

Australia's Julia Gillard is No Feminist Hero

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The Guardian's description of Australia's opposition leader Tony Abbott as "neanderthal" is not unreasonable. Misogyny is an Australian blight and a craven reality in political life. But for so many commentators around the world to describe Julia Gillard's attack on Abbott as a "turning point for Australian women" is absurd. Promoted by glass-ceiling feminists with scant interest in the actual politics and actions of their hero, Gillard is the embodiment of the Australian Labor Party machine — a numbers-crunching machine long bereft of principle that has betrayed Australia's most vulnerable people, especially women.

Shortly before Gillard's lauded rant against Abbott, her government forced through legislation that stripped A\$100 from the poorest single parents – almost all of them women. Even Labor's own caucus reportedly regarded this as "cruel". But that is nothing compared with Gillard's attacks on Aboriginal people, who remain Australia's dirty secret, suffering preventable diseases such as trachoma (blindness in children), which has been eliminated in much of the developing world, and scourges that hark back to Dickensian England, such as rheumatic heart disease, even leprosy. I have seen Aboriginal homes in which 30 people are forced to live, because the government refuses to build public housing for them. Indigenous young people are incarcerated in Australian prisons at five times the rate of black South Africans during the apartheid era.

Gillard has continued with gusto the authoritarian and medacious 2007 "emergency intervention" designed to push Aboriginal Australians off their valuable land and box them into "hub centres": a version of apartheid. She and her indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin have implemented this inhumanity in defiance of international law. In a speech last year, Gillard, like most of her predecessors, blamed the victims of Australia's unresolvable rapacious past and present. I have just spent several months in Aboriginal Australia; and the views I have gathered from remarkable, despairing, eloquent indigenous women of Gillard and her "feminism" are mostly unknown or ignored or dismissed in this country. Watching Gillard address the United Nations last month and claim that Australia embraced "the highest ideals" of human rights law was satirical, to say the least. Australia has been repeatedly condemned by the UN for its racism.

Gillard came to power by plotting secretly with an all-male cabal to depose the elected prime minister. Kevin Rudd. Two of her conspirators, according to diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, sought inspiration in the US embassy where Gillard enjoyed an unusually high approval rating. This was understandable. Her views on aggressive war might be described as neanderthal if they were not Victorian; referring to the dispatch of Australian colonial troops to Sudan in 1885 to avenge a popular uprising against the British, she described the forgotten bloody farce as "not only a test of wartime courage, but a test of character that has helped define our nation and create the sense of who we are." Invariably flanked by

flags, she uses such guff to justify sending more young Australians to die in faraway places such as Afghanistan, essentially as American mercenaries — more soldiers have died under her watch than that of any recent prime minister. Her true feminist distinction, perversely, is her removal of gender discrimination in combat roles in the Australian army. Thanks to her, women are now liberated to kill Afghans and others who offer no threat to Australia. One Sydney feminist commentator was beside herself. “Australia will again lead the world in a major reform”, she wrote. A passionate supporter of the Israeli state, Gillard in 2009 went on a junket to Israel arranged by the Australian Israel Cultural Exchange during which she refused to condemn Israel’s blood-fresh massacre of 1400 mostly women and children in Gaza.

With political trickery reminiscent of the former arch-conservative prime minister John Howard, Gillard has sought to circumvent Australian law in order to send refugees who arrive by boat to an impoverished hell on isolated Pacific islands, such as Nauru. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, these people are “90 per cent genuine refugees”. They include children who, as government studies show, go insane in such confinement.

Australian feminism has a proud past. With New Zealanders, Australian women led the world in winning the vote and were at the forefront of the struggle for equal pay. During the slaughter of the First World War, Australian women mounted a uniquely successful campaign against a vote for conscription — known as “the blood vote”. On polling day, a majority of Australians followed the women. That is feminism.

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