

# What does a parity parliament in Australia mean for the Pacific?

by Sonia Palmieri

6 June 2025



Seven new female Labor Members of Parliament were elected in Queensland during the 2025 Australian federal election

*Photo Credit: Facebook/BonnerKaraCook*

*This is a further instalment in the [Pacific Family Matters series](#).*

The May 2025 federal election has resulted in a parity parliament in Australia. For the first time since Federation, both chambers of the Australian Parliament will have equal numbers of men and women. This is a remarkable achievement that parachutes Australia into the [top 10 parliaments of the world](#) on this metric. While the Senate has had roughly equal numbers of men and women since the 2019 election and a consistently healthier representation of women for some time before that, the story of women's inclusion in the House of Representatives has been one of slower-paced change.

Parity, of course, did not happen overnight. It is the result of deliberate measures implemented by some — but not all — of Australia's political parties. The Australian Labor Party implemented [a quota](#) in the mid-1990s, modestly requiring that women constitute a minimum of 35% of its candidates for winnable seats by 2002. This quota was increased twice — to 40% by 2009 and then 50% by 2025. By contrast, the Liberal Party of Australia has consistently resisted calls for mandatory numerical targets, relying instead on awareness-raising campaigns and mentoring and training of women candidates. This strategy has had marginal success in guaranteeing the election of women under the party name. Some commentators have argued that women who might have found a natural ideological home in the Liberal Party have instead chosen to run — quite successfully — as independents. While wildly diverse ideologically, minor parties such as the Greens and One Nation have both attracted women candidates, resulting in gender-equal representation.

What does this all mean for the Pacific, the region with the [worst representation](#) of women in national parliaments? It means Australia has an opportunity to role-model positive practice in its own context, bearing in mind that the Pacific needs to find its own way to parity.

In 2024, the Australian Government launched its [International Gender Equality Strategy](#), outlining as a strategic priority that it would “support locally led approaches to women’s leadership”. The strategy here is to ensure that local actors — civil society actors, partner governments, development program managers and teams — drive, design and implement efforts for change.

The emphasis on local actors is critical here. We know that when activities are designed and implemented by outsiders — even the most well-meaning — they do not stick. Campaigns to support temporary special measures (TSMs) — often driven by multilateral organisations such as UN agencies — have been met with extreme resistance and narratives of reverse discrimination (that is, that they discriminate against men). This resistance was evident as recently as April 2025 when the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women [held open talanoa sessions](#) on various topics including women’s political participation. Calls for these “UN foreigners” to understand local contexts were heard loudly from the floor.

The strongest counter-attack to these resistance narratives comes from local actors. Programs like [Pacific Women Lead](#) and [Balance of Power](#) are led by and work with intrinsically motivated local influencers who understand what works and what doesn’t in their context. They leverage their own extensive networks and social capital to understand the local political economy, do demand-driven research, showcase women’s successes in leadership across multiple sectors including the private sector, and amplify women’s political voice. This work is unlikely to result in parity parliaments across the Pacific by 2030 or even 2050; it is slow and hard and sometimes frustrating work that comes with setbacks as well as successes.

Understandably, the women now elected to the Australian Parliament may be tempted to pursue faster-paced change in the Pacific. In 2023, Australian women MPs called for the Australian Government [to reinstate funding](#) for a Women in Parliament program. The previous program run from the Australian Parliament — the Pacific Women’s Parliamentary Partnerships Program — was [evaluated in 2017](#), and its performance was judged to be “less than optimal”. Specifically, the evaluation cautioned that:

In a Pacific context — if carried out without adequate consideration or knowledge of unique cultural factors — such work could have significant negative consequences in terms of the personal safety of Pacific women parliamentarians and the stability of Pacific parliamentary democracies. The wrong interventions could easily be counterproductive to the stated aim of improving gender equality within Pacific parliaments.

A parity parliament in Australia is worthy of celebration, and indeed, is an excellent

opportunity to ensure that our parliament is safe for all its representatives and staff. On this, there is **plenty of work to keep doing** in Australia. It is not, however, an opportunity to show others in the region how we got there. Instead, Australia needs to continue to invest in the local actors who have the knowledge, capacity and nous required to ensure Pacific women's voices are heard and respected.

*The **Pacific Family Matters series** explores priorities for the re-elected Labor Government's engagement on development issues with the Pacific Islands region. It draws on the expertise of the **Pacific Research Program**, a consortium led by the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU), in partnership with ANU's Development Policy Centre and the Lowy Institute.*

### **Disclosures:**

*The Pacific Research Program is an independent Pacific-focused research program that supports evidence-based policy-making in the Pacific and collaborative research relationships across the region. The PRP is co-funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the consortium partners' parent bodies. The views are those of the author only.*

### **Author/s:**

#### **Sonia Palmieri**

Sonia Palmieri is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

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