

A black and white photograph of three women sitting inside a tent. The tent has a banner that says 'FIGHT' on the left side. The women are looking out from the tent. In the background is a large, circular building with many windows, possibly a parliament building. The title of the book is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Rethinking Women and Politics New Zealand and Comparative Perspectives

Edited by Kate McMillan, John
Leslie & Elizabeth McLeay



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Rethinking Women and Politics:
New Zealand and Comparative
Perspectives

To my Chinese friends.
It has been a pleasure
and an honour to
meet you all

Elizabeth M'Leay

28 June 2013

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Edited by Kate McMillan, John Leslie and
Elizabeth McLeay

金同如译国际部

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The Editors

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth McLeay

Despite the real gains won by women as a result of the first- and second-wave women's movements, by the turn of the 21st century there were still significant differences between women and men in the distribution of political power and economic resources. The gaps seemed increasingly difficult to bridge. Even in liberal democratic countries such as Aotearoa New Zealand, where women possessed formal political and civil rights equivalent to those of men and had equal access to education, by 2008, women still held a minority share of power in the formal political arenas. Women, more than men, still predominantly cared for children and elders and were often unpaid for their labour, and women, more than men, occupied the poorly paid, caring professions. Women earned less on average than did men. Men dominated most of the senior positions in government departments, and the situation was even worse when it came to business leaders and members of boards of directors. Violence towards women and children did not appear to be abating. Rather, the abuse of women by men seemed to be on the increase, although any upward trend might have reflected a rise in reporting rates rather than an actual increase of crimes of this nature. Billboards and the mass media bombarded New Zealanders with images of near-naked women, and there was public concern about young women's self-images and the impact of the pursuit of bodily perfection.

In contrast to the depiction of women as fashion and sexual objects, women in the public sphere continued to be much less visible than were men. In early 2009, during the first months of the National minority government headed by John Key,

for example, a much-heralded 'Prime Minister's Summit on Employment' was held to discuss the economic downturn that New Zealand, among other countries, was experiencing. Before the summit, 'women's voices were to be heard' at a gathering of 35 'influential women and representatives from small, medium and large businesses and unions'. The Minister of Women's Affairs, Pansy Wong, said:

Women are a vulnerable group in times of recession and unemployment and the National-led government feels that it is important they participate and are heard in providing solutions to the recession. Large percentages of women in the workforce are employed in areas that are likely to be affected and it is inevitable that New Zealand women will be hugely affected by the recession . . . Research and statistics show that, as families start struggling with their finances, women are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence. It is important that this is brought into the debate to ensure that women feel safe in their own homes. (Wong 2009)

Yet the Summit itself (according to the interim invitation list) included just 26 women (16.8%) in the total 181 non-ministerial participants. The conference chair was male (Mark Weldon, Chief Executive, New Zealand Stock Exchange), as were eight out of the total of 10 people involved in chairing or co-chairing the 'workstreams' (Key 2009). These figures raise questions about women's true status as full citizens in the New Zealand polity.

As well as the unequal position of women compared with men, disparities among and between women remained. Leaving aside the enormous differences between the situations of women in wealthy and those in poor countries, within states such as New Zealand there were pronounced differences in the distribution of economic and political resources among women from the various socioeconomic groups, as well as among women of different ethnicities and races. Gender, combined with the other factors, continued to matter a great deal. The optimism and hopes of the second-wave feminists of the 1970s seemed to have been misconstrued: inequality and, indeed,

patriarchy – within the family and within the state – continued to exist.

The picture was not entirely gloomy, however. There had been some notable achievements across liberal democratic states generally and within New Zealand in particular. Although, with a few very rare exceptions, women remained in the minority when it came to the gender disposition of political institutions, in general there were more women elected to Parliament than there had been even a decade earlier, and more women ministers, political leaders, and senior public servants. This was the situation in New Zealand, which provides a particularly fascinating case study of women and politics in a liberal democratic state.

Indeed, despite the curtailed achievements of the women's revolution, in some aspects New Zealand appeared as a shining beacon for women's political achievements in the public sphere, second only to the Nordic countries, and ahead of the national parliaments of other Westminster states such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, and well ahead of the United States. As is well known, New Zealand had been the first country to give women the vote. In 1893, all women, Maori and non-Maori, were enfranchised, although women were ineligible to stand as candidates for the House of Representatives until 1919. It was not until 1941 that women could be appointed to the upper house, the Legislative Chamber, granting a very brief opportunity for women before that body was abolished in 1950. New Zealand's first woman Member of Parliament (MP), Elizabeth McCombs, was elected in 1933, the first Maori woman MP, Iriana Ratana, was elected to represent one of the four Maori seats in 1949, and in 1947 Mabel Howard became New Zealand's first female minister. Winnie Luamanuvao Laban became the first woman with a Pacific Island heritage to win a parliamentary seat (1999) and to become a minister (2005). The first Asian woman to enter Parliament, indeed, the first Asian person to be elected, was Pansy Wong (1996), who later became the first Asian minister.