

FASHION, WOMEN AND POWER

The Politics of Dress



Denise N. Rall

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EDITED BY

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*To the Honourable Julia Eileen Gillard AC,
first female prime minister of Australia.*

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Foreword

Prudence Black

'Taking Clothes Out of the Equation': The Politics of Dress

Women are often judged by what they wear, and women in public office obviously have many more eyes on them. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the numbers are alarming, as only 57 countries of the 193 member nations of the United Nations have had a woman as either prime minister or president (Gillard and Okonjo 2020: 19). A graphic display of the male bias in world politics is seen in the photo of the G20 economic forum in 2010 (see Plate i). Women leaders when they do attain positions of power, have to negotiate their occupancy of these largely male spaces. As writer and historian, Rosemary Hill said about politics:

It's never been arranged for us and our convenience [...] so if you want to stand out, or you want to fit in, or you want to appear authoritative, or you want to disappear in the background, your clothes are going to be incredibly important in the way that you negotiate that.

(Hill 2018: n.pag.)

Women's clothing may need to stake their ground in a political world, but that means their appearance becomes open for criticism (Akou 2011; Allman 2004).

Is it possible to take clothes out of the equation? In October 2018, the official portrait of ex-Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard was unveiled at Parliament House, Canberra. Gillard was the first female prime minister in Australia (2010–13), and she made the conscious decision to have a facial portrait (see Plate ii). She said to Vincent Fantauzzo, the artist who

painted the portrait: ‘It’ll be from the neck up, please’. Further, she noted this was,

a really conscious discussion and choice. I mean one of the things that I think is frustrating for women in leadership roles at the moment, still, is that there is endless commentary about what they’re wearing. For me, being the first female prime minister, there were times when it was just truly absurd. And so, I did, in this, want to entirely take *clothes out of the equation*.

(Anon. 2018a: n.pag., emphasis added)

For women in public office, taking their dress out of the equation appears impossible. So impossible that the Australian Member of Parliament Nicolle Flint responded to media criticism over her wardrobe by wearing a plastic garbage bag over her garments. On her Twitter feed, she asked, ‘What should a woman in politics wear? [...] How about a garbage bag? To match your rubbish views’ (Beikoff 2020: n.pag.). Ms. Flint challenged the media with her garbage bag dress and disrupted the norm of appropriate appearance, what dress theorist Michael Carter names a ‘descent into unacceptability’ (2018: 777). Female (and male) politicians appearing in public should dress to a certain standard, or look ‘smart’. Carter then outlines some of the general features of smart dress, ‘it should be clean, without creases (ironed), crisp, and at least approaching a condition of completion’ (2018: 777). This ‘smart’ appearance is now expected by the public.

So, Julia Gillard chose to take clothes out of her portrait, and Flint ‘called out’ the media for their comments, but women in public office are routinely criticized more than men for their appearance. In 2018, US First Lady Melania Trump wore a green-hooded Zara jacket to the Texan border camp to visit Border Patrol Agents and the children of migrants who had been quarantined away from their parents under her husband’s ‘Zero Tolerance’ policy. The world gasped as they saw the words, ‘I really don’t care, do U?’, scrawled on the back of her jacket. Melania’s overt display of unconcern for both the children (Llamas 2018: n.pag.) and their families was quickly countered by her communications director who responded, ‘It’s a jacket, there was no hidden message’ (Superville 2018: n.pag.). Shortly after this photo received global approbation President Trump reversed his executive order on the ‘family separation’ policy (Collinson et al. 2018: n.pag.).

That said, clothing matters most when they disrupt. This is how the fashion system works. While men in power typically wear a suit, shirt and tie leaving little to discuss, women leaders can choose outfits from a range of styles, thereafter scrutinized by the media and the public. Fashion consistently relies on change, so changes in fashion communicate a message of instability. This is a risk for those in power who must appear stable and will be criticized by the media, especially

if their appearance is orchestrated as self-promoting, a type of vanity. Emmanuel Kant, writing in the late 1700s noted:

Fashion, accordingly, comes under the heading of *vanity*, since our purpose in following it has no intrinsic value, and also of folly, because it still involves a coercion to let ourselves be led slavishly by mere example – the example that the many in society give us.

([1797] 1974: 112, original emphasis)

In society, fashion presents as an ever-changing desire. Thorstein Veblen addressed this in his seminal book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* where he outlined the dysfunctionality of conspicuous consumption through the example of women, who donned ‘high fashions’ that limited their movement or access to simple activities ([1899] 1928). Recently, the equation between women’s fashion and change then-Senator Hillary Clinton estimated that she lost 24 working days in her 2016 presidential campaign due to time spent styling her hair and make-up, when she could have employed those lost hours on the campaign trail rather than ‘enhancing’ her appearance (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020: 141).

So primarily, the fashion system works by drawing attention to the body through changing styles. Specific garments are composed of colour, style and through what parts of the body are exposed, or covered up. As dress can also mask the body many women in western politics adopted the male’s business suit. The suit coat envelopes one’s body, constructing a superficial profile around the body; thus, reshaping the body through its structure. And historically, the suit suggests a relationship to work. The first suits were designed for the male shape (Hollander [1994] 2016) and it must be acknowledged that women have different bodies to men. Male leaders are criticized by the media, but rarely because of their actual body shape. For women, the suit may help to disguise their ‘actual’ body. But both women and men still face media criticism even when wearing the ‘immunity’ of a business suit.

While Julia Gillard typically wore a suit to work she was continually criticized for her appearance; the cut of her jacket, the colour and style of her hair. Malcolm Turnbull (Liberal Party Prime Minister 2015–18) described what Julia Gillard endured as ‘off the charts’ and he elaborated, ‘there’s an obsession with the appearance of women in politics. How often do people talk about [Prime Minister] Scott Morrison losing his hair? [...] You never read this stuff about men. Are the males in Parliament just one Adonis after another?’ (Doreian 2020: n.pag). Today’s sensationalist journalists take up the option to focus on female leader’s clothing to make their political criticisms seem less *ad feminam*, that is, ‘against the woman’, thus leaving her policies unreported.

There are exceptions. Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand Labour Party 2017–present) was elected as the third female prime minister of her country and acknowledges her predecessors for smoothing her path. It is also necessary to mention that Ardern presents as a younger female with a normative body size and shape that drew less commentary from the press. Currently, women leaders are still highly criticized for their body shape through their clothing: in Julia Gillard's jackets and Hillary Clinton's pantsuits the 'fit' is labelled a 'misfit'. Here, the fit of one's clothes becomes 'the point of balance around which the elegant and the awkward circle one another' where elegance itself becomes 'a state where there is a harmonious integration between what is being worn and the body of the wearer. Awkward is a condition where that point of balance, and so fit, is absent' (Carter 2018: 778).

A further imbalance occurs when a female politician becomes too fashionable, that is, moving beyond institutional boundaries. Both Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Party 1979–90) and Theresa May (Conservative Party 2016–19) choose fashionable high heels to express their 'femininity' that were ridiculed by the media, particularly May's leopard-print kitten-heeled shoes (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020: 137; see Chapter 7). Elsewhere in the world, Asian women leaders must not appear overly fashionable, too masculine or even too 'westernized' (see Chapter 6).

In Australia, red jackets and red shoes have been used as a way of signalling an internal female faction within the Liberal Party. Some Liberal Party women wore red at a sitting of parliament to testify their disapproval to the resignation of their colleague Julia Banks in the Victorian State Parliament due to bullying, and the fact that female Liberal candidates were passed over for pre-selection for the seat of Wentworth (Wright 2018: n.pag.).

Julie Bishop (Deputy Leader, Liberal Party [2007–18]; Minister for Foreign Affairs [2013–18]) entered politics more than 20 years ago. Bishop is widely acknowledged as one of Australia's most successful woman leaders who also employed the colour red when she announced her decision to resign from her Cabinet position on 27 November 2018 (Bolger 2018). Her bright red, block-heel and rhinestone-studded Italian Rodo shoes were donated to the Museum of Australian Democracy in Old Parliament House, Canberra, Australia. They are displayed in the museum alongside a photograph of her at her final press conference. The photograph shows her bare legs from skirt length down, hands clasped behind her back (nail polish matching the shoes), standing in her red shoes against a backdrop of men wearing dark suits (Anon. 2018b). The Museum labelled her shoes as a 'bold statement and a symbol of solidarity among Australian women' dignifying this pair of fashion objects with an expression of feminist ideology. Despite her credibility as one of the most successful Foreign Ministers in Australia's history it

is predictable that ‘those red shoes’ are destined to identify the most iconic image of her long career (Bolger 2018: n.pag.) (see Plate iv). Like Dorothy’s red shoes in the *Wizard of Oz*, the headline offered that Julie Bishop was indeed ‘going home’ (Sams 2019: n.pag.).

Women as political leaders are caught as their fashion and its criticism cycle around each other. This author suggests that clothing can be metonymic, where a garment stands for the whole person, echoing the Barthes’ words on fashion that contains ‘such a network of meaning’ ([1967] 1990: xi). Women leaders could choose an unambiguous uniform (but even then) how their garments are understood remains contingent on the day, the time, the hour, the place and their perception by the audience. Certainly, Bishop’s shoes offered a performative utterance when she required her shoes to ‘say something’ in rebuttal to her male counterparts, but the wider audience might easily misinterpret such a message. As Carter notes:

Description slides into judgement. However hard we try to stop passing sentence on our own appearance and that of others, the very words we use to engage with the clothes we wear are already infused with moral value.

(2018: 781–82)

The portrayal of women in political leadership continues to have wider ramifications. Amanda Haraldsson and Lena Wängnerud describe the impact of ‘media sexism’ as a ‘factor contributing to women’s lack of nascent political ambition’ (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2019: 528). Here, media sexism exerts a ‘bystander effect’ that can deter women from entering politics, pre-empting women who might want to stand for office inhibited by presumed media reactions to their appearance (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2019: 526).

To conclude, women in politics will receive different treatment because of their gender coupled with the scrutiny and subsequent judgements about what they wear (Le Marquand 2020). In 2019, only 24.3 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women and if women were to achieve parity with men; it is unlikely whether comments about women’s dress will diminish (Anon. 2019). In an era composed of rapid response media bites, Twitter feeds and social media, women must manage and control the marginalization of their political effectiveness and deflect focus on their fashion where critical interpretations are given free reign (Ibroscheva and Stover 2012). Today, women in politics and their assistants must continue their vigilance, and swiftly call out unwanted attacks on their appearance and demeanour and return the focus to their policies. The more often women in leadership call out and block such demeaning language regarding their fashion could lessen such denigration in the future.

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Preface

Denise N. Rall

As never before, women have been thrust into positions of political power, and likewise into the maelstroms of mass media regarding their fashion, their deportment and their right to govern. These contributors will offer a wide set of perspectives on women and their roles, and their fashions when taking up powerful positions in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States. From the United Kingdom, the historical issues surrounding the movement towards ‘rational dress’ for women seeking their rights to vote and exercise will be interrogated. The volume also explores viewpoints from East Asia, such as the constricting role for ‘common’ women upon entering the Imperial family in Japan. From the United States comes the troublesome media stories engulfing two significant American Democratic First Ladies, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Michelle Obama. From New Zealand, the media reports on Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern upon her motherhood while serving in the office and on her clothing during the recent Christchurch massacre comprise a much-needed contribution to the literature on women, politics and dress. Further, the role of dress in politics broadly as a form of resistance will be examined in Australia from recent skirmishes over ‘appropriate dress’ worn by ex-Prime Minister Julia Gillard and other Australian female politicians. The role of women and what their fashion selections mean continues via considerable debate during worldwide events. Finally, the theme of resistance and social media continues with an examination of protest dressing in the recent street battles in Hong Kong, to how young Asian women have been influenced by the social media campaigns to encourage wearing the veil in Indonesia, to prime ministers negotiating femininity in political dress.

*Introduction: Theoretical approaches to women
in leadership and political fashion*

Denise N. Rall and Jo Turney

This introductory section explores a number of theoretical approaches to fashion that interplay with women, their identities and their political efficacy as they construct a suitable (pun intended) public persona when taking up political office and/or influential positions of leadership. Within fashion research, a number of theories have decoded women's adoption of specific types of dress and how fashion influences their roles in society. These theories run the gamut of perspectives from Goffman's theories of presentation, and how fashion works through 'branding', including power dressing, the significance of fashion for nation branding and the employment of sartorial diplomacy, alongside women who negotiate a personal political identity through their dress. Lastly, recent feminist approaches to power are summarized to explain the limitations to women's opportunities to take up authoritative positions through theories of role congruity and intersectionality.

Following the Introduction are three sections of case studies that survey selected global responses to women in leadership, their dress and comportment while in office, as well as challenges and resistance to the dominant male-oriented cultures regarding women in leadership and the politics of what they wear.

Part I: Gender, politics and identity: Lessons from past and present

Part I develops three narratives of women's performance of gender as it relates to significant social trends from the 1900s through to the twenty-first century. These chapters each offer a series of perspectives that challenged women's authority in the public sphere, in the workplace and how fashion trends affected women as they took up positions of influence and political life. At question is women and their ability to function as productive members of society or in politics, while negotiating the vexing matters of family life as affiliative or reproductive agents within their life partnerships, marriages and/or family obligations. Further issues arise in the chapter on Japan's royal family that details the responsibilities fostered on women's dress from enduring historical dynastic obligations.

*Chapter 1: Rational dress 'as an expression of the
fin-de-siècle aspiration towards equality of the sexes'*

Madeleine Seys

Writing in *Aglaia: The Journal of the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union* in 1894, Lasenby Liberty described the dress reform movement as 'an expression of the

fin-de-siecle aspiration towards equality of the sexes'. During the 1880s and 1890s proponents of the British women's liberation, suffrage and dress reform movements adopted androgynous ensembles of bloomers or divided skirts, waistcoats and jackets. In its rejection of the fashions and gender ideologies of male-dominated Victorian society, this politically motivated mode of dress was termed Rational Dress. Rational Dress afforded women both physical and political mobility. The invention of the bicycle and Rational cycling dress allowed women to negotiate public space in pursuit of equality and employment, challenging the Victorian ideology of 'Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere'. Through its androgynous style, Rational Dress also represented both a symbolic and further, a real threat to patriarchal Victorian society by undermining its very foundations. This research drawn from nineteenth-century primary sources outlines the practical and symbolic use of Rational Dress by British women's rights and suffrage campaigners at the turn of the twentieth century.

*Chapter 2: Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern:
Fashion and performing gender*

Sarah Baker

In September 1893, New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world to give women the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Since then, New Zealand has had three women prime ministers, Jenny Shipley, Helen Clark and most recently Jacinda Ardern. These prime ministers all experienced the double standards associated with women's appearance and questions about their leadership while they were head of the country. For example, Helen Clark suffered many cruel comments about her appearance as 'masculine' while later, Ardern was famously quizzed by the media on whether she would have children while she served as prime minister. Ardern's role as a governor, and her ability to do her job potentially conflicts with the popular media portrayals of her as a woman, mother and fashion icon – requiring much negotiation between her public and private self. Recently, Ardern appeared on the September 2018 edition of *Vogue* to discuss her motherhood, a story which was edited by the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle. Following the horrific Christchurch Massacre in early 2018, she famously donned a headscarf to show solidarity and received both praise and criticism by the media. These two examples highlight where Ardern's role as prime minister has been linked to fashion and further, to her ability to negotiate and deliver a normative gender performance. This discussion outlines the role of fashion and its ties to Ardern's performance of gender and delineates how slippery the climb up the political ladder becomes. The conclusion suggests that women as high-level politicians are still hindered by the constraints of fashion and gender.

*Chapter 3: An empress's wardrobe unlock'd: Empress
Masako and Japan's imperial fashions*

Emerald L. King and Megan Rose

The story of Empress Masako's integration into the Royal Family in Japan highlights an interesting instance where a powerful woman in East Asia has struggled with her negotiation of the self. The public stories of women and their insertion into the imperial Japanese court focus on three life stages: the initial courtship, the assimilation into Royal court life and consequent pressures to produce a male heir. Before her marriage, Empress Masako was a highly accomplished woman and an aspiring diplomat who hesitated to marry into the royal family. She was 'heroed' in the western media as the 'next Lady Di' before failing to maintain her identity within the limitations of the Japanese court. Here, the analysis of Japan's court dress codes illustrates Empress Masako's 'princess lifestyle'. Focusing on three key movements in the Empress's presentation: her courtship by the crown prince, her life as a princess, and finally as Japan's empress; we demonstrate how the use of colour and style are codified. A careful selection of her ensembles worn across this time period is explored through a systematic review of news reportage (both eastern and western) alongside a semiotic analysis of the outfits in question. Further, the manner in which the empress is dressed evokes the occidental fantasy of the elegant woman, retaining strong visual parallels to the British Royal Family.

Part II: Making politics through fashion

Part II concentrates on women in political office at the highest level, as presidents, prime ministers as well as the influential role taken up by United State's First Ladies. These chapters outline how women leaders encountered enormous differences in governmental and political structures in Australia, the United States of America and throughout Asia. These female leaders were repeatedly challenged to adopt appropriate dress choices and afterwards to witness how their fashion choices dictated society's acceptance or blatant non-acceptance within their designated role. Here, the scrutiny of women's dress was first analysed in detail by the daily newspapers in Australia in the mid-1800s and elsewhere reported through other mass media, including print, radio, television and the rise of various social media that have dominated the expression of public opinion during the last two decades of the twenty-first century. In these three chapters, the media continued to regard women's fashion as an indicator of their ability to take up political power alongside family life and country-specific expectations of leadership.

*Chapter 4: Women politicians, fashion and the media in
Australia: Enid Lyons to Julia Gillard*

Amanda Laugesen

Australian women politicians have been subjected to enormous scrutiny ever since they first entered parliament via Dame Enid Lyons in the 1940 federal election who served until 1951. She was the first female member of the House of Representatives, elected alongside the first female Senator, Dorothy Tangney. They are often held to higher standards and expectations, and they are watched closely lest they slip up and do something ‘wrong’. This scrutiny has often included their fashion choices, ranging from hairstyles to the colours they choose to wear. Sometimes these choices are met with approval; other times they are torn to shreds. The media have frequently passed judgement on the attire of women politicians in a way that men are rarely subject to, and thus media commentary has played and continues today as a powerful force in shaping women’s political careers, even shaping a political downfall in some instances. Australian women politicians have, nevertheless, exerted some agency across time in employing this media scrutiny, as well as gender stereotyping, to their own advantage.

*Chapter 5: ‘Dressing up’ two Democratic First Ladies:
Fashion as political performance in America*

Denise N. Rall, Jo Coghlan, Lisa J. Hackett and Annita Boyd

They influence American ‘womanhood’ and by ‘their husband’s elections’ First Ladies become *sites* for the symbolic negotiation of female identity’. The process of negotiation in female identity appears in various forms after women assume political power, for example, Golda Meir in Israel, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Indira Gandhi in India and most recently, Australia’s first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2010–13). While the position of First Lady is unique to American politics, the ways in which Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama each rejected a ‘suitably feminine’ image provides an important lesson for all women in power. Therefore, we argue here that this analysis of two Democratic American First Ladies and their employment or disregard of fashion informs the gender-based and race-based issues affecting women in political leadership through their choices in dress. When ‘dressing up’ both Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama struggled with issues of individual identity, subjectivity and power and negotiated their First Lady roles through their fashion.

Chapter 6: Codes of power: Transforming the dress and appearance of female Asian politicians

Jennifer Craik and Anne Peirson-Smith

Women in politics have always faced challenges in matters of dress. Modern politics has largely been seen as the province – perhaps the playground of men – who have dressed primarily in either a (western) business suit or (less commonly) customary or ethnic dress. The former conveys connotations of authority, discipline, convention and formality associated with the ideals of democratic political systems, while the latter conveys a more colourful aesthetic and image of the exotic. By contrast, female Asian politicians have to negotiate complex interplays between professional credibility and subtle overtures of mainstream femininity. Yet, over the past decade, the wardrobe of female politicians in Asia has expanded to include more colourful fabrics, informal outfits and generally more mainstream garments, cuts and styles. However, female politicians must be careful to retain a vestimentary image that is credible, serious, capable and attractive. Thus, Asian dress codes – although increasingly relaxed – still require a strategic negotiation between professional and gender codes in the selection and combination of garments that can convey an acceptable balance of efficiency, legitimacy and believability while in office. The dress of female Asian politicians and their public appearance attracts more media and public attention than their policies, skills and achievements. Using paired examples of contemporary female politicians in South and East Asia it is suggested that dress codes are employed to change both the look and efficacy of female politicians in Asia.

Part III: Women and dress: Social media, politics and resistance

Part III includes the narratives of resistance offered in the sartorial choices of women, from the highest political office in the United Kingdom to the opening public sphere for young women adopting Instagram-promoted fashions in Indonesia, and finally within the recent street protests of Hong Kong. The overwhelming visual nature of dress speaks to its performative aspect and through performance, its impact on public opinion and mass media. From the more subtle wearing of high fashion shoes to the uptake of a particular style of veil, and through clothing worn of necessity during public political demonstrations, it is evident that women's clothing offers a resistance to the status quo and therefore performs its function as an indicator of resistance.