

## Gillard lifts lid on difficult years as Aussie PM

NIKKI MACDONALD



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OPENING UP: Julia Gillard's autobiography tells of her tumultuous time as Australian prime minister.

**It began and ended in tears. Former Australian prime minister Julia Gillard tells NIKKI MACDONALD about the corrosive impact of constant leadership challenges and the curly question of gender.**

First there was the trenchcoat that divided a nation.

That was the day after she was sworn in as Australia's first female prime minister.

At her first international engagement – meeting Nato head Anders Rasmussen for the first time to discuss Aussie soldiers fighting and dying in Afghanistan – media reports noted she was wearing a white, short jacket and dark trousers.

"It apparently went without saying that Mr Rasmussen was wearing a suit," former Australian prime minister Julia Gillard remarks drily in her new memoir, *My Story*.

The autobiography, which could be subtitled *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, charts Gillard's tumultuous three years and three days as prime minister, which began and ended in a leadership coup.

In 2010 – then deputy prime minister – she deposed a blubbing Kevin Rudd. Three years later Rudd turned the tables, ousting Gillard but later losing the 2013 election.

*My Story* provides insights pertinent to the challenges facing New Zealand's Labour Party – the perils of unstable

leadership and the corrosive impact of party infighting. But Gillard also hopes to start a conversation about "the curious question of gender".

As she puts it, gender explains something but not everything about her prime ministership.

She was subjected to the full gamut of sexism, from unprecedented analysis of her appearance to calls to "ditch the witch" and a Liberal Party fundraiser serving Julia Gillard quail – "small breasts, huge thighs and a big red box".

Not to mention the rumours that her hairdresser partner must be gay.

At first she ignored it, expecting the novelty to wear off. Instead it only intensified.

When she finally stood up against the sexist treatment, in her now famous 2012 misogyny speech detailing opposition leader Tony Abbott's sexist statements, Gillard was accused of "playing the gender card".

Just last week, former prime minister John Howard called the misogyny speech nonsense. "I think it's the worst possible way of promoting a greater involvement by women in public life ... to play the misogyny card."

It's an accusation that still rankles with Gillard.

"I think we need to get that out of our dialogue. The playing of the gender card is done by people who treat women in a lesser way than men. A woman who raises her voice and says 'That's not right', she is not playing the gender card, she is reacting to the person who has engaged in that playing of the gender card, that act of sexism."

She compares it to racism and Aussie Rules player Nicky Winmar raising his jumper and pointing to his black skin in response to a racist taunt.

"The reaction hasn't been 'Gee, Nicky's played the race card, hasn't he'. The reaction has been 'Well, good on them for raising it. What people are saying is wrong'. Why don't we take the same approach to gender?"

Critics have argued that Gillard's misogyny speech was pure political opportunism – an attempt to deflect attention from speaker Peter Slipper's sexist text messages.

She doesn't deny the motivation, but argues the speech had meaning beyond that context, resonating worldwide and accumulating 2.6 million views on YouTube.

She also acknowledges that sexism is difficult to catch and quantify, and that some instances could be put down to perspective.

For example, she classed the "ditch the witch" call as a gender insult, whereas former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark did not see a "ditch the bitch" bumper sticker in the leadup to her 2008 election loss as gender-specific.

Clark has also said that she experienced sexism on the way to becoming prime minister, but not while she was in the role.

Gillard met Clark in New York last week, in her new capacity as chairwoman of the Global Partnership for Education, but the two former prime ministers have yet to trade stories.

"We didn't have an opportunity then to swap notes, but she's someone I'm very admiring of and inevitably, over the full sweep of life in the years to come, I can imagine sitting over a glass of wine and chatting through it all."

The pair might also discuss the parallels between Gillard's experience of internal party ructions and destabilising former leaders and the New Zealand Labour Party, which is tearing itself apart after its worst election defeat in 92 years.

Gillard explains the hurtful and destructive impact of fighting on two fronts – against internal and external critics.

"Even on the biggest days, when you're announcing the most important things for the nation's future, the spotlight could well and truly be elsewhere because of the nature of the internal dynamics."

She bemoans the difficulty of getting probing policy analysis into a frenetic media cycle in which leadership stories are "like stocking fillers – you can always pop in another one with little expense or effort".

She also talks about the pain of being deposed by your own party. "When people stop talking to you, they give away their position; you can always tell." She can't explain why former supporters slowly turned in favour of Rudd, but she suspects they believed that the only way to end the cycle of destabilisation, leaks and dissent was to give in to it.

Having been deposed, she believes she was right to disappear completely to avoid becoming a political liability.

"It is not easy to lose a leadership contest and take yourself immediately out of politics. Having done precisely that, I know. But it is absolutely the right thing to do if you want your political party to prosper; you spare them from dealing with any distractions."

Despite the bruising ride, Gillard would do it all again. And she hopes it will be easier for the next woman.

"The prime advice I would give [to a young aspiring female politician] is to be clear about your purpose, about why you're in politics. Politics at the end of the day isn't about celebrity and it isn't about applause. It's about getting things done. It's about what you believe in, your values, what you want to change. If you're crystal clear about those things, go for it, because they will sustain you even in the rough times in politics. Even if we lived in a post-gender world of absolute true equality for women in politics there would still be political rough times and it would be the sense of purpose that sustains you."

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