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Julia Gillard

By George Parker

Australia may have elected her arch rival, but its ex-premier believes she has forged a path to power other women can follow

Julia Gillard: 'The first thing women still raise with me is that speech – that they watched it and cried'

When Julia Gillard sat down at the end of her lacerating attack on “misogyny” in politics last year, it was seen as a moment of catharsis. Some women cheered, some cried; others saw it as the former Australian premier’s political death warrant. A year later she is out of office and politics – but insisting that her experience has helped to hack out a path to power that other women can follow.

Few politicians in a western democracy have endured such personal abuse as Gillard, whose three-year term as prime minister ended in June amid a welter of recrimination about the nature of Australian society and its treatment of women in top jobs. But the Welsh-born lawyer did not go down without a fight. Millions around the world have watched open-mouthed the video of [Gillard’s parliamentary tirade](#) against Tony Abbott, her rightwing rival and now Australia’s prime minister.

With Abbott sat smirking just feet away, she lambasted his “repulsive” double standards on sexism and willingness to stand outside parliament in front of a placard reading “Ditch the Witch”. A small fireball of red hair and finger-pointing, she erupted: “If he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he doesn’t need a motion in the House of Representatives: he needs a mirror.”

Reflecting on her time as Australia’s first female prime minister, Gillard agrees the speech was a key moment. “There was, for me, some emotion in it and that showed,” she told the FT. “I still constantly meet women and the first thing they raise with me is the speech – that they watched it and cried. I was surprised and continue to be surprised by the reaction to it. I’ve very powerfully heard the message that, for so many women, this speech captured the things that they had wanted to say many times in their workplaces or in other environments and they’d bitten their lip and not said them. They were relieved, delighted, emotional at the fact that they saw another woman say these things.”

The attack went viral and many women cheered. But not Allison Pearson, a British author and columnist, who shuddered. “I thought: God help you honey, you’ve really blown it now. The boys’ club will never let you get away with that,” she wrote in The Daily Telegraph. “She was guilty of all the things that men most hate and fear in the female: she was emotional, she was voluble, she went on and on and she was right.”

Within eight months Gillard was indeed political history, ousted in a repeat of the bloodletting in her Labor party that saw her come to office. Kevin Rudd – seen by her allies as a “snake in a suit” – reclaimed the premiership in a counter-coup, taking revenge on Gillard, who had politically knifed him in 2010. He then lost to Abbott’s Liberal party in the September election.

“It’s a really emotional experience – it’s like a punch, there’s a physicality to it,” she says of losing power. “There’s the emotion of the moment, there’s the leave-taking from colleagues and the physical exhaustion hits you pretty hard once you stop. And then there’s a sense of regret over what could have been, had you still been there.”

Gillard was born in Barry, in South Wales, in 1961 and emigrated with her parents at the age of five to Adelaide in southern Australia. She says “Gillard blood still pumps” in Wales and names Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh Labour politician credited with launching the NHS, as one of her political heroes. After studying law she became involved in state politics in Victoria before being elected to parliament in 1998 – the start of a national political career that saw her rise rapidly through the Labor ranks.

Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott during a debate in Parliament House, Canberra, October 2012

Gillard’s bloody premiership putsch in 2010 is a reminder that she can play hard and dirty – and she insists she is “not interested in sympathy. Politics in Australia is not for the fainthearted. I think we do have a pretty rough-and-tumble political culture and I think I fit in with that political culture.”

Nor does she ascribe the visceral loathing felt for her in sections of Australian society – including some in the business community and the Murdoch press – entirely to the fact that she is a woman; her decision to impose a charge on carbon emitters and a tax on the mining sector were never going to be universally popular. Rather than explain everything about how she was seen, she says, her gender “didn’t explain nothing . . . I had more personal abuse and more questioning of my legitimacy than any other prime minister in Australian history and much of that was explained by gender.”

Australia’s former Liberal foreign minister Alexander Downer has accused Gillard of “whingeing”, arguing that while sexist barbs were sometimes thrown in her direction, she should have risen above them. But John McTernan, a Brit who advised Tony Blair before moving to Canberra to advise Gillard, says that while Australia has an egalitarian dynamism and social mobility that puts Britain to shame, there is a level of sexism in politics and the media that would not be acceptable in the UK or the US. “Tony Abbott channelled that misogyny and used it to bring her down,” he says.

McTernan has in mind incidents such as the June 2013 Liberal party fundraiser which featured on its menu Julia Gillard Kentucky Fried Quail, a dish thus described: “Small breasts, huge thighs and a big red box.” Abbott denounced the menu as “tawdry” but has referred to the unmarried Gillard as needing to make “an honest woman of herself” politically. Her opponents have labelled her “deliberately barren” because she has no children, while Australia’s radio shock jocks have routinely made insults about her appearance. One DJ in Perth asked Gillard live on air whether she and her partner Tim Mathieson had a heterosexual relationship: “People say he must be gay – he’s a hairdresser.”

Gillard is not prepared to accept that she is the victim of a specifically Australian form of beer-and-barbie sexism. “I don’t think our culture on gender questions is a lot different from elsewhere,” she says. “I don’t

think I'd use the word 'macho' about our society." She says she has discussed the position of women in politics with Hillary Clinton and it is clear that powerful females can raise hackles anywhere in the world.

Yet she does perceive a particular societal issue around whether women politicians should – or should not – have children, with both outcomes likely to be viewed as "wrong". "If you don't have children then you don't have the touch and you're potentially uncaring," she says. "[But] if you do, then the time that you should be spending with your children should preclude you from high political office. So there's no clear way for women to be – we're still working that through and I think that's a worldwide phenomenon."

Gillard's attempts to show Aussies that she also had a softer side ended up with her being ridiculed. A staunch republican, she appeared this summer in a photoshoot for The Australian Women's Weekly, knitting a toy kangaroo for the royal baby, Prince George. She had previously been criticised for her supposed lack of homemaking instincts – in 2005 much was made of a photoshoot in her sparse-looking kitchen with an empty fruit bowl on the table – and the image of the prime minister knitting a royal kangaroo was widely criticised. But, she says, "I happily knitted it and it has been sent. I've done some other baby things for friends and I'm now working on a scarf."

Abbott addresses protesters at an anti-carbon tax rally in front of a 'Ditch the Witch' placard in August 2011

In spite of presiding over a fragile minority government and leading a Labor party tending open wounds after the ousting of Rudd, Gillard insists she made a real difference in office, including education reform: "That was closest to my heart."

She is also proud of the creation of a national disability insurance scheme and has no regrets about trying to improve Australia's record on tackling climate change – "it's right for our nation and it's right for our world" – but admits that she fell into a political trap by referring to the carbon reduction plan as a "tax". "I'm satisfied that the government I led did some really brave and courageous reforms that the country needed," she says.

With her angular and partisan style, Gillard was never going to be a politician to bridge the divide in what McTernan calls "a 50/50 society", which in some respects echoes the political split in the US. "She was hated by the haters but people respected her for being hard and tough," he says. "Did people have a warm and fuzzy feeling about her? No. But is her reputation changing now that people realise what they have lost? Yes."

While McTernan's account may mystify her many critics, Gillard says she has better relations with the Australian public now she has retired from politics. "Endearingly, I do have people come up to me and say, 'I didn't vote for you and I wouldn't have voted for you but I do actually want to say thank you for putting in three hard years and devoting a section of your life to running the country,'" she says. "It's getting less sharply political and into a more benign phase, I think."

At the age of 52, Gillard has now entered the demi-monde of youngish former leaders inhabited by the likes of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – a bit of writing here, a bit of lecturing there, lucrative public speaking engagements, airport departure lounges.

She has become an honorary professor at the University of Adelaide and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington on global education issues. She expects to travel to the US frequently and has already started giving speeches internationally; at a recent event in Doha she bumped into Brown.

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Gillard is also writing a political memoir, due out in the second half of the next year. Although she says she does not want to talk about Abbott’s premiership or her relationship with Rudd, one suspects her book may be the vehicle for the settling of old scores. For now she admits to missing power but says there is an upside to being out of office: “It’s a mix. A lot of weight goes off your shoulders, so there’s absolutely some sense of stress ebbing away: there’s a sweetness about that, the relief of the load, less stress.”

Intriguingly, she is convinced that her bruising time at the top of Australian politics – a position so exposed that even the feminist Germaine Greer felt the need to comment on the prime minister’s “big arse” – will make it easier for a future generation of women leaders to come through.

“I am confident that it will be easier for the next woman to come along,” she says. “I think the next time there’s a woman prime minister and any of this kind of nonsense starts up again, people will go back to this period and say: ‘Hang on, we’ve seen this movie before and we don’t want to see this kind of gender bias come into our politics.’”

She adds: “I am also very conscious that when women and girls watched my experience there were two super-dominant emotions expressed to me. One was that it was inspiring to see a woman do it – parents introduced me to their daughters to show that a woman could do anything in Australian society, including being prime minister.

“But I was also very aware of the other side, which was when women came up to me and said they did not know how I did it and how they would never want to endure what I was going through. But I do want the predominant emotion to be one about inspiration.”

Gillard says she hopes Australia “does work through” its attitudes towards women and power. But she admits it was never going to be easy: “I genuinely think there’s a cause for optimism. Crashing through a glass ceiling is always painful, but having crashed through it, I think it will be easier for the next woman who comes along.”