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A natural selection years in the making

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IT SHOULD not be ignored that when the Prime Minister announced the appointment of Jenny Wilkinson as the first woman to lead the Treasury, Treasurer Jim Chalmers pointed out that under this government, women now lead the Treasury, Reserve Bank (Michele Bullock) and Productivity Commission (Danielle Wood), all for the first time. Chalmers could have also added into this mix Gina Coss-Gottlieb, as the current chair of the ACCC who began in March 2022.

It occurs at a time when Australia has a woman as the Governor-General and with women making up almost 50 per cent of the democratically elected 48th Commonwealth Parliament and where the High Court of Australia's seven judges include Justice Michelle Gordon, Justice Jacqueline Gleeson and Justice Jayne Jagot.

We are yet to see the full complement of secretaries to serve their new ministers but in light of these first announcements and the previous government's term where there were nine men and seven women secretaries, we should anticipate an equal complement of secretaries to be appointed.

In Australia's democratic system of governance, this means the three arms of constitutional power; the federal legislature, executive and judiciary are now constituted with men and women almost equally responsible for their leadership.

This democratic picture shouldn't be seen as novel. If you accept, which one should in a world in which equal access to education has been provided in Australia (and compulsorily in Victoria since the Education Act of the 1870s) that there have been equally qualified, capable and meritorious women in Australia to take on positions of leader-

ship, and power, this should be a normal course.

But this natural evolution has been far from the case.

Women with the qualifications to take on these roles of leadership have been available for over 50 years, particularly since the Whitlam government's changes to access higher education enabled so many women to go to university.

Jenny Wilkinson's appointment emphasises that she and all those women elected to this 48th Parliament, and the appointment of the High Court's women judges, is not a natural evolution for those being qualified to be consequently appointed.

We continue to live in a society that has gendered expectations of men and women that have not and still are not comfortable with women equally exercising power and leadership.

The first woman appointed as a secretary of a government department was Helen Williams AC as secretary of education in 1985.

She also later became the secretary of several other departments: tourism, immigration and multicultural affairs, communications, information technology and the arts, and human services, before her retirement in 2009. She was also the Australian Public Service commissioner from 1998 to 2002. But for 17 years, Helen was the only female departmental secretary. It took until the 2000s for a growing number of those women working within the various government departments to be appointed to join her. And it should be noted that women have made up a large proportion of



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the Australian public service workforce for a significant period, but disproportionately in the lower hierarchical echelons. Indeed the most recent WGEA report, the first of the Commonwealth Public Service, identifies a continuing gender pay gap which speaks to that fact. The next departmental head was Jane Halton in 2002 as secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing, later reformed as the Department of Health where she stayed until she was later appointed secretary of the Department of Finance.

Then, in 2004, John Howard appointed Lisa Paul as secretary of the Department of Education, Science and Training, Lynelle Briggs as Australian Public Service Commissioner, Joanna Hewitt as Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Patricia Scott as Secretary of the new Department of Human Services.

Five women had been appointed secretaries within five years. The adage that you can't be what you can't see is one part of the picture underpinning the movement campaigning for women, working within all arms of our system of governance, to be taking on and equally responsible for the exercise of power and leadership in these key governance positions.

As Sam Mostyn, Governor-General is reported to have acknowledged, Helen Williams AC was an influence on her own public policy life, and there would be so many women now in leadership roles in the legislature, the executive and the judiciary who can identify their many mentors, who

inspired them, guided them and led the way.

But we cannot and should not be complacent about this picture continuing.

Indeed, we must recognise that the project for democratic power to represent the lived experience of all Australians impacted by their decisions has not yet been realised.

In all those current roles, men and women alike, how many are being chosen (democratically or by appointment) from a multicultural non-white background?

With more than half the country now either born outside of Australia, or their parents being born outside of Australia, it should not take another 50 years before we see their merit, their capacity and their contributions being brought to the fore in these roles of democratic leadership and power.

Until then, we mark this moment, extend gratitude to all those who worked to get to this point, and continue to work towards enabling all who have the capacity to take on these roles to be seen and identified, going forward.

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