Gender, Leadership and Franchise in Australian Agri-political Groups: Men's Resistance to Change

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Gender and Leadership in the Third Sector: Examining the Franchise Systems of Australian Agricultural Groups

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of the paucity of women in leadership positions in the agri-political groups in Australia. Data from a study of the Australian sugar industry's main agri-political group CANEGROWERS, the representative organisation for over 6 600 farm owners, are used to explore this issue. While there is a range of constraints to women's involvement in CANEGROWERS, this paper focuses specifically on the issue of the electoral system of the organisation. The significance of this focus is that the system of 'one-vote per farm' utilised by CANEGROWERS is the dominant electoral process for agri-political groups in Australia, and one that is also implemented in a number of similar organisations across Britain, Europe and the United States. Drawing on data from interviews with fifteen male elected leaders of CANEGROWERS, the paper identifies the types of discourses of resistance being mobilised to reject a change to the voting system. This is despite the fact that at the time of the study (1998-2001) women held none of the 181 positions of elected leadership in the organisation.

Keywords: Resistance, change,

This paper is concerned with women's representation in leadership positions in agri-political groups. One factor that has been said to explain the paucity of women in decision-making in agriculture is the voting systems of producer groups which typically allow only a single vote per farm (Grace, 1997; Elix and Lambert, 1998; Alston, 2001). Typically this means the senior member of the farming family is allocated the vote. This is typically the senior male. This has three impacts on women's participation according to the literature. First, this means that women standing for election must be elected by an almost all male constituency. Second, by denying women participation in the electoral processes, agri-political organisations devalue women's contributions to agriculture which affects their willingness and ability to participate in agricultural leadership. Third, the lack of franchise for women simultaneously constructs males as the legitimate protagonists in the public agricultural arena.

In 1998 the Victorian Farmers' Federation (VFF) led the way for the adoption of more inclusive practices by agri-political groups with the adoption of a Diversity Policy, aimed at encouraging 'one of its most important, and too often untapped sectors – women' (Dimopoulos and Sheridan, 2000). A key element of its policy was the extension of franchise amongst its 17 000 members to allow two people to vote at federation meetings. Despite this lead, and the research findings cited above, other agri-political groups have not moved to change their membership or franchise arrangements. The majority

continue to operate offering only single membership, and therefore a single vote per farm for the election of representatives (Haslam-Mackenzie, 1999). It is this lack of change with which this paper is concerned. What is of interest is that despite calls from newly emerging farm women's groups as well as a state agenda to increase women's involvement in decision-making positions in agricultural groups, little change has occur. This paper thus asks how the male leaders of this part of the political sector resisted calls for change to the franchise systems of their organisations. In order to address this question I draw on data from a doctoral study of gender relations within the Australian sugar industry's main agricultural organisation, CANEGROWERS. Before turning to this data, the following section situates the Australian sugar industry within the broader Australian political landscape.

Resistance to Organisational Change for Equity

In her seminal study of men's resistance to equity in the workplace, *In the Way of Women,* Cynthia Cockburn (1991) undertook four case studies of disparate environments – a local authority, a private sector retail chain, a government department and a trade union – to demonstrate the ubiquity of male responses of subversion, denial and rejection to gender equality in organisations. The men in her study are, she says, 'not exceptional in their resistance to change' (Cockburn, 1991: 100). This is not to suggest that there was any uniformity to the nature of this resistance. It came in a variety of guises – as sexist humour and sexual harassment as well as via disparaging comments and exclusionary practices. As Blackmore (1999: 136) has reported subsequently in her research on women leaders in education, there is a myriad of 'discourses of denigration' by which men may work to resist gender equity related change in organisations.

In light of this complexity, it is useful to turn to a typology of institutional resistance to change presented by Agocs (1997: 917-931; see Table 1). Of particular concern to the author is categorising the discourses engaged by the decision-makers of organisations, as they confront calls for equity related change. Five discursive scripts are identified. These discourses overlap and merge with each other, and are often engaged simultaneously by organisational leaders. The first of the discourses of

resistance is one which simply denies the need for change by attacking the credibility of the message itself. The second of the discourses of resistance in the categorisation is a hybrid of the first, in that it also is based on denial. However, in the first the focus for denial is the message, and in this discourse the focus is the messenger, and their credibility. The third discursive form of resistance in the typology is based on a refusal to accept responsibility for dealing with the change issue. A fourth mode of resistance nominated is a refusal to implement change that has been agreed upon. The final type of resistance discourse is concerned with dismantling change that has been initiated.

Table 1: A Typology of Forms of Institutionalised Resistance to Change
(Argos 1997: 48).

Type of Resistance	Examples
Attacking the change message	-Message is exaggerated, biased, irrational, untruthful. -Demands for more studies/data to prove message. -Inequality individualized rather than recognized as systemic.
Attacking the messengers and their credibility	-Claims on behalf of a group named as 'special interest'. -Group/individuals presented as self-interested/vindictive. -Power holders presented as the 'victims' of these groups/individuals. -Attack competence/objectivity of change advocates.
Refusal to accept responsibility for dealing with change	-Other people created the problem rather than the power holding incumbents. -The problem is the disadvantaged group. They need to change. -Change will happen in time. Pipeline theory. -There are more pressing priorities for the organisation. -We can't address this issue and maintain the essential values of the organisation. -The issue is defined as a conundrum/condition, not a problem that has a solution.
Refusal to implement change agreed to	-No resources allocated to implementation. -Staff responsible for change given no authority. -Lack of enforcement of policy. -Failure to set standards, objectives, time lines etc.
Dismantle change that has occurred	-Termination of a change agent's role or position. -Deprivation of resources for change activity.

In this paper I engage Agocs' (1997) typology in order to critique and understand the way in which CANEGROWERS' leaders construct the issue of changing the franchise system of the organisation. In this sense, the focus of investigation is shifted from women's disadvantage to the typically less studied question of men's advantage, and the actions, practices and discourses by which men seek to retain this advantage (Eveline, 1994).

Context

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CANEGROWERS was established under the *Queensland Primary Producer's Organisation and Marketing Act*, 1926. This act was repealed in 1999 and the *Primary Industry Bodies Reform Act* was introduced. Under this legislation CANEGROWERS operates as a three level structure with 153 elected positions across the state. The first level consists of local area committees related to each of the 25 mills to which growers supply cane. Each area can nominate the appropriate size of its committee with a maximum set at ten. Each of these local committees has a Chairman and a Deputy Chairman who are elected at the first meeting. The second tier in the structure consists of district executive committees. These deal with matters common to a group of mill areas in a particular district or issues of broader relevance to growers. There are currently thirteen district of these committees across Queensland. In the single mill areas (Mossman, Tully, Proserpine, Isis, Maryborough and the Tablelands), the Mill Suppliers' Committees also act as the district Executive Committees. Again, each area determines the size of the Executive Committee. Elections by ballot for the local and district committees are held every three years and are administered by CANEGROWERS' staff. At the first meeting of the local area committee, a member is selected by their committee peers to take a position on the CANEGROWERS' Board which is the highest level in the organisational structure. In turn, when the Board meets for the first time, it elects an Executive: a Chairman, a Senior Vice Chairman and a Vice Chairman who hold these positions until they become vacant again with the next election.

METHODOLOGY

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger doctoral study which examined women's participation in the Australian sugar industry. The study was conducted in partnership with the agri-political group CANEGROWERS, which represents the interests of over 6 600 cane farming operations in Australia. Currently, there are 153 elected positions across the organisation, of which three are filled by women. At the time of the research (1998-2001) no women held elected office. A key focus of the work was therefore to identify any constraints to women's involvement in the organisation, as well as nominate the types of strategies the organisation could introduce which would lead to change.

The study was undertaken as a feminist research project (Pini, 2003), and involved three case studies. Two case studies were undertaken in the cane growing districts of Mackay, in the central area of Queensland, and Herbert River, in the far north of the state. These case study sites were selected as in each area women's networks had been established as an attempt to facilitate women's entry to mainstream agri-politics. In each of these locations sixteen initial and follow-up focus groups were undertaken with eighty women (Pini, 2002). Of these eighty participants, only 15.0% (n=6) had ever voted as individuals in a CANEGROWERS' election. The largest proportion 45.0% (n=18) said their husbands had responsibility for voting. Of the remainder, 40.0% (n=16) said they had not participated in the electoral process, but were unsure if their husbands had done so.

It is data from the third of the case studies, that of the CANEGROWERS' organisation itself, which are drawn upon in this paper. This case study relied upon interviews with fifteen elected members. This qualitative approach was used as the study was designed to elicit a detailed and descriptive understanding of participants' own meanings and experiences rather than quantification (Mason, 2002: 65). As the research was undertaken in partnership with CANEGROWERS, staff were able to provide assistance in the selection of appropriate interview participants. Elected members were chosen to reflect a range of variables – geographic location, length of time as a member, and position in three-tiered electoral hierarchy. Full transcripts were made of all the interviews before thematic coding began. In terms of analysis, I used the process of profiling the experiences of individual participants described by Seidman (1998), alongside the more traditional process of categorising across the data according to themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the following section of the paper I explore one of these themes – men's discourses of resistance to modifying CANEGROWERS' electoral system.

Discourses of Resistance

Agocs (1997) has argued that studies of organizational resistance have rarely focused on the power-holders and decision-makers. When 'resistance' is discussed in the organizational literature it is typically in terms of 'middle managers, supervisors, shop floor or unionised workers' resisting a change that senior management want to implement. This omission is important, given that a person's

position in the organizational hierarchy will influence their capacity to resist change. Those who have access to resources, and moreover, access to determine the allocation of resources, as well as the authority to establish organizational rules, priorities and practices are clearly well positioned to resist calls for change. This is not to suggest that resistance is one-sided or that power is absolute and monolithic, but that in organisations such as CANEGROWERS, the male elected leaders mobilizing resistance operate from a structurally and discursively more powerful position than groups such as women. In the following five sections, the ways in which this resistance has operated is discussed according to Agocs (1997) typology.

Attacking the change message

The fifteen elected male leaders interviewed were asked why they thought women were under-represented in leadership positions within the industry, and if they could suggest any strategies which could facilitate women's increased involvement in the organisation. Of the fifteen interviewed, thirteen expressed strong resistance to any suggestion of changing the franchise system. This was despite the fact that eight believed men would have difficulty voting for a woman candidate. Two other participants did believe there was a possible argument for changing the voting system of CANEGROWERS. What was notable in these responses was that they were highly qualified. Thus, they were not representative of the first form of resistance identified by Agocs (1997) in that they were not attacks on the message, but they certainly did qualify the message. The following is illustrative of the reframing of the message of equity that was offered by the two CANEGROWERS' leaders:

> Elected member: There might be a bit of bias against women. In anything it takes a long time for people to change their attitudes and I would say that there would be a bit of bias because men would look at a woman and say, 'What would she know?' (Mackay, In-depth Interview, 1999)

This construction of the franchise system recognises an impact on women, but minimises its importance. The message of equity is not necessarily being attacked in the terms described by Agocs (1997), but it is certainly being diluted. In this sense, the framing of voting as an equity issue by the two leaders could be seen at the far end of a discursive continuum which ultimately is about attacking the message. This is a continuum which may go from qualifying the message to overt attacks.

The perspectives on voting and equity offered by the remaining thirteen male elected members were more clearly examples of attacking the message in the manner described by Agocs (1997). The most common means of attacking the message of the need to change from a system of one vote per farm, was to argue that voting rights were connected to a farm. Because, it was asserted, men farm, men vote. In one interview, for example, an elected member had difficulty in suggesting there were any barriers which existed for women seeking to be industry leaders. As in other interviews, I consequently asked about specific potential barriers as reported in previous studies, including the barrier of voting. His response was simply that 'voting rights go with the farm….with the farmer'. This type of response relied upon invoking definitions of farming as a masculine enterprise centred on the on-farm physical work typically undertaken by men. Correspondingly, it involved denying a connection between women's contributions to agriculture (through labour such as domestic work or business management) and the occupational identity of farmer. As Liepins (1998, 2000) has demonstrated through her reading of agricultural media in Australia, these discursive constructions have enjoyed currency and hegemony despite being highly mythologised and subject to challenge. In invoking these discourses, CANEGROWERS' leaders demonstrate Agocs (1997: 50) claim that resistance in the form of denying the message relies upon 'power to accord legitimacy to some interpretations of experience and deny it to others'.

Elected member: Where do you draw the line? The bloke next door to me, for example, has got two sons on the farm. There is only one farm but you have the father, two sons and the mother. Do you give them four votes? Four votes for one farm? (Herbert River, Interview, February 1999).

There were a number of other manifestations of a discourse of resistance based on attacking the message of change. Some argued that change would be too difficult to administer. Those calling for a reformed franchise system were positioned as naïve and their suggestions of change constructed as inefficient and ineffective. Others argued a case against the message by suggesting there had been a

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substantial shift in ender relations, and claims that men would reject a female candidate on the basis of her sex were considered no longer relevant. The message being delivered was therefore obsolete.

Attacking the Change Messengers

When elected members moved from attacking the message to attacking the messenger they were engaging Agocs' (1997) second form of organisational resistance to equity. These involved attacks on individual women as well as the women's networks. Some elected leaders, for example, attributed complaints about the lack of participation in voting as having emanated from women who were looking to justify or rationalise their lack of success as candidates. In the words of one elected member the argument for change was nothing more than 'sour grapes' from 'whinging women'.

Leaders who sought to attack the messenger were typically highly aggressive. In one interview a leader stated he believed there were no barriers to women. As a means of prompting further discussion, I consequently asked about specific barriers as reported either in the literature or as emerged in focus groups. Before he moved to a discourse of denial stating, 'I don't think this is even worth talking about', he asked how many women, and particularly, which women, were seeking change. The narrative he was attempting to build was that this was not a collective experience of gender discrimination, but an individual experience of disquiet. This individualising of the problem was even engaged when the women's networks raised the issue. Again, specific women were identified as being problematic rather than the franchise system itself. These women were subject to a range of personal attacks which sexualised, trivialised and masculinised them. They were subject to appellations such as 'bra-burner' and 'man-hater' and accused of undermining CANEGROWERS as a political and economic force (see Pini and McDonald, 2004). Such discourses were extremely powerful in containing the women's networks and their message for change.

Refusal to Accept Responsibility for Change

The third discursive form of resistance in the typology developed by Agocs (1997) is based on a refusal to accept responsibility for dealing with the change issue. This discourse was evident in an

argument preferred by elected leaders that if women failed to vote in elections this was not a matter for CANEGROWERS to rectify. The view was that franchise is a private issue in which CANEGROWERS has no role or part. As one elected member claimed, 'That's between husband and wife'. By reconfiguring a public organisational practice into a private conjugal practice, elected members relinquished any responsibility for change. This rationale which denied CANEGROWERS any culpability in women's exclusion from agri-political leadership relied upon constituting the franchise system as benign and gender neutral. The gendering of voting occurred outside the organisational space of CANEGROWERS.

A further way in which CANEGROWERS' leaders sought to relinquish responsibility for changing the voting system was to suggest that there were more important issues that required attention. Drought, the price of sugar, and new industry regulations, were all touted as the types of concerns that should be given priority over and above a focus on franchise. There were too many other pressing concerns in the busy life of a CANEGROWERS leader to afford attention to voting for women, as the following participant explained:

> There's a lot of times there's just so many other things happening and with all the demands. You are struggling to keep up with what's going on throughout the district, throughout the state and then industry. And then trying to run your own farm at the same time and live a separate life, play sport and bring up your children so….no. (Mackay, In-dpeth Interview, July 1999).

An addendum to this argument was what is often referred to in the literature as the 'pipeline argument' (Pini, 2005). This is named as such as it suggests that women are now entering into the 'pipeline' towards management/leadership, and it will be only a matter of time before this is reflected in their participation in decision-making positions. Consequently, developing specific strategies for change is unnecessary.

Refusal to Implement Agreed Change

Agocs' (1997) fourth discourse of organisational resistance to equity related change involves a refusal to implement agreed-to change. Examining the extent to which such a discourse was evident in the narratives of CANEGROWERS' leaders is problematic as the organisation had never agreed to change

their franchise system. They had, however, developed a policy focused on increasing women's involvement in agricultural leadership (CANEGROWERS' Council, 1994). They were also signatories to the 1998 *National Plan of Action for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management* (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management, 1998) which committed them to implementing strategies to facilitate gender equity in organisational decision-making roles. To rationalise a failure to change the voting system of CANEGROWERS, it was consequently necessary for leaders to decouple any relationship between gender equity and the franchise system. This was a recurring theme in interviews. The following is indicative of these attempts to disentangle the relationship between franchise and women's participation in agri-political leadership:

> *Elected member: If it came down to that (there being a link between gender and voting) then there shouldn't be any males in politics. You have 51% of the population females and 49% males, so if people vote for someone who is the same sex as them there shouldn't be a man in politics. (Brisbane, In-depth Interview, June 1998)*

The ratification of a policy to encourage more women into industry leadership by CANEGROWERS in 1994 could have been a significant step towards change. However, there were no strategies developed to accompany the policy nor implementation plan, goals or time-lines established. In interviews CANEGROWERS' leaders suggested that the policy was simply viewed as a 'politically correct thing to do' at the time when government was calling for gender equity in agricultural groups. Thus, the commitment to increasing women's participant in CANEGROWERS that was espoused in the policy statement was never to lead to change in the processes or practices of the organisation – including the practice of allocating a single vote per farm for elections.

Dismantling Change That Has Been Made

The fifth of the resistance strategies identified by Agocs (1997) – that of dismantling the change that has taken place – was not evident in the CANEGROWERS' discussions of the franchise system. This is understandable, as proponents for equity in this agri-political group have not been successful in achieving the type of gender- based reform, which could be either retracted or abandoned by the organisation. At a broader political level, however, the federal government has withdrawn its funding support for the national rural women's groups which were keen advocates for inclusive franchise in

agri-politics. The Howard Coalition has simultaneously retracted its policy commitment to a more equitable agricultural sector in ceasing to publish annual reports on women's involvement in leadership on farming boards, renaming and reconfiguring the focus of what was a Rural Women's Unit within the Agriculture, Forestry Fisheries Australia, and disbanding a Ministerial Standing Committee established in 1998 to progress gender justice in agriculture (see Pini and Brown, 2004; Panelli and Pini, 2005). In its own dismantling of a change- based program for gender equality, the federal government has legitimated agri-political groups removing a change to the franchise system from their agendas. The state has thus given voice to Agocs' (1997) final discourse of resistance for agri-political groups such as CANEGROWERS.

CONCLUSION

The type of in-depth ethnographic study of gender relations within the agri-political group, CANEGROWERS, as described in this paper, has not been replicated. There is nothing to suggest, however, that CANEGROWERS would be atypical from other agricultural groups in terms of resisting women's calls for an inclusive franchise system. The lack of change or reform in the voting procedures of producer groups across the country gives veracity to this claim. It is likely, therefore, that the types of discourses of resistance articulated by the leadership of CANEGROWERS are being echoed by male agricultural leaders in other organisations, as they attempt to rationalise and legitimise a failure to implement strategies for gender reform. This continued omission should be of concern to policy makers at both state and federal levels, given that these groups in Australia have traditionally played a substantial role in the policy making arena (Halpin and Martin, 1999). This privileged representative status is highly questionable, given that the franchise practices of producer groups deny women the right to participate in choosing their industry leaders, and, in turn, in taking up a leadership role themselves.

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