

## Kerry Chikarovski and the Press

Socialist feminists have long argued that the media re-produce patriarchal ideology, notably, that aspect of it which sees men as belonging to the public sphere and women belonging to the private sphere<sup>1</sup> and in which woman is viewed as the 'Other,' while the male is the 'Norm' or 'Absolute.'<sup>2</sup> The *Collins English Dictionary* defines patriarchy as 'a form of social organisation in which a male is the head of the family and descent, kinship, and title are traced through the male line.' Feminist scholars take the term further, to embrace the concept of male domination of society as a whole, including the military, science and technology, religion, finance and politics. Zillah Eisenstein suggests capitalist societies need a patriarchal system in order to operate efficiently, as patriarchy sets down roles for men within the economy and for women within the home:

Women stabilise patriarchal structures (the family, housewife, mother, etc.) by fulfilling these roles. Simultaneously, women are reproducing new workers, for both the paid and unpaid labour force. They care for the men and children of the society. They stabilise the economy through their roles as consumers. If the other side of production is consumption, the other side of capitalism is patriarchy.<sup>3</sup>

Socialist feminist scholars argue that the traditional family structure of wage earner husband/housewife-child carer must be maintained to guarantee the continuation of a patriarchal capitalist society. The family socialises the young into patriarchal ideologies, which are reinforced by outside sources, including the media: 'As cooperation between the family and the larger society is essential, else both would fall apart, the fate of three patriarchal institutions, the family, society and the state are interrelated.'<sup>4</sup>

The binary of the masculine public role versus the feminine private one also involves the issue of the Norm/Other dichotomy. Simone de Beauvoir argues that Self (or Norm) and Other appeared in even the most ancient societies and their mythologies, and is a fundamental part of human thought: 'In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are "strangers" and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are "foreigners".'<sup>5</sup> If women live in a society in which men hold financial, political and religious power, women become the Other from the point of view of the dominant masculinist ideology. In the parliaments of Australia, the male politician is the Norm while the

female is the Other, and still very much in the minority. The 'Otherness' of women is also constructed in their media treatment, which is characterised by concentration on their physical appearance, dress and private lives. This lessens their dignity and standing, and frequently deploys 'words that would never be used to describe a man.... repeated often enough ... their cumulative effect is to diminish a woman's stature as an effective legislator.'<sup>6</sup> At the same time, women suffer from the expectation that they will be fairer and more honest than their male counterparts, so the backlash against them is harsher when they appear to fall from their pedestals.<sup>7</sup>

The elevation of Kerry Chikarovski to the position of New South Wales [Liberal] Opposition Leader in December 1998 offers an instructive study of the treatment of female politicians as the Other by the media, in times when some believe that things have changed. Chikarovski became the first female Opposition Leader in that state when her predecessor Peter Collins was told he no longer had the support of the Parliamentary Liberal Party. Chikarovski's elevation to the position, and the period since her party's loss of the NSW State election the following March, provide a useful study of a woman leader's position in relation to the media. It also demonstrates that, despite many advances for feminism, much has remained the same since these analyses began to be offered in the 1970s. The constructions of Chikarovski as (female) political leader in the *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* demonstrate, indeed, an extraordinarily crude and simple sexism.

When news of her impending elevation broke, the novelty of her position and her family life were the first indications of the treatment of Chikarovski as the 'Other' in politics. The *Australian* led its report with the statement: 'Kerry Chikarovski will on Monday become Australia's first female alternative conservative premier, if as expected she is elected leader of the NSW Opposition.'<sup>8</sup> The paper not only mentioned the novelty of her gender, but also stressed her novelty from the point of view of the conservative side of politics—there had already been Labor alternative premiers, in the form of Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner.

The article continued with a rundown of the political events leading up to the change of leadership, but when it came to describing Chikarovski's background, her family life came first: 'Ms Chikarovski, who has two children, could become the first female NSW premier if elected on March 27. Ms Chikarovski, the Opposition environment spokeswoman who has strong support within Sydney's business community, could not be contacted for comment last night.'<sup>9</sup> An analysis piece on the same page was headed 'How the plotters gave the Chik a

chance'—playing on her media nickname of 'Chika,' but at the same time, mobilising an out-of-date, belittling term for a young woman. However the piece itself made it clear that Chikarovski wanted power and planned to work toward that goal—a change from coverage of many previous female pioneers who were depicted as either having to be persuaded to put their hands up, or who simply happened to be in the right place at the right time. Chikarovski herself tried to imply that she had been persuaded to take over the leadership role, and played no part in her predecessor's downfall, but a commentator stated the following day that she was a willing participant<sup>10</sup> a view shared by most of the other political writers.

The same issue carried a feature article dealing with political analysts' and feminists' reactions to Chikarovski's success. Malcolm Mackerras was quoted as saying that he believed that the government of Bob Carr would be defeated, making Chikarovski only the third female Premier in Australia's history. He was also quoted as saying that Chikarovski's case would be different, as she was not handed a 'poisoned chalice' like Kirner or Lawrence. Lawrence disagreed with Mackerras' statement, saying that Chikarovski had been asked to step forward because the Liberal party was seen to be going nowhere in its attempt to win government. Feminist Eva Cox also warned of what Chikarovski could expect in terms of media treatment: 'they'll no doubt sniff around her personal life in ways that are totally revolting.' She added: 'Where men are allowed to be more complex, women have to be the sexy blonde or the comfortable mother figure ... she's no mother figure. She's an attractive woman, with a lot of bounce and charm, so they'll probably go for all of that.'<sup>11</sup> They also went for how she dressed, with a page two article in the same issue headed 'Woman in white takes over—Kerry Chikarovski dressed in white to make yesterday's announcement confirming she was taking the NSW Liberal Party's top job.'<sup>12</sup>

While Chikarovski was portrayed as playing down the significance of her gender—'I don't think people look to see whether you're a man or a woman, they look to see whether you can do the job'—the *Australian* article ended with a reference to her status as a divorcee with two children. The *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a different view of how Chikarovski saw her gender: 'Mrs Chikarovski says she had 'no problem' calling herself a feminist and declares a long-held "passionate" interest in women's issues.' The *Herald* recalled a previous comment from the new leader at a women's power lunch: 'I am sick and tired of the media's constant focus on my clothing, make-up and shoes. In profiles, they always seem to say 'mother of two ... I asked my male colleagues, "are you described as a father of three?"'<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, her dress and appearance again drew comment:

'Looking almost immaculate in a long cream suit, Mrs Kerry Chikarovski walked alone into her first press conference as Liberal leader at Parliament House. The rush of the morning's drama was so intense that someone in make-up had forgotten to take the shine off her face for the television cameras.'<sup>14</sup>

A *Herald* feature article on the novelty of women as leaders also embodied the very treatment that it criticised: 'Chikarovski can now look forward to having everything from her hairstyle (Princess Di-esque) to her dress sense (sleek but careful) to her marital status (divorced with two children) to her voice (resonant and authoritative) analysed with far more interest than any male politician could attract.' The item also discussed the double bind facing female politicians, who are perceived as more virtuous than their male counterparts, but who suffer harsher criticism if they fall from their lofty pedestal. The author did add: 'Still, as many successful female politicians around the world have demonstrated, gender can also be used adroitly to one's advantage. After all, if the public wants to believe that women are more honest and caring and loyal than men, why should a female politician dissuade them? Even if the truth is somewhat different—as Peter Collins can attest.'<sup>15</sup>

A fear of success theme<sup>16</sup> also cropped up in the coverage of Chikarovski's accession to the Liberal leadership, in an article dealing with the problems women have in balancing work with family. 'We know she [Chikarovski] will have to show single-minded devotion to her job. And we know the price she and her children, aged 15 and 13, are likely to pay.... The female MPs I contacted told of anguished times when children were in crisis but they could not leave the chamber ... the tears shed over children's missed performances.'<sup>17</sup> This can be seen as enforcing the role of the woman as a primary care-giver, particularly in the case of Chikarovski, who is divorced. However it should be noted that her former husband was still reported as having a strong presence in the lives of the children, although he has maintained his determination to protect his own privacy in the face of media attention. The *Herald* also used unfortunate wording in describing Chikarovski's siblings, saying that her parents, Greg and Jill Bartels, 'only had daughters, four of them, of whom Kerry was the oldest.'<sup>18</sup> This use of the word 'only' gives the impression that since there were no sons, the parents had to make do with second best, or that Chikarovski and her sisters were brought up as pseudo-males. Indeed, Chikarovski's sister Julianne Wright was quoted on the same page as saying that '[I]f Dad and I didn't build the bookshelves, they didn't get built.' Wright also told the *Australian* that she and her siblings were raised as 'people,' not as 'girls ... gender was irrelevant.'<sup>19</sup>



The same feature article in the *Australian* also dwelt on the stress that successful women suffer in trying to mix work with family, with the article claiming that Chikarovski's political career was partly to blame for her divorce. She was also asked whether she was currently seeing someone, thereby giving another example of how the private lives of female politicians appear to be under more scrutiny than those of their male colleagues. Apparently hooting with laughter, her reply was a brief: 'No, I'm not!' making it clear that questions about her private life were out of bounds. The same article also carried the implication that Chikarovski may be less than womanly: 'The femininity of her immaculate dress code contrasts with a deep, almost masculine, voice.' Successful or powerful women can be made to appear unfeminine, thereby discouraging other women who value their femininity from following in their footsteps. The article had the suggestive title 'Chika Chika boom boom.'

The *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an in-depth interview with Chikarovski, which also touched on the issue of successful women politicians appearing too masculine. Reporter Craig McGregor asked: 'some people maintain you've become too blokey ... is that right?' 'Hmmm [she laughs] ... I'd actually reject that ... I refuse to play screaming games down in the House ... I haven't been thumping the table, not in that male way of aggression ... that's not me.' The interviewer questioned whether she had a current partner, a regular man, or even an irregular man, and asked if she'd considered going back to her original name after her divorce. However the interviewer and Chikarovski were not afraid to use the 'F' word—on being asked whether she was a feminist, she replied: 'Absolutely.'<sup>20</sup>

Chikarovski's brand of feminism is mixed with conservatism. She has indicated her belief that women should have access to safe abortions, but adds that there should be more concentration on preventing unwanted pregnancies, not through contraception education but through promoting abstinence: 'We need to say to young people first of all, "you don't need to be out involved in sexual relationships"'<sup>21</sup> Her feminism follows the Liberal party line that, while there are not enough women in Australia's boardrooms, affirmative action is not the way to go: 'I don't think quotas work.'<sup>22</sup> Her politics overall are aligned closely to the Liberal mainstream. She describes herself as 'an economic dry with a heart of gold,' keen to privatise the electricity system and use the money raised to improve infrastructure, including schools, roads and hospitals.<sup>23</sup> While she holds some 'small-l' liberal views, including support for multiculturalism and belief in the need for an apology to the

Aboriginal people, at the same time she launched as part of her law-and-order policy a plan for young vandals and petty criminals to be 'shamed' by being forced to clean up public sites while wearing fluorescent shirts with 'Community Service' written on the back.<sup>24</sup> At this stage the new campaign had clearly become a bidding war on law and order, and it is clear that Chikarovski was willing to promise quite draconian measures.

As the election date drew nearer, Chikarovski sought to explode some stereotypes dealing with women, and offered advice to those who might follow her lead: 'You don't have to be a bitch to be tough.... The tough woman is normally called a bitch and I think that what we need to do is make sure that you can be seen to be determined without necessarily being a bitch ... Don't fall into the trap, as a woman, believing you have to play the game the way the boys play it'.<sup>25</sup> The article observed that Premier Bob Carr did not comment on Ms Chikarovski's toughness while on the hustings elsewhere in the state. Indeed, Carr made little comment on the Opposition generally during the campaign, relying instead on his own government's record, and standing back and allowing the people to judge the Opposition for themselves.

Carr was himself the subject of a major profile piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the week before the election. In a rare thing for a man, the piece made some comment on his physical appearance: 'After four years in office, the only sign of wear and tear is a little pot gut. As he waits for the cameras to set up, he hitches his daks and pats his hair into place. That hair is a miracle, really: as bushy as the day it was transplanted.'<sup>26</sup> However the tone of the whole piece is light-hearted, a different form of article from the previous apparently 'hard(er) news' items which commented on Chikarovski's dress and appearance.

As history now shows, Chikarovski did not then become the first female Premier of NSW—indeed, her Coalition's loss in the election was massive and humiliating. The articles after the poll made no mention of Chikarovski's appearance or personal life; instead, they focussed on the recriminations that flew within her party, and speculation about her future. However Bob Carr was once again the subject of a light-hearted article that described him as a self-proclaimed 'bookish' nerd, and as having 'a face made for radio and a voice forged in heaven.'<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Chikarovski received a pasting from feminist author Susan Mitchell, who argued that the Liberal leader had not revealed her real self for the entire campaign: 'Her so-called power suits were as real as Helen Demidenko's peasant skirts. Her smile as real as a toothpaste commercial ... Her whole

image as bland and tasteless as the plastic chicken at a corporate lunch.<sup>28</sup> Mitchell concluded by urging Chikarovski to sack her image team and be herself. Bob Carr was praised in feature articles for refusing to succumb to the image gurus, but it could be argued that, in doing so, he was able to create a likeable, approachable image of his own.

Mitchell did admit that Chikarovski's image wasn't the entire problem—her offer of one thousand dollars per taxpayer from the planned privatisation of the NSW power industry backfired badly. People did not want privatisation in the wake of the problems that had come from selling off the water supply in NSW and South Australia: 'Not only do the bills go up, but you can't drink the stuff.' Mitchell also had little time for the Liberals' negative election campaign, which included 'a series of clichéd, predictable, negative advertisements, the last of which urged voters to "Give Labor a kick in the pants." Chikarovski should not be able to sit down for weeks.' Commentators generally agreed with Mitchell that the Liberal party's loss of the election was not caused by the public's resistance to the idea of a woman in power, but more by the party's failure to take advantage of the perceived failures of Carr's Labor government, including reports of cockroaches infesting a major Sydney hospital, public transport problems, and running the Sydney Olympics.<sup>29</sup>

Since the Coalition's spectacular failure in the state election, Chikarovski has complained of what she describes as offensive media questions about her private life: 'They're intrusive and they're stupid and they do not in any way impact on what I do ... Who I'm going out with is totally irrelevant to your assessment of whether I can be Leader of the Opposition, really.'<sup>30</sup> More relevant to that assessment is the opinion polls, which have revealed a continuing slide in popularity for Chikarovski and her party. To add to her problems, the federal Liberal administration took over the running of the NSW branch in October 1999<sup>31</sup> while, in January 2000, the Liberals' state director Remo Nogarotto resigned after months of pressure from within the party. Nogarotto played a major role in Chikarovski's accession to the leadership, and commentators have viewed the departure as a serious weakening of her hold on power.<sup>32</sup> Only time will tell how long she survives in the position, with political commentators stating that the only reason for the lack of a challenge so far is that no-one else is ready to take on a 'poisoned chalice' job.

However the question remains: has the press treatment of female politicians improved? The answer is, not really. Chikarovski's dress, appearance and private life still took up much column space compared

to her male counterparts, and her achievement was trivialised by 'Chika Chika Boom Boom' style puns involving her name. This form of concentration tends to trivialise women and lessen their credibility—a clear handicap when women are trying to enter male-dominated halls of power.

Cathy Jenkins

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Cirkse and Lisa Cuklanz. 'Male is to female as \_\_\_\_\_ is to \_\_\_\_\_: A guided tour of five feminist frameworks for communication studies.' *Women Making Meaning: New Feminist Directions in Communication*, ed. Lana F. Rakow. New York: Routledge, 1992: pp. 18-44.

<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. London: Picador, [1949] 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*. London: Granada Publishing, Second impression, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir: p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Braden, Maria, *Women Politicians and the Media*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996: p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Henderson, *Getting Even: Women MPs on Life, Power and Politics*. Sydney: Harper Collins, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> *Weekend Australian*, 5-6/12/98: p.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*: p.6.

<sup>10</sup> *Australian*, 7/12/99: p.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*: p.17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*: p.17.

<sup>13</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7/12/98: p.7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*: p.5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*: p.7. Peter Collins became NSW Opposition Leader in 1995 but, at that time, Chikarovski refused to accept a shadow portfolio from him, and moved to the back bench. Because of Chikarovski's growing power within the party structure, Collins was forced to persuade her to move to the front bench in March 1996. From that time she continued to gather the numbers until on 4 December 1998, Deputy Liberal Leader Ron Phillips and shadow Attorney-General John Hannaford informed Collins that he no longer had the parliamentary party's support. He resigned from the leadership the following day, and Chikarovski was elected to succeed him two days later.

<sup>16</sup> Gilah C. Leder. 'What Price Success? The View From The Media.' *The Exceptional Child* 31.3 (1984): 223-229.

<sup>17</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12/12/98: p.41.

- <sup>18</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12/12/98: p.33.
- <sup>19</sup> *Weekend Australian*, 12-13/12/98: p.25.
- <sup>20</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 6/2/99: p.36.
- <sup>21</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 12/12/98: p.6.
- <sup>22</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 6/2/99: p.36.
- <sup>23</sup> *Weekend Australian* 6-7/3/99: p.31.
- <sup>24</sup> *Sun-Herald* 21/3/99: pp.1, 5. This plan came under fire from ACT Chief Minister (and fellow Liberal) Kate Carnell, who pointed out that a similar policy had been tried in Canberra several years previously, and an attempt to shame one offender with an 'I am a thief' T-shirt turned him into a cult hero: 'There were people printing these T-shirts everywhere. Given the youth counter-culture, what else did people expect?' (*Australian* 26/3/99: p.8.)
- <sup>25</sup> *Australian*, 26/3/99: p.8.
- <sup>26</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20/3/99. 'Spectrum' section: p.6.
- <sup>27</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29/3/99: p.5.
- <sup>28</sup> *Australian*, 29/3/99: p.13.
- <sup>29</sup> *Australian*, 29/3/99: p.13.
- <sup>30</sup> *Australian*, 4/8/99: p.6.
- <sup>31</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/10/99: p.8.
- <sup>32</sup> *Australian*, 25/1/00: p.3.