentralising wage bargaining and introducing competition policy (Sawer 2015). In a perhaps associated development, Labor governments can no longer be relied upon to support women’s policy machinery or to favour a central location for it, as shown in detail by Andrew (2013: 93).

This article sets out to examine whether, as some previous literature has suggested, the adoption of neoliberal agendas leads to reduction in partisan difference in gender equality policy. The theoretical framework encompasses the relationship between shared neoliberal ideology on the one hand and continuing partisan policy differences on the other. These concepts are operationalised through comparison of gender equality policy across partisan changes of government and across policy sectors, particularly those differing in terms of redistributional implications. The comparison of gender equality frameworks under successive Labor and conservative Australian governments in the period from 2007 to 2015 is of more general relevance as a case study of the impact of neoliberalism on longstanding gender equality architecture. It seeks to identify any bipartisan patterns in terms of issue salience and policy domain as well as to solve the more immediate puzzle of why a conservative government should have relocated women’s policy to the heart of government.

To identify patterns of neoliberal policy influence together with continuing patterns of partisan difference, we needed to engage in process tracing, to gather insights from different sources before and after the change of government. Our evidence comes from comprehensive analysis of the ‘grey literature’ produced by government and intergovernmental bodies; interviews, sometimes repeated, with senior officials with responsibility for women’s policy; meetings with ministers and shadow ministers; and participant observation of policy forums by both authors. We were looking for policy shifts as well as an explanation for the relocation of the OfW and its implications. The questions asked in interviews covered both the locational issue and policy priorities. There has already been extensive scholarly attention given to misogyny and discursive issues in the period of Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (see Johnson 2015; Wright and Holland 2014). We only deal with these when they shed light on why the decision was made to bring back the Office to the centre, and the way this decision was perceived.

We begin by setting out the theoretical framework of the article building on some of the existing literature on neoliberalism and gender equality policy architecture. We then provide background material on Australian gender equality policy before 2007 and an overview of gender equality architecture under the recent governments of left and right, with an emphasis on the often-neglected intergovernmental level. Next we examine
specific policy sectors, first under Labor and then under the Abbott government. In line with previous ‘party matters’ literature, we find significant partisan differences in areas such as equal pay. However, we also find that both Labor and Coalition parties now appear more comfortable in articulating gender equality objectives in areas such as international peacekeeping and development assistance than in domestic economic and social policy. We conclude with a number of possible explanations for why governments of either the left or right have become less comfortable with analysis of domestic policy for gender outcomes but still supportive of international gender equality objectives.

Neoliberalism and gender equality policy

As already noted, the term neoliberalism takes on different meanings in different contexts. The context we are concerned with here is that of the historic social liberalism of Australia and New Zealand, the ‘new liberalism’ of its day, which at the time of nation-building provided justification for the pursuit of social justice through the state, including legally enforceable award wages and non-contributory old-age pensions (Sawer 2003). These social liberal innovations were underpinned by theories of underconsumption and were introduced by reformist Liberal parties. Subsequently Labor parties in both countries became their strongest advocates.

However, from the time of the stagflation of the mid-1970s, there was an increasing backlash against welfare liberalism. There was a revival of market liberalism with its related discourses of individualism, competition and choice (Johnson 2007). Paradoxically, Labor parties in Australia and New Zealand now embraced neoliberal policy directions including market deregulation, privatisation and competition policy. Labor even started undoing the longstanding centralised wage-fixing systems and introducing an enterprise bargaining principle based on productivity, despite the predicted gender effects.

In this neoliberal context, the expectations established in the party matters literature concerning the relationship between parties of the left and gender equality policy came increasingly into question. Comparative institutional analysis had suggested a strong relationship between parties of the left and strong gender equality machinery (see Bashevkin 1998; Caul 1999; Chappell 2002; McBride and Mazur 2010; Threlfall 2010).

However, as neoliberal policy influence increased, the relationship between parties of the left and commitment to women’s policy machinery became more complicated. For example, Kathy Teghtsoonian described the barriers to implementing gender analysis in New Zealand in the following terms:

The privileging of individualism and of marketised relationships … have continued to inform the policies pursued under Labour; these orientations are, as we have seen, antithetical to the conception of women as a disadvantaged social collective on which the gender analysis initiative is premised. (Teghtsoonian 2004: 280)

A comparative study of the effects of partisan change on women’s policy machinery found that in New South Wales a centre right Coalition Government was responsible for upgrading women’s policy machinery (to a self-standing ministry), while a subsequent Labor Government was responsible for downgrading it (Teghtsoonian and Chappell 2008). Merrindahl Andrew, in her large-scale survey of the institutional harvest of the Australian women’s movement, found that there was little difference in the average rate of
abolition/end events under centre right and under Labor governments: ‘abolition/end events have simply been more likely to occur later in the survey period (particularly after the late 1980s), irrespective of the partisan complexion of government during this period in the jurisdiction in question’ (Andrew 2013: 93).

The effects of neoliberal agendas in blurring partisan differences in relation to gender equality or gender mainstreaming has also been observed in Europe. Johanna Kantola has anticipated the findings of this article that new patterns are emerging that owe more to neoliberalism than to partisan difference and which give primacy to feminist agendas that are compatible with a market agenda (Kantola 2010: 359).

To point to the effects of neoliberalism in establishing new patterns of government response is not to argue that there are no differences between right and left in relation to gender equality policy. While some common patterns have emerged, there remain significant partisan sectoral differences in gender equality policy, particularly relating to labour market regulation. Recent studies have distinguished between ‘class-based policies’ that involve some form of redistribution and are associated with left parties and ‘status-based policies’ such as violence against women, which may be equally promoted by parties of the left and right (Htun and Weldon 2010: 209). In addition, a recent study of gender equality issue attention in Europe has found that ‘class-based issues’, such as employment, pensions and childcare, are most likely to gain attention from governments of the left and at a time when the economy is performing well. In contrast, issues defined as ‘status-based’, including both ‘blueprint equality issues’ and reproduction and gender violence are not found to have the same partisan inflection (Annesley et al. 2015: 4).

This distinction between class-based and status-based issues usefully draws attention to sectoral differences in gender equality policy and in their sources of partisan support. However in this article we prefer to use a distinction between gender equality policies that require economic redistribution and those that in general terms do not. We group ‘blueprint’ policies requiring gender assessment of policy with the former, because of their role in requiring analysis of the distributional outcomes. We find a bipartisan retreat from ‘blueprint issues’, in contrast to a bipartisan embrace of the issue of gender-based violence.

Gender equality policy before 2007: an overview

During the 1970s and 1980s Australia was regarded as being in the forefront of the development of women’s policy machinery. For example, at the first UN world conference on women in 1975, Australia’s official delegation was unique in being led by Elizabeth Reid, a feminist recently active in Women’s Liberation, who now held the position of Prime Minister’s Women’s Adviser. Her Prime Minister had endorsed the need for machinery in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to monitor all Cabinet submissions for gender impact (Sawer 2007: 21). This central machinery became the hub of a ‘wheel’ of women’s policy agencies, embodying the feminist insight that no policy could be assumed to be gender neutral in its effects, given the different location of men and women in the social and economic division of labour. Later this whole-of-government machinery became the basis for women’s budget statements, requiring even reluctant economic departments, to account for the gender impact of their policies and programs. Interdepartmental women’s adviser meetings resulted in successful policy transfer of women’s
budgeting to all Australian jurisdictions (Malloy 2003: 40–41) and at the same time international transfer was also taking place.

Australia tabled its (and the world’s) first women’s budget statement at an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) meeting in 1984 and presented a case study on it to an Expert Group Meeting organised by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women in Vienna in 1987. It was promoted at the 1996 meeting of (British) Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs and the Commonwealth Secretariat assisted countries interested in developing pilot women’s budget programs. In taking up this Australian model, other countries improved upon it, for example by the incorporation of parliamentary oversight (a parliamentary committee with some expert technical support) to prevent it degenerating into a public relations exercise. What became known as ‘gender-responsive budgeting’ has now been adopted in some form in around 100 countries and is recommended by the OECD (2014: 199, 2016).

Having been an early starter in the development of women’s policy machinery, progress faltered in the 1990s and Australia fell behind many other countries. By 2011 the OECD found that Australia had the fewest requirements for gender impact assessments of legislation, policies or budgets of 19 countries surveyed (OECD 2014: 185). From the 1990s there was also a retreat from high-profile women’s policy launches during election campaigns and women’s policy coordinating agencies were moved away from the centre of government. At the federal level, this was more likely to occur under Coalition governments, although, as we shall see, it was not redressed by recent Labor Governments, including one headed by Australia’s first woman Prime Minister (see Table 1).

Women’s budget statements, despite their growing international influence, were effectively abandoned in all Australian jurisdictions in the 1990s, sometimes leaving behind a slim publication on budget initiatives for women. It has been suggested this retreat from gender-responsive budgeting occurred for administrative reasons, to escape the vagaries of the Budget cycles and processes, as well as because of the disinclination of governments to publicise the gender-specific effects of neoliberal policy directions (Sharp and Broomhill 2007: 39–40).

The central location of women’s policy is also intuitively identified with a strategic vision and a coherent reform agenda. There has been little in the way of a national plan or roadmap for gender equality in Australia since the National Agenda for Women launched by the Hawke Labor government to implement the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies of 1985. No similar national plan was launched to implement the Beijing Platform for Action a decade later and Australia’s most recent report on implementation instead lists four pillars: safety for women, women’s economic empowerment, women’s

**Table 1.** Changes in location of the Australian Government’s chief women’s policy coordinating body 1974–2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coordinating body</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Affairs Section</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Dept of Prime Minister &amp; Cabinet</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Women’s Affairs</td>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>Dept of Home Affairs</td>
<td>1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Status of Women</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Dept of Prime Minister &amp; Cabinet</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Women</td>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>Dept of Family and Community Services</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Women</td>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>Dept of Prime Minister &amp; Cabinet</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
leadership and support for Australia’s international engagement and reporting obligations (Commonwealth of Australia 2014b).

One problem is that Australia has never developed parliamentary bodies to oversee implementation of gender mainstreaming, like those found in European parliaments and in Canada (for a database on these, see IPU 2016). This makes it easier to downgrade gender equality architecture without too much political pain. Nor does Australia belong to a regional body like the European Union, with treaty requirements for the promotion of gender equality and support for women’s policy agencies.

**Gender equality frameworks from 2007**

By the time of the election of the Rudd Labor government in 2007, the major political parties had become less inclined to issue women’s policies as part of their election campaigns (see Table 2). The Labor party, which had produced strong women’s policies in the 1980s, became persuaded that such policies were responsible for the loss of blue-collar votes evident in the Australian Election Study (McAllister and Bean 1997: 183). From the 1990s, not only were the major parties less likely to produce a women’s policy as part of their campaign, when one was produced it was often slipped onto a party website rather than being launched with fanfare by the party leader, like the 1993 Labor women’s policy launch (Jupp and Sawer 1994: 16). For example, in 2007 the Coalition released its policy onto its website two days before the election while in 2010 the Labor policy was released onto its website the day before the election. In line with this forgetfulness or coyness about gender, the women’s portfolio was missing from the Gillard government’s initial announcement of portfolios following the 2010 election.

The lack of comprehensive women’s policies meant that an overall framework for achieving gender equality (‘blueprint policy’) was missing from these governments, despite the reintroduction of national gender equality indicators (ABS 2011–Cat. No. 4125). The creation of a high-level interdepartmental Committee on Women under the Rudd Government did not lead to the restoration of cross-government gender-based analysis of policy as intended. At the intergovernmental level, bodies responsible for gender monitoring were serially abolished between 2011 and 2013 (Sawer 2014). These included the Ministerial Conference on the Status of Women ((1991–2011), the Select Ministerial Council on Women’s Issues (2011–13) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Reform Council, abolished after a solitary report on the gender outcomes of Commonwealth-State financial agreements (CRC 2013).

The abolition of these intergovernmental bodies meant there were no longer any arrangements in place to promote a national framework on gender equality. The officials’ body, the Standing Committee of Women’s Advisers, which had been meeting regularly since 1978, also ceased regular meetings although there was continuing activity around gender-based violence. This recent loss of intergovernmental bodies under governments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Coalition</th>
<th>Labor Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Women’s policies at federal elections 2007–13.*
of both left and right continued a bipartisan pattern evident since the 1990s (MAWM 2013).³

**Gender equality policies under the Rudd and Gillard governments**

Despite the lack of an overarching gender equality framework, there was progress under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments in specific policy sectors such as gender-based violence, paid parental leave, equal pay and women, peace and security. In the gender-based violence area, the community-based peak bodies representing women’s sexual assault and domestic violence services were brought back into the policy process, reflecting the generally better relationship between Labor governments and the NGO sector. As Minister for the Status of Women, Tanya Plibersek established a National Council which included members of the peak bodies for domestic violence and sexual assault as well as a range of other NGOs.⁴ It produced the comprehensive *Time For Action* report, which in turn provided the basis for the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–22 (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). This was the most comprehensive intergovernmental and cross-sectoral plan to date, laying out a series of steps to prevent and respond to violence.

As with previous Labor Government plans, gender-based violence was presented as arising from and reinforcing systemic gender inequalities in the distribution of power and resources. Since the 1980s, Labor governments at both federal and State levels had adopted this kind of women’s movement framing of the issue.⁵ In contrast, the Howard government had ‘individualized the problem and focused increasingly on perpetrator programs’ (Chappell and Curtin 2013: 34). One continuity, underlining the need for discursive strategies compatible with neoliberalism, was an emphasis on the economic costs of domestic violence, now estimated to be $13.6 billion (KPMG 2009) as against $8.5 billion in 2004.

The long-term nature of the National Plan was seen as an important breakthrough, but with the abolition of intergovernmental gender architecture there were concerns over who would oversee its implementation and intersection with other key Commonwealth-State agreements (CEDAW 2013; Harris Rimmer 2009).

In an area where Australia had long lagged behind other democracies, Labor’s paid parental leave scheme finally became operational from 1 January 2011. It consisted in 18 weeks of leave paid at the minimum wage; a ‘use it or lose it’ component of two weeks paternity leave became operational from January 2013. The latter, surprisingly, had first been taken up by the Coalition, with the Shadow Minister for the Status of Women, Sharman Stone (2010) emphasising that the Coalition was following Sweden, Iceland and Norway in this respect.

Some progress was also made under the Rudd and Gillard governments in addressing the issue of equal pay. Internationally, this is an issue where we find the greatest differences between centre left and centre right governments (for example, Curtin and Teghtsoonian 2010; Malloy 1999). In Australia there has been a persistent gender pay gap, despite early gains following the adoption of the equal remuneration principle in 1972. Some 40 years later, there was still an 18 per cent gap in the ordinary hours earnings of male and female full-time workers (WGEA 2016). The new Labor Government initiated a House of Representatives inquiry into pay equity and, importantly, its *Fair Work Act* of 2009 introduced
more effective equal remuneration provisions. A successful case was then brought by the Australian Services Union on behalf of community service workers, over 80 per cent of whom are female and who include disability and women’s refuge workers.

To help pay for the wage increases for community service workers, the Gillard Government announced $2 billion in funding on the part of the Commonwealth. It also announced substantial funding to support other moves towards equal pay, in the predominantly female and very poorly paid childcare and aged care industries. And in addition to the new equal remuneration provisions of the *Fair Work Act*, four years funding was provided for a specialist Pay Equity Unit in the Fair Work Commission to undertake pay equity research. Such complex research has often proved beyond the resources of individual trade unions bringing cases.

Equal remuneration also featured as an important element of gender equality in the first object of the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*. This Act renamed an agency in existence since 1987, giving more emphasis to equal opportunity for men in relation to their caring responsibilities as well as to improved data collection by employers, including gender pay gap analysis.

Under the Labor Governments, there was also a more positive approach to referencing international gender equality standards than under the preceding Howard government. Australia’s obligations under the *Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), as well as other international human rights obligations were set out in the framework of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children referred to above. In another development, Australia at last acceded to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and Australian women could make complaints under it from March 2009.

However, despite advocacy by women’s policy agencies, women’s movement organisations and the Parliamentary Labor Party’s Status of Women Committee, a significant move backwards took place in the last year of Labor Government. The time use survey scheduled for 2013 was cancelled to enable the Australian Bureau of Statistics to achieve required savings. This is the only survey to measure the distribution of paid and unpaid work and their intersection and hence is a key gender equality indicator. Performance of unpaid work over the life course continues to be the major contributor to women’s poverty in old age. The cancellation meant that data for this gender indicator became increasingly out-of-date – for example, still relying on 2006 data in 2015 (ABS 2011 Cat. No. 4125).

By contrast with domestic policy, a clear overall gender equality objective and policy framework had been adopted for international development assistance even before the arrival of the Rudd Government (*AusAID 2007*). AusAID had developed relatively strong gender expertise to underpin policy development and program evaluation and appointed a Principal Gender Advisor. The Rudd Government built on this by appointing a career diplomat as Ambassador for Women and Girls to promote Australia’s gender equality objectives in the region. A further regional commitment was Prime Minister Gillard’s landmark program *Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development* – a 10-year $320 million initiative to increase women’s participation in leadership. At the global level Gillard became co-chair of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals Advocacy Group, with a special focus on the education of girls.
On the other hand, the development of the National Plan of Action to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women in conflict and conflict resolution was a relatively slow process. Australia was the 38th country to develop a National Plan, eventually launching it (Commonwealth of Australia 2012) in the run up to membership of the Security Council. This plan outlines how Resolution 1325 will be implemented in peacekeeping missions undertaken by Australia.

At home Labor also tackled gender equality issues in the Defence portfolio and both Labor and the Coalition supported voluntary efforts to increase the representation of women on private sector boards and the 'business case for diversity' (Cash 2012). Both also strongly supported the campaign by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to engage male champions in the quest for gender equality (Plibersek 2008).

The Coalition’s gender equality policies

In the 2013 federal election the Coalition not only had a women’s policy (unlike Labor) but had as its lead item the return of OfW to the central policy co-ordination agency of government, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The policy stated that location in the Family and Community Services portfolio had implied that the women’s portfolio was a welfare concern rather than underpinning a whole-of-government approach. The last time that a machinery of government commitment had been the lead item in an incoming government’s women’s policy was 30 years before, when a Labor Government had similarly brought the Office back from an exile in the lowly Department of Home Affairs (Sawer and Groves 1994: 27).

One significant change when the Abbott Government was elected in 2013 was the drop in the number of women on the government benches. Contrary to propositions about ‘contagion effects’, the number of women candidates fielded by the Coalition had lagged far behind Labor, let alone the Greens. Women constituted only 21.6 per cent of the Liberal MPs and 15.8 per cent of the Nationals (compared to 43 per cent of Labor and 64 per cent of the Greens). The number of women in Cabinet dropped from six to one in 2013, with the only woman being Foreign Minister and Deputy Liberal Leader Julie Bishop (see Table 3).

There was a great deal of critical media commentary concerning the absence of women from the Abbott Cabinet, with journalists adversely comparing Australia to countries including Afghanistan. Abbott’s perceived ‘woman problem’, and the need to counter it, is one part of the answer to the puzzle of why a government of the Centre Right would commit to a more central position for its women’s policy agency. It was true, as stated in the Coalition policy, that location in a family services portfolio had implied the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole ministry</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary secretaries</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow Cabinet</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow ministry</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow parliamentary secretaries</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Gender breakdown of the Abbott ministry and the opposition shadow ministry, September 2013.
women’s portfolio was a welfare rather than a whole-of-government concern. Cross-government work on gender equality had been hindered under the Rudd and Gillard Governments by the location of the office in a relatively low-status department. Apart from the importance of such a location for purposes of policy coordination, it also has strong symbolic importance. Prime Ministers often move issues into their own department as a demonstration of commitment: under the 2013 Administrative Arrangements, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and counter-terrorism policy were located there as well as deregulation and women’s policy, an interesting combination of policy areas.

Tony Abbott might well have been persuaded by his ambitious spokeswoman on women, Senator Michaelia Cash, that such a demonstration of commitment would help counter his reputation of being out of step with women. She had also been lobbied extensively by the women’s peak bodies on the locational issue (Senior official interview, 25 March 2015). In the event, the new Prime Minister’s misogynist reputation was such that the return of women’s policy to Prime Minister and Cabinet received a very mixed reception (Harris Rimmer 2013). When Australia’s gender equality architecture was at its peak in the 1980s, the Prime Minister always had responsibility for the Status of Women. Some of this history was overlooked as social media campaigning spread the word in 2013 that Prime Minister Abbott was now ‘Minister for Women’. Anne Summers commented: ‘Speaking as a former head of OSW (in the Hawke era), I applaud this move. However, we are not talking real estate here and location is not everything. The policy brief is what counts’ (Summers 2013).

Summers’ words proved prophetic. Location did not bring increased policy influence:

the Office has never been in Prime Minister and Cabinet with so little power. There is a division between ‘need to know’ and ‘don’t need to know’ issues, with economic Cabinet submissions falling into the latter category, so we have to rely on networking. (Senior official interview, 25 March 2015)

In line with the emphasis on the international domain, discussed below, the only interdepartmental committee (IDC) chaired by the Office was the Women, Peace and Security Interdepartmental Working Group; it participated in a number of other IDCs including the Gender in the G20 and the APEC IDCs, as well as IDCs concerned with domestic policy such as paid parental leave and women’s safety (Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014).

There was considerable continuity with the preceding Labor Government in relation to policy on gender-based violence (Commonwealth of Australia 2014a). In 2015, family violence survivor Rosie Batty was named Australian of the Year and was appointed to a new COAG Advisory Panel to Reduce Violence against Women. It was supported by the creation of a Women’s Safety Taskforce in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, with almost 20 members. Batty immediately called for the government to reverse the large cuts it had made to services for women fleeing domestic violence. When a new more centrist Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, took office in September 2015, his first major announcement was a new funding package. He was criticised by some right-wing media commentators for joining Batty and his Minister for Women, Senator Cash in linking violence against women to gender inequality (Devine 2015). Cash had consistently articulated a feminist framing of gender-based violence, despite refusing to identify herself as a feminist. She now became a Cabinet minister as the new Prime Minister...
increased the number of women to five, including Australia’s first female Defence Minister, Senator Marise Payne.

While there was continuity in emphasis on gender-based violence at a policy level and even continuity in the feminist framing of the issue, the partisan differences on equal pay continued into government (see Table 4). The Coalition had not supported the Community Services Union’s equal pay case discussed above nor the expenditure required to implement it. Nor did it support the Pay Equity Unit in Fair Work Australia. Following the change of Government the Coalition reversed Labor’s funding decisions intended to support equal pay in the social and community services sector. In addition, a number of the employer bodies that had unsuccessfully opposed the equal pay case were seeking to remove the equal remuneration provisions of the Fair Work Act (AIG 2012: 83ff).

The Coalition regarded the reporting requirements of the Workplace Gender Equality Act, including reporting on the gender pay gap, as part of the regulatory burden imposed on business. Despite vigorous opposition (Dent 2015) it reduced reporting requirements from 2015 as part of its ‘red-tape reduction strategy’. The government’s Commission of Audit also listed the Workplace Gender Equality Agency as among the statutory bodies that should be rolled back into departments, which would bring to an end its ability to attract extensive media coverage for gender pay gap statistics. In another move, the Government was reviewing its procurement procedures and the requirements for contract compliance with gender equality legislation, in existence since 1992.

On the other hand, Abbott had been committed since his 2009 book *Battlelines*, to a relatively generous form of paid parental leave compared to that introduced by Labor. There was considerable distrust about this commitment and again, a perception that he was trying to overcome his ‘woman problem’. Opposition from both economic dries and social conservatives within the Coalition and from cross-benchers in the new Senate eventually forced him to drop the commitment in early 2015.

Despite ambivalent attitudes to gender equality policy at home, the Coalition expressed strong support for gender equality initiatives at the international and regional levels, and particularly initiatives to reduce gender-based violence. In December 2013 the Abbott Government appointed outspoken feminist and former Senator and Australian Democrats Leader Natasha Stott Despoja to the position of Ambassador for Women and Girls, the position initiated by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Major cuts to the aid program (AUD $11 billion) and the integration of the aid agency into the Foreign Affairs and Trade Department meant the outcome for gender equality programs was unclear despite a relatively high-profile Gender Equality Branch in the Department (Rhiannon 2015). However Bishop took pride in refocusing the aid program to focus on such issues and women’s economic empowerment (Bishop 2014).

Australia’s report for the UN’s Beijing + 20 Review, highlighted international aid in the Indo-Pacific region as one of Australia’s major achievements for gender equality from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women's policy</th>
<th>Labor 2007–13</th>
<th>Coalition 2013–</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central location</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal pay agenda</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-based violence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional, global issues</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2009 to 2013. The other major achievements were listed as a national framework for addressing violence against women and their children (the lead item); paid parental leave; a national action plan on women, peace and security; and a whole of government approach achieved through the relocation of the OfW to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Commonwealth of Australia 2014b: 1–11).

There have been many similarities in the way centre right governments in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK have adopted foreign policy priorities centred on women’s economic empowerment and protection from sexual violence in armed conflict. In its term as an elected member of the Security Council in 2013–14 Australia raised Women Peace and Security issues in all parts of the Security Council’s program of work (Harris Rimmer 2013). The Australian G20 Presidency also gained historic agreement to the goal of ‘reducing the gap in participation rates between men and women in our countries by 25 per cent by 2025 … to bring more than 100 million women into the labour force’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

Conclusions

Our Australian case study of transition from a government of one political complexion to another, confirms that where neoliberal agendas have been adopted, parties of the left may no longer give higher salience to gender equality architecture (‘blueprint issues’) than parties of the Right. Unlike a recent Western European study, we do not find that ‘blueprint issues’ (such as gender mainstreaming) attract ‘wide ranging support cutting across political affiliations’ (Annesley et al. 2015: 12) but rather that there is little support on either side of politics for systematic gender analysis of policy. Policy differences persist, with a government of the right significantly less likely to take action on issues requiring redistribution, such as gender pay gaps and the undervaluation of work in community services. However, in Australia both Labor and Coalition governments now appear more comfortable in articulating gender equality objectives in the international realm than in domestic policy. At the domestic level, both left and right are more likely to prioritise issues of gender-based violence than broader issues of gender equality. This bipartisan emphasis on gender-based violence confirms findings of Teghtsoonian and Chappell (2008) in their study of British Columbia and New South Wales and Campbell and Childs (2015) in their study of the 2015 UK election. But how can we explain the bipartisan shift towards an international rather than a domestic focus in gender equality policy?

Here we offer a few preliminary suggestions. First, gender equality policy, if implemented as across-the-board gender audit of domestic policy, draws unwanted attention to the gender outcomes of neoliberal reshaping of the welfare state. The kind of gender budgeting programs pioneered in Australia became unpopular when they highlighted the disparate gender impact of budgetary measures such as cuts to the public sector. While gender-responsive budgeting may be recommended by the OECD as a form of best practice, it is hardly likely to commend itself to governments intent on red-tape reduction and a greater reliance on market mechanisms.

Second, issues of gender equality may be seen as vote losers in the domestic context, particularly among blue-collar workers, the traditional heartland of ‘old-left’ support. This could be clearly seen in the negative reaction in the Australian media to Gillard’s
two speeches on sexism and gender equality and the marked drop in male support for the Labor Party.

Third, a focus on gender-based or sexual violence can seem ideologically neutral in both the domestic and international policy realms. If it is construed as not requiring economic redistribution, a focus on regulating male violence can fit more easily with neoliberal agendas than other feminist claims.

Fourth, the explicit articulation of gender equality goals in the international arena may in part be due to peer pressure and new normative frameworks. In Australia such pressure has come from diplomatic partners such as the European Union and the Obama administration, and especially US foreign policy under Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Fifth, a cynic could suggest that signing international treaties or lending a name to international causes is both budget-neutral and good for a politician’s legacy, particularly if they are a first female foreign minister or prime minister. As the Coalition’s Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop appeared to be taking this role very seriously, assisted by a very experienced femocrat who headed the gender equality branch in her department. Julia Gillard did not necessarily go looking for such a role but grew more comfortable with it after her misogyny speech and its favourable international reception (Sawer 2013). The significance of these critical actors in successive governments would confirm previous findings regarding how status-based gender-equality issues gain executive attention (Annesley et al. 2015).

Finally, there is more pressure on particular gender issues at the international than on the domestic level, which may seem counter-intuitive in the context of normal electorate-based politics. International development organisations are part of international advocacy coalitions and are better funded and more organised for targeted lobbying than the domestic women’s sector. In contrast, the domestic peak women’s bodies are dominated by service organisations and more diverse in their priorities and interests, often lacking dedicated media and policy staff.

These are preliminary suggestions to explain the new patterns emerging in Australia. There has been a general retreat by the major political parties from high-profile women’s policies and a general decay of women’s policy machinery. At the national level the Coalition government has returned women’s policy to the central policy coordination agency of government, but central location has not been accompanied by strategic policy direction or reform vision. The main focus of domestic gender policy has been on gender-based violence rather than any broader-based gender equality policy. On the other hand, there has been considerable focus on gender equality at the international level, including in international development assistance policy and the promotion of women, peace and security agendas. At the same time as gender equality has become a noticeable feature of foreign policy, it has become relatively unpopular at the domestic level of politics.

Our case study confirms the effects of neoliberalism in shifting the focus of gender equality policy to the international domain except in the case of gender-based violence. Where neoliberalism has become dominant there is likely to be an erosion of domestic gender equality architecture and associated gender-based analysis of the effects of neoliberal policies. The focus moves to policy sectors like gender-based violence that are less redistributive. Despite this pattern of neoliberal policy congruence, partisan differences will continue to be found, particularly around issues of labour market regulation and gender pay gaps. Party continues to matter, but not so much.
Notes

1. To preserve confidentiality, senior officials interviewed for this project are not named here. The authors also participated in the Australian government delegation to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2014, the G20 preparatory process, meetings of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party Status of Women Committee and of the Gender Statistics Advisory Group of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
2. For a Swedish example of concern for blue-collar votes trumping gender equality policy, see Bergqvist et al. (2015).
3. However, in its 2016 women’s policy the ALP made a number of machinery commitments, including to re-establish a ministerial council.
4. For backgrounds of members, including those with expertise in relation to Aboriginal and immigrant women: http://www.formerministers.dss.gov.au/1885/nat_council_violence_26may08/
5. For discussion of the comparable adoption of women’s movement framing of domestic violence by the Scottish Labour government, see Charles and Mackay (2013: 602).
6. The major Australian centre right parties, the Liberal Party of Australia and the rural-based Nationals, generally operate in Coalition, particularly in government.
7. In 2002, when he was a minister in the Howard Government, Abbott had said at a Liberal Party function ‘Compulsory paid maternity leave? Over this Government’s dead body, frankly’.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the interviewees for their thoughtful responses to sometimes sensitive questions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council (Future Fellow).

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