

Appendix 3

Back to the Fifties

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In the fourth term of the Howard Government, is it time to complete Australia's return to the political culture of the 1950s?

The federal parliamentary Labor Party seems to think so, or at least those elements hostile to Julia Gillard's leadership hopes. Following Labor insiders' "backgrounding", the media has given a lot of air to notions that Gillard's lack of a spouse and children may disqualify her from Labor's top job. Gillard has had to deal with this nonsense by citing successful Australian and international leaders who lack spouses or children. Talk in the leadership context of Gillard's marital status puts Australia, and the Labor Party in that it entertains such talk, light years behind the most conservative U.S. administration in living memory.

The contrast between this clumsy attempt to make Gillard's personal life a leadership issue and the nomination of Condoleeza Rice as U.S. secretary of state highlights Labor's errors.

Rice is a relentless advocate of the war in Iraq and an unflinching defender of every action of the Bush Administration from Iraq to Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay. U.S. Intelligence agencies have no more loyal promoter.

Dr Rice's opening remarks to the Confirmation Hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee encapsulated enthusiastically the Bush doctrine of the war against terror. While progressives everywhere oppose Rice's policies, they find her personal story inspiring.

She grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and acknowledges her debt to Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement and to Colin Powell.

Rice is not the first female, and she is not the first black, secretary of state.

Ironically, after an overwhelming victory in an election where he drew heavily on anti-gay and anti-abortion campaigns, Bush has chosen a single, childless black woman for his secretary of state.

This act is bi-partisan. Diane Feinstein, Democrat, California, introduced Rice to the senate hearing. The nomination was approved by a 16:2 vote of the committee with Democrat Senators Barbara Boxer and John Kerry voting against Rice on policy grounds. Unusually, the nomination will be debated by the full senate, to allow more criticism of foreign policy.

Condoleeza Rice is a powerful woman, about to move into an even more powerful role in the world's only superpower. If the treatment of Julia Gillard is anything to go by Rice wouldn't make it here.

The Labor Party has gone backwards. Thirty years

ago, when I sought Labor preselection, my status as a divorcee with two young children was used against me, not so much by the media but by my opponents within the Labor Party.

These attacks from otherwise progressive male rivals were always couched in terms of "it isn't us; the electorate won't cop a divorcee with kids". It was them. The electors of the A.C.T. elected me six times with massive margins.

I left government in 1988. By then, divorced or single members of parliament, with or without children were not remarkable. Marital status? Family situation? Australia had got over it and even the Labor Party had got over it. But in 2005, Gillard attracts the same hostile questions raised in the 16th century about Queen Elizabeth 1. Perhaps it's the red hair.

Actually it is old-fashioned misogyny. If a woman can put herself forward for leadership unencumbered by a husband and kids, able to devote herself fully to her work, she gets the Julia treatment.

If an aspiring female leader has a spouse and offspring, enemies raise other doubts. Will she be neglecting them? Will her family distract her from the affairs of state? What sort of a man would play second fiddle to a powerful wife?

In Australia, aspiring female political leaders can't win. Gillard is even in trouble for lacking interior design skills. A photo of her tidy, plain kitchen upset some observers further. If she had a house husband adding cosy design elements, and skateboards and ballet shoes scattered round the kitchen, would it have helped? Whether she runs in the caucus ballot this week or not, Julia Gillard is not about to lead Labor yet. She needs broader policy experience, and more time to build up support from colleagues. She doesn't need attacks from within about her personal life.

Those Labor critics who tried to knock her out of the race on these spurious grounds should have a close look at the latest Australian census.

Single Australians are not a small minority. They are a rapidly growing part of our society. Despite the wonders of IVF technology, not every Australian can achieve parenthood. Where are these insiders coming from? Didn't they notice that during the short and tumultuous Latham leadership, Labor, and the electorate had never heard so much about family and children. Even the Latham mortgage got a big run. And Labor got its worst primary vote for decades.

If Condoleeza Rice can achieve one of the most powerful roles in the world, Labor in Australia ought to look beyond gender and marital status and go for intelligence, energy, and values that resonate across our diverse society.