

## **Australia's First Female Prime Minister**

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We are used to women Prime Ministers in South Asia and it all started in 1960 with Ms. Srimavo Bandarnaike became Prime Minister after her husband's assassination in Sri Lanka. Then Indira Gandhi ruled India from 1966 for more than decade and left her legacy in the country.

Ms. Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister in Pakistan in 1988 and in Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia held the office of Prime Minister in 1991 and was again Prime Minister in 2001 after the election. Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister in 1996 and again has assumed office as Prime Minister after her party secured a large majority at the election held on 29th December in 2008.

In any country's political history, it is unique that since 1991 for almost 20 years, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in Bangladesh continue to be women..

On 24<sup>th</sup> June, Julia Eileen Gillard (48) a former child migrant from Wales in Britain, has risen to the top, the 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister and the first female Prime Minister, of Australia.

Sheikh Hasina has sent her congratulations to Julia Gillard on her assumption of office as Prime Minister and wished her all the success in her job.

For Australians, it is a beginning of a new era with a woman Prime Minister and a Prime Minister who remains unmarried.

Gillard was Deputy Prime Minister and was in charge of industrial relations and education. A lawyer turned politician, if there is one constant characteristic in Gillard's career, it is an understanding of power and how it works. As she says, she didn't get to where she is by being "a Doris Day" -- a reference to the 1960s actress with the girl-next-door screen image.

She said in 2006: "I had to fight hard to get pre-selected, I had to play a factional game to do that, I had to count numbers, I had to make deals and I'd do all of that again tomorrow if I needed to."

### *Her brief profile:*

Born in 1961, she comes from a worker's family as her father was a male nurse and her mother cooked at a refuge for women. Her parents migrated to Australia in 1966 and understood that in Australia, at the time, education was the ladder to success and prosperity.

She was an excellent student at Unley High School, the University of Adelaide and later Melbourne University. In a profile in July 2007, she told : "I have always reflected that

one of the key differences between my life and my mum and dad's life was that I got the access to education they would have liked."

From her early days as a law student, she was an activist and impressed as a believer who was nonetheless smart at political management, at what Simon Marginson, now professor of education at Melbourne University, calls the "business of politics". She became the president of the Australian Union of Students in the university.

From 1987, Gillard spent nine years at the Melbourne law firm, Slater & Gordon, for most of that time as a partner, and gradually became involved in Labor politics.

#### *Political career:*

After two years as chief of staff to a Labour leader in Melbourne, she entered parliament in 1998 and the Welsh-born Gillard was mocked for her nasal voice, her flame coloured hair, her dress sense and her failure to embrace a married life.

She came at a time into parliament when it was just possible to be seen in the media as a politician rather than as a woman politician. But Gillard has been good at reading both sides of the gender game -- she can appeal to feminists while seeming to be completely at home in the main game where male values and culture dominate.

Five years ago, she was publicly humiliated when a cosy photograph in her kitchen revealed an empty fruit bowl. The message from her enemies was clear -- here was a woman who could not possibly connect with voters because she wasn't a real woman, a wife and mother who made sure there were bananas in the bowl.

Gillard weathered that storm beautifully, perhaps because many people understood that for all the talk about work-life balance, for all the women politicians juggling partners and kids, getting to the No 1 job still involves stark choices for women.

She held several key shadow portfolios in the opposition-- immigration, indigenous affairs and health -- before becoming deputy opposition leader under Rudd in the December 2006 coup against the Labour Opposition leader Kim Beazley (currently Australia's Ambassador to Washington).

During a decade in opposition, she showed herself to be politically adept and was a good operator, quickly grasped the subject matter and good at managing the work flow, building a reputation.

She was found to be decisive, tough, pragmatic, even wily -- qualities regarded highly in men. That she has been able to mix the two streams to such good effect suggests that, perhaps for the first time in Australian public life at this level, gender has been taken out of the equation.

After she became Prime Minister, Gillard delivers a clever speech as the new leader, effortlessly about importance of consensus, change, accepting responsibility and personal independence, in a performance both supremely confident and modest.

There's only one question about being a girl, and Gillard sidesteps the trap, saying: "I didn't set out to crash my head on any glass ceilings. I set out to keep my feet on the floor and to be there walking the streets talking to Australians about what's the right thing for this nation."

"She's a born politician," says one journalist who has been asking her questions for years. "She has a strong tendency to lawyers' language ... and maybe that's a mark of having to come through the ranks of the Labor Left." She has the "every person" touch and can be disarming..

At her first press conference on 24<sup>th</sup> June, Prime Minister Gillard was keen to kill off any notion that just because the unions and the factional bosses had orchestrated the move against her predecessor, Kevin Rudd, that she would be under their wings, saying: "I would defy anyone, anyone, to analyse my parliamentary career and to suggest that on any day I have done anything other than made up my own mind, in accordance with my own conscience, and my best views about what's in the interests of the nation."

### *Why change the leader?*

The change of leadership took place suddenly like a coup when the Labour Party under former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was losing popularity since November as he had adopted a few faulty policies, such as black flip on emission trading scheme on environment, 40% tax on super profit of giant mineral companies and "soft" on immigration.. All the issues became hopelessly entwined and public sentiment began to shift against the government.

Anxious Labor parliamentarians suddenly abandoned Rudd on 23 June amid worries about the party's standing in the polls ahead of general election that must be called in the coming months.

On 24<sup>th</sup> June, Gillard was installed to replace Kevin Rudd to reverse the unpopularity of the Labour Party. The public dispute over the tax dealt a final blow to Kevin Rudd, the former Labor prime minister.

Labor Party knows there's an upside in a female leader, not the least being that it will be difficult for the men of the opposition to take her on without appearing to be bullying her.

The new Prime Minister Gillard on June 25<sup>th</sup> said her priorities would be to resolve an impasse with the mining industry over a controversial proposed resources profits tax, toughening up border controls and combating climate change.

According to opinion polls published on 26<sup>th</sup> June, Julia Gillard's taking over the reins as Prime Minister has led to an immediate surge in the Labour Party's primary vote. But the leader of the opposition Liberal Party (Conservative Party) Tony Abbott said that the surge was only temporary.

The polling will encourage the prospect of an early election and will give Labor confidence that it could win a federal election -- as early as August. The Galaxy poll tipped an election for either October 23 or 30, with the earliest likely dates August 21 or 28. The latest it should be held is April 16, 2011.