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How Well Does Australian Democracy Serve Australian Women?

Prepared by Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge. Australian National University, 2007. ISBN 978097755127 (pbk). Free. ISBN 078-0-9775571-3-4 (online) <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>.

This report, a strand of the Democratic Audit of Australia being conducted by the School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, documents the relationship between Australian women and the democratic system. It outlines the initiatives taken and machinery developed and evaluates how successful they have been. Specific attention is paid to the role of sex discrimination legislation, policy machinery, Parliamentary and institutional representation, as well as Non-Government Organisations.

The report compellingly demonstrates that there has been a resiling by Australia from its commitment to equal opportunity for women in the public sphere. The regression has been pronounced in the last decade, supporting the conclusion that the Australian democratic apparatus is not serving women well.

The report shows how cutbacks in benefits and policy initiatives at both State and Federal levels are underscored by cutbacks in the support for NGOs which formerly enabled the voices of a diverse range of women's groups to be heard and reflected in policy. The report reveals that the savagery and frequency of the cutbacks have had the effect of silencing dissentient voices and reasserting a subordinate position for Australian women within the polity.

The absence of an entrenched guarantee of equality reveals how rapidly progressive policies can be jettisoned by a neoliberal government espousing conservative views. The international framework, which Australian once took seriously, and which represented the impetus for remedial legislation, is now treated with contempt. While Australian women have relied on the state as a benevolent force for social change, the report shows it to be a fickle ally.

While the report clearly reveals Australia's decline from a world leader to a lacklustre performer on women's policy, the authors eschew a simplistic one-way slide and are careful to qualify what they say and give credit where it is due. In a multi-jurisdictional Federal system, there is inevitably going to be some variation. For example, the South Australian Office for Women is being rejuvenated at a time the status and influence of other women's policy advice units around the country are being eviscerated.

The report is well structured and clearly written, and would be accessible to a wide cross-section of general readers. For example, the explanation of equality is succinct, while bringing out its contradictions, as highlighted by the sameness/difference debate. The report constitutes a useful reference source, with up-to-date information in an attractive and simple tabular format that can be taken in at a glance. The lists of strengths and weaknesses at the end of each chapter are also very reader-friendly.

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