

Playing the Gender Card: The Uses and Abuses of Gender in Australian Politics

Carol Johnson

University of Adelaide

I want to just say a few remarks about being the first woman to serve in this position. There's been a lot of analysis about the so-called gender wars, me playing the so-called gender card because heaven knows, no-one noticed I was a woman until I raised it. But, against that background I do want to say about all of these issues the reaction to being the first female prime minister does not explain everything about my prime ministership, nor does it explain nothing about my prime ministership. . . . it explains some things, and it is for the nation to think in a sophisticated way about those shades of grey.

Julia Gillard, final speech as Prime Minister, June 26, 2013 (cited in Sales 2013).

In the quotation above, Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard (in office June 2010–June 2013), rightly suggests that the gender issue doesn't explain everything about the difficulties she encountered during her period as prime minister of Australia that contributed to her downfall.¹ However, Gillard suggests that gender does

My thanks to this journal's anonymous reviewers for their useful feedback on this paper. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Fourth South Australian Women's and Gender Studies Annual Public Lecture, Flinders University, Adelaide, May 2013, and at the Australian Political Studies Association Conference, Murdoch University, Perth, September 2013. My thanks also for the feedback received on those occasions.

1. Gillard was speaking after being replaced as Labor leader, and therefore prime minister by Kevin Rudd, whom she had in turn ousted three years earlier and who then lost the subsequent election. This article acknowledges that a wide range of issues would need to be examined, including Gillard's

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/15 \$30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X15000045

explain some things. There have already been analyses of how media coverage of Gillard was gendered (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Trimble 2014; Young and Ricketson 2014; see also Gillard 2014, 97–114) and of the broader gendered attacks on Gillard (Sawer 2013; Summers 2012). This article takes a somewhat different approach by analyzing how Australian politicians, including Gillard herself, negotiated the gender politics of the Gillard years, focusing especially on the issue of “playing the gender card” and its implications for politicians “performing” gender. It will use an analysis of Australian politicians’ discursive mobilizations of gender during the Gillard period to suggest that the gendered nature of politics did indeed influence Gillard’s prime ministership.

The resulting analysis is not relevant only to Australia but also can provide useful insights for the international literature on gender and politics. For, while Gillard’s British-born former communication adviser blamed Gillard’s downfall on the excessively “male inscribed” and sexist nature of Australian culture (McTernan 2013), the problems Gillard encountered were far from specifically Australian ones. Indeed, it should be noted that Australia (no. 49 at 26%) ranks above both the UK (no. 65 at 22.6%) and the U.S. (no. 84 at 18.3%) in terms of the percentage of women in the lower house of parliament (Interparliamentary Union 2014). Furthermore, it will be argued here that Gillard’s experiences share similarities with those of many other female political leaders internationally. Many of the dilemmas Gillard faced, ranging from an excessive focus on issues of her clothes and appearance to her difficulties in appearing to be neither too tough (and thereby unfeminine) or too compassionate (and therefore too feminine and weak) are common ones internationally (see, e.g., Messner 2007, 466; Murray 2010a, 3–23). Harriet Harman (2014), as deputy leader of the British Labour Party, has spoken of the problems she has encountered as a woman in politics. While Gillard’s male communication adviser may have been surprised by the Australian media’s treatment of Gillard, a key study concluded that it was “unfortunately, entirely predictable when placed in the larger, international context of how female leaders are reported by media across the world” (Young and Ricketson 2014, 292). Like Gillard, other prominent female politicians, such as Hillary Clinton (Ritchie 2013) or

handling of controversial policy issues, key strategic mistakes, and opposition from the media, particularly the Murdoch press. All of these, along with gender issues, contributed to her poor showing in the opinion polls (Green 2013) and to her removal from office.

even, on her death, Margaret Thatcher (Evans 2013), have also been subject to vicious online sexist attacks. The very same gendered terms that were used against Gillard, such as “witch” and “bitch” (Sawer 2013, 112) were also used against Clinton and Thatcher. Clinton was regularly referred to as a bitch (Murray 2010a, 17), while Margaret Thatcher’s death was marked by an online campaign to make *The Wizard of Oz* song, “Ding Dong the Witch is Dead” go to number one on the British charts (Evans 2013). Clinton herself (2014) has noted the similarities in the “sexism” that she, Gillard and other female leaders, have suffered, arguing that in her own case “it was very much part of our culture” that was “taken for granted.”

Female political leaders are regularly characterized in gendered ways and criticized for transgressing gender stereotypes that are shaped by cultural norms regarding what are desirable and acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity. This is not to suggest that gender stereotypes internationally are totally identical or to deny that they can intersect with other forms of local cultural, historical, and political influences, including ones that female leaders, from Thatcher to Merkel, can sometimes use to their advantage (see, e.g., Franceshet and Thomas 2010, 190–91; Warner 1985, 51; Wiliarty 2010). Nonetheless, the editor of a comparative international study on women’s campaigns for executive office has highlighted some common gendered stereotypes that prominent female politicians have to face and negotiate, in whatever ways possible, within their local context:

Men and women are viewed by voters as possessing distinctive traits and issue strengths, with women seen as stronger on “compassion” traits and issues while men are favourably associated with being tough, assertive, decisive, and strong on issues such as the economy and foreign policy. While “feminine” qualities may be advantageous for certain elections, executive office is the most masculine of all political positions (Murray 2010a, 19).

Meanwhile, women who try to demonstrate more “masculine” traits, to show their suitability for executive office then face the additional problem of being seen as “unfeminine” (Murray 2010a, 16–17). Murray (2010a, 18) suggests that women from left-wing parties (such as Gillard) are doubly disadvantaged because the more socially progressive issues pursued by those parties are associated with the “feminine” — a problem that is less of an issue for conservative female leaders such as Angela Merkel or Margaret Thatcher (see further, Messner 2007, 473).

It will be argued here that analyzing the issue of “playing the gender card” throws additional light on the difficulties and dilemmas that prominent female politicians have in *performing* their gender, given such stereotypes. Consequently, it is helpful to draw on the work of Judith Butler on gender. Butler agrees, along with others who stress the social construction of gender, that gender does not reflect a masculine or feminine essence; it is not a fact or objective ideal, but rather “gender reality is created through sustained social performance” (Butler 1990, 140–41). While Butler herself has not focused on how politicians perform gender identities, others have. For example, Cooper (2009) has drawn heavily on Butler to explore the (highly complex) ways in which Obama performs his (intersecting) gender and racial identity. Similarly, McGinley (2009) has applied gendered analyses of how work identities are performed to analyzing Hillary Clinton’s campaign against Obama for the Democratic nomination. McGinley (2009, 717) concludes that, as a woman, Clinton “found herself in a double-bind: Either act more feminine and be judged incompetent or act masculine and be considered unlikeable”.

Importantly, Butler notes that “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences . . . indeed we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 1990, 140). Butler’s work is particularly relevant to analyses of playing the gender card. Firstly, it will be argued here that the gender card is often used to suggest that someone is not performing “their gender right” and that it can be used in the case of both femininity and masculinity. Secondly, it will be suggested that female politicians often try to perform their gender in a way that attempts to minimize the gender card being used against them, given that they are so vulnerable to suggestions from the media and political opponents that they are not performing their gender “right.” Thirdly, women who protest about their gender being used against them by their political opponents are not only accused of playing the gender card themselves by claiming they are being discriminated against on the basis of gender, but their very challenging of their male opponents’ sexism, is itself constructed as a transgressive performance of femininity.

While the main focus in this article is on femininity, the article will also touch on issues of masculinity. For, despite assertions by conservative politicians that it was Gillard who initiated playing the gender card in her critique of Tony Abbott (Alberici 2012), it is clear that Abbott himself had long been playing the gender card of his masculinity, not

just against Gillard but also against her male predecessor — the man she deposed to become prime minister — Kevin Rudd.

THE MEANING OF THE GENDER CARD

The argument that Gillard illicitly played the gender card has become a key critique that was made of her government by her conservative opponents, as the following quotation from Tony Abbott, the then Australian opposition leader and subsequent prime minister, demonstrates.

Tony [Abbott]: ... my opponent ... thinks the only way she can win is by discrediting her opponent. The prime minister, to her credit, made a virtue of never having played the gender card when she first came into the job and again, to her credit, never played the gender card until the position was particularly dire.

Kate [Gleeson]: How does one play the gender card?

Tony [Abbott]: A female accusing a male opponent of sexism and misogyny is playing the gender card (*Madison* 2013).

There are two key points to make here. It will be suggested later in this article that Gillard did indeed initially play down her gender, but that was because she wished to minimize the possibility of the gender card being played against her. Secondly, and even more importantly, Abbott identifies a woman drawing attention to her gender and claiming she has been subject to sexist and misogynist attacks as an example of playing the gender card. He implies that playing the gender card is a new development for Gillard and one that a woman is likely to resort to from a position of desperation (of weakness rather than strength).

Given Abbott's suggestion that the gender card is played by female politicians and Liberal MP Kelly O'Dwyer's claim that Gillard had initiated using gender as a "political weapon" for the first time in Australian politics (Alberici 2012), it is worth noting that there is actually a long history of the gender card being played in Australian politics, in which Tony Abbott himself is implicated. It is just that, partly because of women's underrepresentation in Australian politics, it has normally been played by men against men. This has rarely been identified as playing the gender card, though.² As Michael Kimmel (2001) has pointed out, gender tends to be noticed only when a woman raises it — after all, masculinity is the unacknowledged and assumed universal, the norm in

2. Though, as Sawyer (2013, 106) has noted, successive conservative victories have led to a drop in the proportion of women in state and federal parliaments overall.

public life, so men are often not even constructed as gendered. Consequently, men using forms of masculinity against other men isn't commonly accepted as playing the gender card. Falk (2013, 200) identified five meanings of playing the gender card that had been used against various female politicians and noted that the last two were particularly used against Hillary Clinton:

1. Drawing attention to your gender as a woman to make you stand out in a field of men
2. Arguing that people should vote for a woman to remediate current underrepresentation
3. Campaigning on issues that women are believed to support
4. Arguing sexism plays a role in attacks against you or that you are the subject of sexist attack
5. Mentioning the fact that women face discrimination in the public sphere

It will be suggested in this article that we should make a case for another key meaning, namely men mobilizing particular stereotypes of masculinity against other men — and against women — whether that is simply by mobilizing their own masculine image or by making derogatory comments about their opponents' masculinity or femininity. Extending the meaning is important, not merely because it brings the other half of the gender equation, masculinity, into the equation but because it also helps to expose some of the ways in which accusations of “playing the gender card” can be used to try to shut down debate over discrimination against women in politics. Furthermore, although this article focuses on politicians themselves, rather than providing an analysis of media coverage of them, it should be noted that the media is also implicated in issues of playing the gender card, both in terms of media accusations regarding politicians playing the card (Falk 2013) and in terms of media critiques of female politicians (Murray 2010a) that so often focus on whether they are performing their gender correctly.

One reason why men playing the gender card can easily be overlooked is because, like the race card, the gender card is often something that is raised in implicit form and not explicitly spelled out. It is subtly designed to evoke ingrained gender assumptions. As Mendelberg (2001, 4–8) has argued in her study of American uses of the race card, because making explicitly racist arguments is widely considered to be unacceptable, politicians playing the race card often use language that evokes a racialized response but never explicitly spells out what is being said. In other words, the race card is

usually used via what Australians would call a dog whistle (in which subliminal targeted messages are sent to specific audiences, just as farm dogs rounding up sheep and cattle are directed by whistles, pitched so that only the dogs can hear). The use of implicit meanings, of subtexts, is also the most common way in which the gender card is played in Australian politics, including when the gender card has been played by men against other men. Although it is important to realize that “cards” can be played not only by members of dominant groups against subordinate groups, they can also be played within dominant groups by suggesting that politicians are not adequately exhibiting or performing the dominant identity. In terms of gender, men can suggest that their opponent’s masculinity is inadequate in some sense, thereby shoring up their own. After all, as Connell (2003, 14) has pointed out, there are hierarchies of masculinity: “Different masculinities do not sit side by side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them. Especially there are relations of hierarchy, for some masculinities are dominant while others are marginalized or discredited.”

Tony Abbott came to the opposition leadership while Gillard’s Labor predecessor, Kevin Rudd, was still prime minister. Abbott quickly moved to use his own particular model of masculinity against Rudd. Abbott cultivates a hypermasculine image as a former boxer and rugby player who remains a fit cyclist, volunteer lifeguard, and community firefighter. Consequently, Abbott portrayed an image of an action man who got things done while depicting Rudd as a wordy nerd who was “all talk and no action” (Abbott 2010). Abbott was playing the masculinity gender card by suggesting that he was a real man while Rudd was weak and ineffectual. Rudd (2013) apparently recognized the effectiveness of Abbott’s attack on his masculinity given his subsequent attempts when he replaced Gillard and returned to the prime ministership to turn the tables on Abbott by casting him as the former boxer too scared to debate a nerd on issues such as government debt. As Rudd put it in a media interview, “It’s time we have a properly moderated debate. . . . Mr. Abbott, I think it’s time you demonstrated to the country you had a bit of ticker on this. I mean, he’s the boxing blue; I’m the glasses-wearing kid in the library” (Rudd 2013). Nonetheless, the attacks on Rudd’s masculinity continued. Abbott’s Liberals (Australia’s conservative party) continued to depict Rudd as “all talk” (Liberal Party 2013b). Shadow treasurer Joe Hockey expressed his belief that voters would see through “the celebrity factor of Kevin Rudd and see that there is in fact no substance given that Australians don’t want Kevin Kardashian as Prime

Minister” (Kenny 2013; Metherell 2013). Being explicitly likened to one of the female Kardashians by Hockey makes the aspersions on Rudd’s masculinity particularly clear. Abbott (2013b) also questioned Rudd’s masculinity by urging him to “be man enough to admit that you got it wrong” on asylum seeker policy.

While this article focuses on Abbott in the context of the Gillard years, it should be noted that he is part of a long history of Australian male politicians who have played the masculinity gender card (see further, Johnson 1993 and Johnson 2007, 7, 78–79, 86–87). Rudd himself had portrayed an image of contemporary masculinity, especially by being married to a highly successful businesswoman, to challenge the older and more socially conservative Liberal Prime Minister John Howard. Howard had portrayed an image of being a decisive, strong, grandfatherly protector, whom George W. Bush described as a “man of steel” (Davies 2009). Howard’s Liberals had critiqued the previous Labor leader, Kim Beazley, for being not man enough to protect Australia from asylum-seeker boats and terrorists — as being “flip-flop” Beazley, who lacked “ticker” (Howard 2005, 75; Reith 2001).

The above examples demonstrate that the performance of masculinity (Butler 1990) is an important part of male politicians’ image that is used for electoral advantage (Messner 2007), although this is an issue that has been somewhat neglected in much existing literature on masculinity (see Johnson 2013, 15). While the examples given here are from Australia, similar examples of male politicians playing the gender card can be given from other countries. For example, both David Cameron in the U.K. and Barack Obama in the U.S. have attempted to use versions of a “softer” new empathetic masculinity against their opponents while George W. Bush tended to portray a more traditional conception of the strong masculine leader (see further, Cooper 2009, Johnson 2013, and Messner 2007). Indeed Katz (2013, 1) has argued that U.S. “presidential politics are the site of an ongoing cultural struggle over the meaning of American manhood.” Male politicians can be targeted for not performing their masculinity correctly. Nonetheless, being an effective politician and leader (e.g., strong, assertive) affirms a male politician’s masculinity (Katz 2013, 3). By contrast, being a strong and assertive leader risks undermining a female politician’s femininity among voters with more traditional attitudes, due to different gender expectations and stereotypes (Johnson 2013; Lawless and Fox 2010, 9–12, 27; Messner 2007, 466). There is an issue about how well political leaders perform

their masculinity, but there are no inherent tensions between being a leader and being masculine, as leadership is coded masculine.

ABBOTT'S PLAYING OF THE GENDER CARD AGAINST GILLARD

Abbott had initially played the gender card against Kevin Rudd by using his own hypermasculine action man image. However, that posed the issue of how Abbott's hypermasculinity would work against a female opponent when Julia Gillard deposed Kevin Rudd in 2010 and became leader? Abbott responded to Gillard's ascension by recalibrating his performance of masculinity. He softened his image and emphasized his status as a family man. He was repeatedly photographed with his wife and daughters. He declared that he had changed his views on women's issues, for example, to now support a generous parental leave scheme (Horin 2010). He began playing the gender card in another way, using his own image as a family man to repeatedly imply that the fact Gillard was unmarried (albeit living in a de facto relationship) and didn't have children meant that she couldn't empathize with ordinary Australians. He emphasized that "my wife, Margie, and I know what it's like to raise a family, to wrestle with a big mortgage, with grocery bills and school fees" (Abbott and Gillard 2010). Abbott was performing a form of "protective masculinity," an image that revolves around a male model of the responsible, caring, protective father who plays the key role in providing for families (see further, Johnson 2013). As Tony Abbott's daughter Frances stated at the Liberal Party campaign launch, after praising his fatherly support, "My Dad looks out for everyone and I know he will look out for you" (*Nine MSN News* 2013).

Notoriously, Abbott also alluded to Gillard's unmarried state in his assertion: "I think if the Prime Minister wants to make, politically speaking, an honest woman of herself, she needs to seek a mandate for a carbon tax and she should do that at the next election" (cited in Farr 2011). He also referred to the Labor government's carbon price as "the mother of all taxes" (cited in Farr 2011) as though Gillard had perversely given birth to a tax, not a child. Meanwhile, the repeated images of action man Abbott performing in hard hat and fluorescent safety vest, driving trucks and forklifts and inspecting factories were designed to suggest that he was more in touch with a blue collar male constituency than Gillard was. In other words, Abbott repeatedly used the gender card

against Gillard in a way identified earlier, namely using implicit subtexts rather than spelling things out. His own performances of fatherly “protective” masculinity were as implicated in that playing of the gender card as were the gendered subtexts in his comments about Gillard. Abbott’s use of the gender card was just more subtle than when Gillard was targeted in the past by Liberal politicians for being “deliberately barren” (cited in Harrison 2007) or for being “one dimensional” and unable to understand how parents think (Maiden 2010).

THE BACKGROUND: GILLARD’S INITIAL ATTEMPTS TO NEUTRALIZE THE GENDER CARD

Gillard was well aware that her gender could be used against her. Several years before she became a prime minister herself, Gillard (2005a) noted that New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark had been constructed as “bossy,” where a man would have been constructed as authoritative; that her opponents “cast her as the head of ‘lesbians, husbandless women and feminist extremists.’” Gillard noted that Clark had “walked out of a media interview in Australia when asked about her childlessness” and added that this “sounds familiar” (Gillard 2005b; see further, Trimble and Treiberg 2010). Gillard had also commented on the gendered treatment of prominent female Australian politicians (Baird 2004, 241), such as Carmen Lawrence (state premier of Western Australia), Joan Kirner (state premier of Victoria), Cheryl Kernot (leader of the minor party, the Australian Democrats), and Natasha Stott Despoja (another leader of the Australian Democrats).

Gillard’s tendency to downplay gender in her early period in office seems to have been precisely because she was well aware of how the gender card could be used against a female political leader. On her first day in office, she acknowledged that she was both the first woman prime minister and possibly the first redhead but “can I say to you I didn’t set out to crash my head on any glass ceilings” (Gillard in Gillard and Swan 2010). Much later, in an interview just before she lost office, she stated that she initially hadn’t wanted to “hark on” about being a woman given it was “obvious.” She just wanted it to be about “doing it rather than talking about it” (Gillard in Summers 2013a). Long before she became prime minister, Gillard expressed her frustration that, in effect, issues of how female politicians performed their gender were still being privileged over how well they performed their jobs.

The last thing I have feared from the Canberra press gallery was infatuation . . . I have spoken on the public record about images of women and leadership . . . we are all, women in politics, trying to crack through to the next stage of engagement in public debate where we are no longer viewed as an oddity, we are no longer assessed on what we are wearing, how we are wearing our hair or indeed how we keep our kitchen but we are assessed on what it is that we say, what should be done for the good of the nation . . . (Gillard 2005a).

Consequently, Gillard's prime ministership saw her having to walk a very careful path in how she performed her gender, trying to neutralize the gender card being used against her. She was well aware that the time she hoped for, of gender being an "irrelevancy" (Gillard 2005a), hadn't arrived yet.

However, in her final two years in office, 2012 and 2013, Gillard began to speak more explicitly about — and challenge — the dilemmas she faced in performing both femininity and leadership:

I think what I would say about being the first woman to do this job is a broader point, which is it's not been ever the norm in our nation before for people to wake up in the morning and look at the news and see a female leader doing this job. For all of the years before, you would see a man in a suit. I am not a man in a suit, and I think that that has taken the nation some time to get used to (Gillard 2013b).

One consequence of not being "a man in a suit" was the need to pay constant attention to what she was wearing in an attempt to forestall it being an issue that could be raised against her: "I spend a lot of time having to worry about what I'm wearing so no-one comments on it. It's a complete reverse of how most women think about their wardrobe" (Hadfield 2013; see further, Goodall 2013, 31–41). Other prominent female politicians internationally, from Hillary Clinton in the U.S. to female leaders such as Tarja Halonen in Finland and Angela Merkel in Germany, have also faced excessive scrutiny of their clothes and appearance (Murray 2010a, 12–13; Van Zoonen 2006, 297).³ When Abbott was being criticized for wearing his "speedos" (particularly skimpy swimming briefs), he was being criticized for not wearing a suit. Unlike Gillard, he was not being criticized for not being male. Indeed, there was the implicit suggestion that one of the problems with Abbott's swimwear is that he appears to be well endowed. He has a simple

3. Though, Merkel's case is complicated by the intersections between feminization and westernization given her East German origins (see Wiliarty 2010, 146).

uniform to wear as an acceptable leader: "dark suit, white shirt, blue tie is kind of my uniform and I figure if I look more or less the same every day, people won't be distracted by my appearance and they will listen to what I have to say" (Abbott 2013a). Male leaders do indeed have a simple and plain "uniform" that women don't (see Goodall 2013). It is part of the way in which leadership is coded as male while women's clothes are problematized along with their femininity.

As well as negotiating issues of clothing, Gillard was also put on notice that she had to negotiate issues of personality that were also gendered, with one journalist asking whether she was going to change her "innate style of holding back a fair bit." Gillard responded by explicitly challenging the gender politics involved in such criticisms of how she performed the job of prime minister:

...with the greatest respect Mike, I'm not a talk show host, I'm not on breakfast TV, I'm not appearing in a drama on Australian television, I'm the Prime Minister. . . . I don't remember people looking at John Howard and saying "gee I wish he'd be warmer and cuddlier and more humorous and more engaging in his press conferences." They looked at him and said "well, he's the bloke running the country," and I think the same standard should apply to me. I'm a woman running the country. . . . What I'm here to do is to do some tough things, some hard things that make a difference (Gillard 2012b).

Gillard's point about the different ways of judging male and female leaders in Australia is an important one. Once again, other prominent female politicians internationally, including Clark in New Zealand, Merkel in Germany, Halonen in Finland, and Clinton in the U.S. have also been criticized for being too cold and distant (Trimble and Treiberg 2010, 125–26; Van Zoonen 2006, 298–99).

Nonetheless, Labor strategists should perhaps have thought in more depth about the constant repetition of the message that Gillard was "tough" both by herself (as above) and by others, including Treasurer Wayne Swan who praised her for being "tough as nails" (ABC News 2011). Gillard's "tough" image, posed particular gendered difficulties for her. She had the common dilemma that female politicians face of trying to walk the tightrope when performing their femininity of appearing to be either not too aggressive or too weak, too tough or too lacking in warmth, empathy, and compassion. Trying to get the balance right is a particular challenge for female political candidates (see further, Johnson 2013 and Messner 2007, 466). In addition, repeatedly emphasizing

Gillard's toughness and resilience made it harder for her to appeal to paternalistic forms of protective masculinity that disapprove of women being picked on. The issue of managing toughness versus compassion is a longstanding one for female politicians. For example, Gidengil's and Everitt's Canadian research on media coverage of female leaders suggests that women tend to be depicted as being more aggressive than male politicians anyway. They argue that this is partly because of framing that sees politics as a game men play, so men playing tough are just being the norm, but when women play tough, they are seen as unfeminine (Gidengil and Everitt 2003a, 2003b). At the same time, other female candidates for leadership have been discredited for not being tough enough and then pilloried for being too tough when they try to address that criticism — for example, Ségolène Royal in France (Murray 2010b, 54, 62).

However, Gillard faced even greater issues in this regard because she came to power as prime minister by removing Kevin Rudd as Labor leader in an innerparty coup. (Australian prime ministers are chosen via the winning party's leadership decisions, rather than being directly elected by voters.) While removing a first-term prime minister is unusual, it is hardly unusual for male political leaders to make it into office by removing their predecessors. Nonetheless, the Liberals became masters at implying that Gillard's ascension to the Labor leadership was done in a way that was unusually bloodthirsty for a woman — and that she was a devious and untrustworthy female (Pyne 2012). In the words of a prominent Liberal, "Comparing her to Lady Macbeth is unfair on Lady Macbeth — she only had one victim to her name; this Prime Minister has a list of victims longer than Richard III" (Pyne 2012). Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth may have famously asked the spirits to "unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* Act1, scene5), but Christopher Pyne is also literally unsexing Julia Gillard by comparing her to Richard III (who was depicted in a particularly cruel light by Shakespeare). The repeated questioning of Gillard's legitimacy as a prime minister also worked as a subtext regarding the legitimacy of having a woman in the role of prime minister at all. There are genuine questions that can be asked about both the justification for and timing of Rudd's removal. However, Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991–1996) did not receive the same level of personal opprobrium for successfully challenging then Prime Minister Bob Hawke and neither did Tony Abbott for successfully challenging his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull for the position of

opposition leader. Women, however, are apparently not meant to behave in this way, and this was also reflected in much media coverage, which depicted such behavior as a deeply transgressive performance of femininity (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Trimble 2014).⁴

DEMONIZING GILLARD

The popular demonization of Gillard took various forms, only some of which will be mentioned here given that they have been well documented elsewhere and the main focus of this article is on how conservative politicians were willing to exploit such feelings when playing the gender card. The forms of demonization included “Ditch the Witch” and “Bob Brown’s Bitch” signs held aloft at anti-carbon-tax rallies — Brown was leader of the Greens, a party Gillard made a pact with to support her minority government. (Tony Abbott claimed not to have known he was standing in front of these signs). They also included a Julia Droolia dog chew toy (which featured particularly large breasts and buttocks) and talkback radio shock-jock Alan Jones’s comment that “women are destroying the joint,” following on his previous comments that the prime minister should be put in a “chaff” bag and dumped out at sea (Farr 2012a; see further, Goldsworthy 2013b, 5–19; Johnson 2013, 19–24; Sawyer 2013, 111–14, and Summers 2013b, 104–36). The demonization of Gillard was particularly obvious online, as Summers noted, and included various semipornographic images in which her head was transposed on naked female bodies, “sack the crack” slogans, cartoonist’s Larry Pickering’s notorious depictions of her with a large penis-shaped dildo, and other examples that are not appropriate to refer to here (see Summers 2012).

Such images suggest that Gillard was deeply troubling to the traditional gender order. Her actions, and the highly transgressive performance of femininity that they involved, seem to have unleashed deep anxieties among some sections of the electorate. They exacerbated a tendency that has been noted in online constructions of high-profile female politicians

4. Once again, such negative media coverage should not entirely surprise us, given work by Baird (2004), Muir (2005), and others in Australia as well as studies in Europe (see Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012) and in Canada (see Gidengil and Everitt 2003a; 2003b). Interestingly, a *Hansard* and media search suggests that Margaret Thatcher does not seem to have encountered a similar demonization when she deposed Edward Heath. However, Heath was by then an opposition leader, who had failed to win two general elections and was widely seen as a liability. Rudd was a prime minister who had won a decisive victory at the previous election.

internationally. As Ritchie (2013, 103) points out in her article “Creating a Monster” on online media constructions of Hillary Clinton:

In contemporary American politics, the campaign trail constitutes a forum in which gender boundaries are tested and negotiated. Anxieties about women in power, debates about the balance of career versus family, issues concerning women’s reproductive choices, uneasiness about women’s relationship to war and militarism, and the gendering of public and private spaces all intensify with the entrance of women into political contests. The higher or more “public” the level of office, the more acute these anxieties become.⁵

Gillard’s “knifing” of Rudd made it all the easier for such anxieties to be provoked, not least regarding a female prime minister who was unmarried and didn’t have children. After all, Hillary Clinton was married – to an ex-president no less – and being related to a powerful male political figure has often been an acceptable path for women to get into politics. Clinton stood by her man when he misbehaved sexually, and she has a child. So Gillard was potentially far more threatening to socially conservative men who felt threatened by gender changes (as well as to socially conservative women).

Occasionally some of the more bizarre material on the internet that suggested Gillard was troubling the gender order would surface in the mainstream media. For example, Gillard was asked on radio about rumors that her *de facto* relationship with Tim Mathieson was a fake one, with the implication being that both Gillard and Mathieson were actually gay (Weber 2013). Interestingly, Helen Clark, Hillary Clinton, and Tarja Halonen also faced accusations that they were lesbians. However, Gillard didn’t just become a repository of anxieties about gender uncertainty. One suspects from the level of vitriol unleashed that she was also a repository for more general feelings of resentment (Hoggett, Wilkinson, and Beedell 2013, 1, 19) in which her challenges to the traditional gender order also triggered a broader sense of grievance and impotence around the loss of traditional certainties and identities in the face of social change (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett 2012, 165–67). Arguably this helps to explain what one of Australia’s leading psephologists, Antony Green, has termed Gillard’s “bloke problem” – a reduced vote from men that has also been identified in other polls and election surveys (Bean and McAllister n.d.; Green 2013; Manning 2013).

5. There were also examples of sexist mainstream media coverage of Clinton (see, e.g., Lawless and Fox 2010, 27).

Advertisements such as “The Headless Chooks in “The Gillard Experiment”” video clip released by the Liberal party in the final weeks of Gillard’s prime ministership played on such feelings and the anger that goes with them. The video clip depicts various Labor politicians as chickens running around with severed heads, while a large ax can be seen in the foreground. The video culminates in a chicken representing former Labor Minister Simon Crean (who tried to facilitate a premature, subsequently aborted leadership challenge between Gillard and Rudd) being depicted as a suicide bomber blowing himself up with sticks of dynamite — less than three weeks after the Boston Marathon bombing (Liberal Party 2013a). One reason why the gender card is so effective when played by conservative politicians is that it can evoke often inchoate and inexplicit anxieties and anger that exist in a time of fear, uncertainty, and rapid social change (including in gender roles).

THE “MISOGYNY SPEECH” AND ACCUSATIONS THAT GILLARD WAS PLAYING THE GENDER CARD

So, the previous analysis poses an interesting question. Given that Abbott had played the gender card since he first became leader, firstly using his masculinity against Rudd’s masculinity and subsequently mobilizing gender stereotypes against Gillard; given that Gillard had tried to behave so carefully as prime minister to try to minimize the gender card being used against her; given that she had nonetheless been subject to vitriolic gendered attacks — why was Gillard the one who was accused of starting a gender war by playing the gender card?

Let’s return to Tony Abbott’s statement that was cited in full earlier in this article, where, in answer to the question, how does one play the gender card, Abbott responded by saying, “A female accusing a male opponent of sexism and misogyny is playing the gender card” and suggested Gillard was playing it out of desperation (*Madison* 2013). This is a classic meaning of playing the gender card that Erika Falk identified, namely that a woman accusing a man of sexism is playing the gender card and, by doing so, is both desperate and seeking an unfair feminine advantage. Furthermore, Abbott’s comments were part of a general strategy to diffuse accusations of sexist attitudes toward women. Liberal MP Kelly O’Dwyer had previously defended Abbott from attacks by Labor criticisms of his attitudes toward women by suggesting that “what we’re seeing for the very first time in Australian political history is gender

being used as a political weapon” (Alberici 2012). Given that Gillard’s speech accusing Abbott of “misogyny” was seen as a defining incident in the gender wars, it is worth considering it in more detail.

While Gillard was initially cautious about drawing attention to gender issues, she later adopted a position of challenging the gender discrimination she encountered. The high point of such critiques was her so-called “misogyny speech.” A literal translation from the ancient Greek would suggest misogyny involves a pathological hatred of women. However, the editor of *The Macquarie Dictionary* (the key Australian dictionary) argues that its *meaning* has shifted in contemporary usage to mean “an entrenched prejudice against women” and particularly strong forms of sexist attitudes (ABC News 2012). Gillard’s use of the word misogyny didn’t come out of the blue: Gillard (2012c) had used the term previously in August 2012 when criticizing the derogatory abuse that she was subject to by “the misogynists and the nut jobs on the Internet.” Opposition politicians such as Tony Abbott (2012) and George Brandis (*Herald Sun* 2012) had then picked up on that usage of the term to suggest that MP Peter Slipper was a “misogynist” and that Gillard was being hypocritical in refusing to remove him from the position of parliamentary speaker after texts he had sent (before becoming speaker) making derogatory comments about the appearance of female genitalia became public (Farr 2012b). So, Gillard was responding to what she saw as the hypocrisy of the argument by Tony Abbott that Peter Slipper should be sacked for his sexism and misogyny. In the process, although the media tended to neglect mentioning it (e.g., Kelly 2012), Gillard did critique Peter Slipper’s sexist and “anti-women” statements in her speech. However, Gillard is best remembered for her eloquent denouncing of Tony Abbott, in which she retaliated by using Abbott’s own performance of conservative, sexist masculinity against him. In that respect, Gillard was indeed prepared to use the gender card as a weapon herself.

The government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man – not now, not ever. The Leader of the Opposition says that people who hold sexist views and who are misogynists are not appropriate for high office. Well, I hope the Leader of the Opposition has a piece of paper and he is writing out his resignation, because if he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia he does not need a motion in the House of Representatives; he needs a mirror (Gillard 2012a).

Gillard then went on to mention incidents from Abbott's own behavior toward her, as well as citing some of Abbott's past remarks about gender issues. The latter included comments he made in 1998, while a minister in the Howard government, questioning whether female underrepresentation mattered and whether women were less suited to leadership positions than men (Gillard 2012a).

Gillard's speech was an extraordinarily strong and important statement and one of many cited in this article in which she was consciously drawing attention to, and fighting against, sexism. It received considerable attention both in Australia and overseas, was praised by many supporters, and had had more than two million viewers on YouTube within ten days of it being given (Sawer 2013, 114). The misogyny speech was only one of the many key statements Gillard made against sexism, many of which have been cited here. Gillard also made a speech, often referred to as the "blue tie" speech, referring to Abbott's (2013a) acknowledged "uniform," in which she argued that "we are going to make a big decision as a nation. It's a decision about whether, once again, we will banish women's voices from our political life." She asked listeners to imagine:

A prime minister — a man in a blue tie — who goes on holidays to be replaced by a man in a blue tie. A treasurer, who delivers a budget wearing a blue tie, to be supported by a finance minister — another man in a blue tie. Women once again banished from the centre of Australia's political life (Gillard 2013c).

At the time, Gillard's speech was ridiculed by the conservative press (see, e.g., Godfrey 2013). However, given that Abbott only appointed one woman to his first Cabinet (as foreign minister), while even Gillard's male Labor successor Kevin Rudd had six, Gillard was arguably correct to draw attention to the marginalization of women in an Abbott government. Similarly, Gillard was criticized for raising Abbott's past position on abortion in the speech with suggestions that that was purely a scare campaign, but Abbott had attempted to reduce the number of abortions by various backdoor methods when he'd been health minister in the Howard Liberal government (see Gleeson 2012).

I'd suggest that the reaction by opponents to the "misogyny" speech, along with the "blue tie" speech, has been so strong for a number of reasons. Abbott was undoubtedly offended by accusations of misogyny, which he interpreted as involving a pathological hatred of women. Furthermore, the misogyny speech questioned his crucial model of protective masculinity — suggesting he was dangerous for women — rather than depicting him as a

strong male who would protect women. However, in order to understand the broader opposition, one also needs to look at the misogyny speech's wider significance. Then Labor Finance Minister Penny Wong (2013, 257–63) argues that the speech was “a marker of change” with huge symbolic value. The problem Gillard faced is that the misogyny speech was a marker of change and had huge symbolic value not only for those men and women who support gender equality and who lauded the speech, but also for those who were, consciously or unconsciously, troubled by it. In her analysis of playing the race card, Mendelberg (2001, 4) has suggested that making the race card explicit undermines it: “When an implicit appeal is rendered explicit — when other elites bring the racial meaning of the appeal to voters’ attention — it appears to violate the norm of racial equality. It then loses its ability to prime white voters’ racial predispositions.” Or, as Mendelberg (2001, 10) also put it: “What makes implicit appeals distinctively effective is also their Achilles’ heel. To counter an implicit appeal one can render it explicit.”

However, Gillard has suggested that explicit racism is treated more seriously than explicit sexism:

I think some of the stuff about me, because it is about gender, gets glossed over more easily. If I was the first indigenous prime minister, and Abbott had gone out and stood next to a sign that said, “Ditch the black bastard,” I reckon that would be the end of a political career. And I think even with all the nutty stuff you see in American politics, if a Republican went and stood next to a sign said, “Ditch the black bastard” about President Obama, that would end a political career. And it’s not less because it is gender. But it’s been treated as less (Hooper 2013, 27).

Furthermore, Gillard was not a member of the “elite” in gender terms, to refer back to Mendelberg’s argument; she was a member of the socially subordinate group. She was not a man casting aspersions on another man’s performance of masculinity but was a woman suggesting that a male opponent was exhibiting a form of masculinity that involved subordinating women. Gillard’s accusation of sexism and misogyny was therefore outside of the rules of the game that male politicians play about masculinity with each other. Accusing a man of sexism and misogyny was constructed as unfair and unforgiveable by conservative opponents. After all, aggressively calling men to account is not an acceptable performance of femininity. The role of good girls is not to challenge men but to make men feel good about themselves — not to humiliate them and try to force them to face up to uncomfortable truths

about their discriminatory social attitudes. Good girls are expected to turn the other cheek. Theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson and Edelman “have argued that metaphors can help society to highlight what it wants to believe and avoid what it does not wish to face” (cited in Falk 2013, 194). As Falk (2013, 194) points out, the gender card is one such metaphor in that it helps social conservatives to dismiss accusations of sexism. So, too, did Abbott’s related accusation that Gillard was playing the “victim card” — an accusation that Gillard responded to by saying that “I think it is actually a manifestation of deep sexism that you would say that if a woman raises her voice then that is her playing the victim as opposed to her standing up for her rights” (cited in Taylor 2012).

Overall, it is an immensely powerful moment to have a prime minister stand up and say she has been discriminated against. It was particularly significant in the post-Howard era. One of the effects of former Prime Minister Howard’s conservative discourse asserting that the Australian mainstream had been disadvantaged by politically correct special interests was to make it very hard for Australians from marginalized groups to raise issues about discrimination and challenge the discriminatory practices of powerful groups. Such accusations were inevitably dismissed as “political correctness” and an example of “special interest” groups trying to empower and enrich themselves at the expense of “mainstream” Australians in arguments that drew on U.S. debates (see Johnson 2007, 39–72). However, Mendelberg’s comments above regarding the positive effects of naming discriminatory attitudes hadn’t adequately allowed for the sleight of hand in such discourse whereby the oppressor becomes the oppressed and the advantaged becomes the disadvantaged. Martha Augoustinos and Danielle Every have made a general point about this in regard to race. Their analysis indicates how social conservatives in many countries, including the United States, have responded to attempts to make the playing of race cards explicit in ways that Mendelberg hadn’t adequately allowed for in her statements above.

During the last 50 years, social norms against openly expressing racist sentiments has led to the development of ways of talking that present negative views of out-groups as reasonable and justified, while at the same time protecting speakers from charges of racism and prejudice. . . . Contemporary race talk, therefore, is strategically organized to deny racism. A closely related but largely ignored phenomenon associated with the denial of prejudice is a political climate that creates what is tantamount to a social taboo against making accusations of racism in the first place. . . . Such charges and accusations are invariably met with not

only strong denials, but also moral outrage and are often treated as more extreme than racism itself (Augoustinos and Every 2010, 252).

Augoustinos has suggested that a similar phenomenon has occurred in the case of gender in respect to Gillard.⁶ Similarly, former Attorney General Nicola Roxon argued that Liberal MP Kelly O'Dwyer's dismissal of a so-called "handbag hit squad" of female Labor ministers critical of Abbott's sexism was an attempt to suggest it was illegitimate to discuss sexism in politics, including the sexist behavior that Roxon claimed to have experienced from Tony Abbott herself (Alberici 2012; Cassidy 2012).

Somewhat poignantly, Gillard was vulnerable to some of the very Howard-era arguments that she had previously analyzed. Gillard (2006) had identified the racial nature of Howard's culture wars in which she argued that Tony Abbott had been a key henchman (Gillard 2003, 100). She argued that "John Howard hankers for the mono-cultural world he remembers of white picket fences shielding white families. . . . he is smart enough to understand the political potency of this image, this stylized representation of security and simplicity, for change weary, anxious Australians" (Gillard 2006). In her own tougher policies on asylum seekers and dog-whistling over population increases and foreign worker visas she had tried to address the anxiety over race by pandering to it. However, what Gillard had perhaps underestimated was that behind the white picket fence also lived a married heterosexual nuclear family, in which women were playing more traditional gender roles. Gillard could attempt to neutralize issues of race (however controversially), but she couldn't expunge the challenge that her own persona as Australia's first female prime minister posed to traditional gender relations. By contrast, it proved easier for Abbott to continue remaking his own image on gender issues, appearing in interviews designed to be women-friendly and even (thanks to his lesbian sister Christine) relatively gay-friendly (Hayes 2013; Madison 2013, 48–50). Gleeson (2013) has written about her own experience of one of these media events, including Abbott's attempts to rewrite his own history on abortion issues. When he tried to appeal to women, Abbott is himself playing the gender card, but by attempting to strengthen his image of protective masculinity as a loving father, husband, and brother figure who can be trusted to look after Australians. In doing so, Abbott is reaffirming a version of the existing

6. Communication with the author. I should acknowledge at this point that Gillard's own speech has been powerfully criticized by Stringer (2012) for its failures to acknowledge the intersections between gender and other forms of discrimination, such as race and sexuality.

gender order. By contrast, when Gillard raises issues of gender equity, Gillard is challenging the gender order.

In 2007, Gillard had become acting prime minister for the first time while then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was overseas. She said at the time, “I think if there’s one girl who looks at the TV screen over the next few days and says ‘I might like to do that in the future,’ well that’s a good thing” (cited in O’Malley 2007). By 2013 Tanya Plibersek, a senior feminist minister in the Gillard government who had observed the way the prime minister had been treated, had a very different perspective. As interviewer Anna Goldsworthy (2013a, 12) explained,

Plibersek is disturbed by the popular rage directed towards Gillard, not only because she wants “to stick up for my friends” but because “I never want a young woman to look at the treatment that the prime minister receives and think ‘I don’t want to do that job, because if I’m going to be a target like that, I don’t want to let myself in for it.’”

Gillard (2013a) herself has noted that “smashing through a glass ceiling is a dangerous pursuit. It is hard not to get lacerated on the way through” but nonetheless urges other women to pursue political careers and suggests (or perhaps hopes) that it will be better for her successors than it was for her.

CONCLUSION

Falk (2013) has highlighted the importance of unpacking claims of “playing the gender card” given that the accusation will continue to be used against female politicians in the United States. This article has used an analysis of the case of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard to argue for a broader understanding of playing the gender card that emphasises issues of gender performativity and incorporates analyses of both femininity and masculinity. Gillard provides a particularly useful example because of prominent accusations by her political opponents that she was playing the gender card. However, it has been argued here that the issues raised in this article have relevance for international analyses and debates regarding gender and politics, not just Australian ones, given the ways in which gender norms have commonly been mobilized against female political leaders and leadership candidates. In particular, it has been argued that the gender card is frequently used to criticize those who, in Butler’s words quoted earlier, are not performing their gender “right.” That gender can be either male or female, and we

need to analyse the ways in which cultural norms of both masculinity and femininity are used when playing the gender card.

Consequently, we need to make it clear that it was not Gillard who initiated playing the gender card in Australian politics. It has long been played by men against other men in ways that privilege particular forms of heteronormative masculinity over others. However, the advent of Australia's first female prime minister saw the gender card being played by male politicians against a female leader, exploiting a conservative gender politics in a society in which it is not usual to have women in positions of political power. When she acceded to the prime ministership, Gillard attempted to downplay her gender. As the use of the gender card against her escalated, Gillard responded by drawing attention to the sexism she was encountering, including depicting Tony Abbott as exhibiting a particularly sexist and misogynistic version of masculinity. In that respect, Gillard was retaliating by playing the gender card herself via suggesting that Abbott's conservative performance of masculinity transgressed contemporary, more progressive male norms. In the quotation given at the beginning of this article, Gillard suggested that a full understanding of the role of gender in her prime ministership would require a sophisticated analysis of "shades of grey." This article suggests that a crucial part of that analysis should involve a more sophisticated understanding of when politicians are merely playing the gender card to reinforce traditional gender norms and when they are raising legitimate issues about sexism in public life. (Given Gillard's possible evoking of E. L. James's book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, her comment perhaps suggests, even more strongly, that we require an analysis of the sadistic way in which women are treated in politics.)

The complaint that Gillard was playing the gender card also draws attention to some potential differences between playing the race card and playing the gender card that are relevant for the international literature that has been discussed here. The race card tends to be played by dominant ethnic/racial groups in ways that subliminally play on the dominant group's fears of a stereotyped racial "other." By contrast, accusations of playing the gender card, made by men against women, draw on anxiety about those who trouble the gender order by not performing the dominant gender stereotypes correctly. That can lead to a pernicious double-bind situation where a female politician's challenging of her male opponent's sexism is itself constructed as a transgressive performance of femininity.

Finally, a key reason why it is necessary to reframe and broaden our understanding of “playing the gender card” is so we can challenge the ways in which such accusations are used to shut down debate about the sexism that women still encounter in public life. One way of doing this is to draw attention to how male politicians can use their masculinity to play the gender card against their female opponents.

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