

# Sex and

From Maureen Dowd to Julia Gillard – power sits differently on women. While it's a celebrated characteristic for men, women who wield power are often demonised. Begging us to ask ... are women afraid of power or are men afraid of powerful women?

**When power struts in stilettos**, they're black and cream, sexy and very high. Very high. And right now they're walking towards me, strapped to the feet of America's "most powerful and dangerous columnist", Maureen Dowd.

Dowd's name on the end of a phone line incites panic. US President George W Bush calls her "the cobra". His father's chief of staff once famously promised colleagues, "I will destroy her ... if it takes me the rest of me life, I will destroy her." Former US president Bill Clinton reckons she's a "castrating witch".

But right now, as Dowd clip-clops my way, she doesn't look like the "flame-haired scourge of the White House" that the US media has dubbed her. Rather, this Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist looks petite, shy and a little unsure; perhaps even a bit battle-scared.

Dowd's most recent book, *Are Men Necessary?*, was released in early 2006, and she's taken a drubbing ever since. But at 54, Dowd is accustomed to being in the line of fire. Her caustic tongue and acid wit stir up reader fury more than any other writer at *The New York Times*, where she's the only female columnist.

Her first book, *Bushworld*, made her plenty of political enemies. But this latest offering – a fast and funky rant about men, women and gender inequities, which Dowd describes as "breezy and fun" – has stirred up a whole new generation of Dowd-haters. And they're out to shoot the messenger, regardless of the message. Almost no review is written about Dowd that doesn't mention her "fabulous red hair and shapely legs", along with her vital statistics: single, childless and exceptionally attractive. "It's easy to be bitchy about Dowd," says one Australian critic. "She has good looks,

a great job, moves in powerful circles and has had some pretty interesting dates in her time."

Needless to say, the most stinging vitriol comes from women. But men love to hate Dowd too. Her columns excite furious response, fuelled by perceptions of her as some kind of 'femme fatale'. Dowd says the level of vituperation she's copped is draining. She is continuously attacked for her gender rather than her banter. "It's been really hard over the years," she says, looking a little stunned as I lay out my scrapbook of Dowd press attacks in front of her. "I've had a lot of male aides to powerful politicians try and destroy my reputation and spread nasty things about me." The misogyny inherent in this doesn't escape her. "If a man writes a scathing piece about some gaffe a politician has made, no-one accuses him of hostility towards men," Dowd says, "but if a woman writes the same scathing piece ... [the media] will often suggest that her criticism is a reflection of some psychological problem. She is bitter about men." No wonder Dowd conjures up the image of "Emma Peel in a black leather catsuit, giving a kung fu kick", when she's working up the nerve to write a tough column. Dowd says men don't like it when women mess with what they consider to be their domain: politics and power.

Amanda Vanstone knows that well. As Australia's longest-serving female Federal Cabinet Minister, she's learnt to hold her tongue in the face of bully-boy posturing in Parliament. Earlier this year, Vanstone shared her secret to success – just don't ever call male ministers stupid. "Men don't like being criticised generally in front of other people ... if a woman does it, it is even worse," she said. Rather than tell a man his idea is plain dumb, Vanstone reckons you should call it "interesting", then suggest an alternative.

Dowd is convinced it's power that separates the sexes. For women it's an aphrodisiac, as they are attracted to powerful men. But men, says Dowd, are threatened by powerful women. Perhaps that's why she has trouble getting a date.

Dowd was once famously jilted by a New York producer who said he wanted to ask her out but "nixed the idea because my job as a *Times* columnist made me too intimidating". The man told Dowd she'd never find a mate because if there's one thing men fear, it's a woman who uses her critical faculties. Will she be critical of absolutely everything, even his manhood?

So why does power stink when a woman wears it?

"Power is the wrong word to use," says Rod Cameron, chief executive of polling organisation ANOP. "Power is a male thing." The word he thinks I should be using is 'influence'. Women, it seems, can 'influence', but men wield the power. That's not to say Cameron doesn't think women aren't marvellous. He thinks women are more multi-faceted than men (is that because they can do several chores at once?) and he says "women are more interested in exploring new [intellectual] horizons than men". Maybe. But that hasn't helped women move into positions of power in significant numbers. Nevertheless, Cameron insists that, in Australia, the rate of change, the "trend to feminisation in all walks of life – politics, business, media, values", is happening at quite breathtaking speed.

The fact that after 40 years of feminism in this country, only two per cent of our top 200 ASX companies have female chairs, only three per cent have female CEOs and only 8.7 per cent of board



---

# power

---

BY VIRGINIA HAUSSEGER

---



America's "most powerful and dangerous columnist", Maureen Dowd.

---



# Vive

For Women Who Mean Business

## Julia Gillard Future Prime Minister?

**Baroness  
Susan Greenfield**  
Sex, science and  
shopping

**Core strengths**  
Business leaders reveal  
the secrets of success

**Corporate good guys**  
Who you really want  
to work for

**Women in the cockpit**  
Nancy Bird and friends

**Travel** Exotic India  
Rejuvenating Thailand



February - March 2006 \$8.50 AUD



# VIVE

NETWORKING  
CAREERS • TRAVEL  
WOMEN AT WORK

FOR WOMEN WHO MEAN BUSINESS

## AMANDA VANSTONE Pushing Boundaries

**UNCOVERED**  
Jane Fonda's life

**BUSINESS AWARDS**  
A guide to the best

**TOP 10 WORK SKILLS**  
What you need to succeed

**KRIS KRINGLE**  
The politics of giving



+ tropical escapes: Byron, Fiji



Vive cover women Julia Gillard and Amanda Vanstone, two of the few Australian women to attain positions of power. But though Gillard had been tipped as likely to succeed Mark Latham as Labor party leader in 2005, she decided not to contest Kim Beazley's bid. And as Australia's longest-serving female Federal Cabinet Minister, Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, says she's learned to hold her tongue in Parliament.

directors are women, doesn't faze men like Cameron. He is convinced our 'feminised' society is becoming a much kinder, gentler, less combative place. And the fact that well below a third of our state and federal politicians are women doesn't seem to matter either.

"Women make better political candidates than men," says Cameron. "We've got much more, dare I say, feminised men - census-seeking, warmer men - Bracks, Wran, Beattie, Gallop, I don't know about Carpenter yet, Howard, Beazley. These are not macho types, crashing through." Maybe so. But just because the men in Australia's top political jobs have adapted their behaviour to suit 'gentler' times - or, to Cameron's mind, taken on more female traits - that hasn't managed to deliver any substantive political power to women. We have no female state premiers, no female head of a major political party and no real chance of seeing a female prime minister, much less deputy, in the foreseeable future.

And for any woman with such aspirations, she's damned if she shows her hand - and ignored if she doesn't. We all know the story of Julia Gillard. When the Labor party leadership was up for grabs, Gillard was clearly a strong contender, until one of her colleagues did the rounds of the press gallery with 'off-the-record' briefings about how the electorate wouldn't tolerate a single, childless, 43-year-old woman as leader.

Women make up 44.5 per cent of the Australian workforce, represent 58 per cent of university graduates and are undoubtedly moving into senior professional roles. So why aren't they taking charge? Do women have a fear of power? A reluctance to seize it? Or is Dowd right - do men have such a fear of powerful women that they knee-cap any who look like they're elbowing their way to the top?

It's interesting to observe Federal Cabinet Minister Julie Bishop, the Liberal party's rising star. As she appears on our

television screens, Bishop remains both impeccably dressed and impeccably 'clean'. Unlike Gillard, Bishop has never uttered a word about leadership aspirations. And while she remains mum, she remains a team player and a non-threat. Not surprisingly, most of the men in her party are more than eager to wax lyrical about her talents and 'potential'. But no doubt the moment she publicly reveals the extent of her political ambition, she'll be shut down and shut up.

Back in 1990, when Rod Cameron first spoke of the trend towards the 'feminisation' of Australian politics, he cited Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner as examples of the style of Australia's future leaders. Later, women such as Cheryl Kernot, Natasha Stott Despoja and Bronwyn Bishop were included in the list of 'would-be-powerful'. It's interesting to note that all of these women have since been demonised along the path to power. Now they are either non-players or insignificant players at best. Powerful women become



powerful targets, and their public mauling can be excruciating to watch.

Is our patriarchal society afraid that the more power women seize, the less nurturing they will be? Is the path to power so fraught that women give up? Or are they being picked off before they get anywhere near the control levers – with only a few steel-clad types getting through?

"I think women just won't put up with the crap," says Anna McPhee, director of the EOWA. Like most women in senior roles, McPhee is firmly of the view that ambition knows no gender. But when I ask whether women are shy of power, I can hear the frustration in her voice. She says it comes back to visibility and women's failure to put themselves forward. "Women get tired of the number of men, the peacocks, that come into their office saying they can do the job, they want the job, yet knowing they don't really have the skills. Women just don't do that," she says. "Women tend to be less visible because they're heads down, bum up – they're working hard. They don't work on their visibility." And as any woman who takes a break to raise a child knows, absence from the workplace results in not only diminished 'visibility', but in a whole new swag of preconceived notions about a mother's reduced commitment to the job.

Untangling deeply rooted stereotypical perceptions about women and power is perhaps the greatest hurdle facing women right now.

In its landmark report, *Women "Take Care", Men "Take Charge"* (2005), the US research organisation Catalyst found the alarming gender gap in leadership positions in the US boiled down to perceptions about gender. While in reality, the few women who do attain positions of power, use it and manage it in pretty much the same way as any man would, the perception nevertheless remains that power is a man's domain.

The characteristics of power are considered 'male traits'. The Catalyst research found stereotypes create negative perceptions of women's overall leadership competence. While women are perceived to be "affectionate, appreciative, emotional and sympathetic", men are perceived to be "dominant, achievement-oriented, ambitious, forceful and aggressive". The latter are traits considered necessary for leadership. The stereotype has men as 'risk-takers' and 'problem-solvers', but not women.

---

When I asked the students to name powerful Australian women ... it was a struggle. A few women on TV got a mention – along with Janette Howard.

---

I was amused, and a little bewildered, when I asked a lecture theatre of first-year university students to describe the characteristics of powerful men and women. I was a guest speaker at the National Association of Australian University Colleges' annual conference, presenting on 'Gender and Power'. Although they were nothing more than a straw poll, the results emphasised the strength of gender stereotyping. I was told that powerful women were "manipulative", "kick-ass", "work behind the scenes" and were "wealthy". Powerful men, on the other hand, were said to be "ego-driven", have "strong views", and my favourite, "possess all the qualities that are valued in today's society".

Interestingly, when I asked the students to name powerful Australian men, the likes of John Howard, Eddie McGuire and Rupert Murdoch were on everyone's lips. But when it came to powerful women, it was a struggle. A few women on TV got a mention – along with Janette Howard.

To be fair, just about every adult I've asked to name Australia's top five most powerful women has struggled. And the response gets even more befuddled when I ask people to name the most 'charismatic' women in Australia. It's a real conversation stopper. Yet broaden the field to international women, and both Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice are repeatedly mentioned.

Maureen Dowd's eyes light up when I tell her that. Like every journalist, Dowd is salivating at the thought of a political stoush between the wife of philandering Bill Clinton in the Democrats' corner, and the black, single, childless woman – who President Bush applauds for her "strength, grace and decency" – in the Republicans' corner. Dowd says everyone would be salivating at the idea of a tussle between the women she calls "the Warrior" (Clinton) and "the Warrior Princess" (Rice). "It's the cat-fight thing," Dowd explains. "Everybody loves a cat fight." ●