
*Women Senators In
The Old Boys' Club*

By Kim ALEXANDER

AT THE GATES OF POWER

Up until 1976, the most exclusive and powerful men's club in California was not the Olympic in San Francisco or the Sutter in Sacramento—it was the State Senate chambers. Then Rose Ann Vuich, a conservative Democrat from Dinuba, was elected. She broke the Senate's sex barrier and started clipping away at the Capitol's all-male mind set that had been firmly entrenched for more than a century.

One of her first tasks was to press for the addition of a women's rest room to the Senate floor (a rather necessary item considering that the Senate doors are locked once a session convenes, and departures are prohibited unless approved by the President Pro Tempore). Vuich's other attempts to gain acceptance took a combination of perseverance and wit, like the tactic of employing a tiny brass bell every time one of her colleagues forgot she was there and addressed the body with phrases like "Gentlemen of the Senate" or "Brothers of the Senate."

Her ringing reminders effectively forced fellow senators to acknowledge Vuich's presence, but much more was needed to open the doors behind which real political power resides. Now, 15 years after Vuich came to the Senate, it seems those same doors can still be astoundingly slow to open when it's a woman who's outside knocking.

More women than ever are following in the footsteps of Vuich and taking their places in the upper echelons of government. The National Organization for Women reports that since 1988, the number of women serving in state legislatures has increased by 9 percent.

But winning elections is only part of the battle.

Even now in the '90s, some say women elected to office often find themselves in a place where informal rules and norms can impede their effectiveness by keeping them out of internal power circles, out of

"the loop."

Of California's two state houses, the Senate is by far the more traditional. Only five women belong to this elite group of 40. Since Rose Ann Vuich's election, the house that prides itself on decorum has struggled to make room—literally—for women. It was a full six months after Vuich took office that a storeroom on the Senate floor was converted into a women's lounge, appropriately named "The Rose Room."

Another door opened to Vuich when she was admitted to the Derby Club, an old-fashioned association of senators and lobbyists. Weekly meetings are hosted at Posey's restaurant, where club members wear black derbies and often exchange useful information. In addition to being the first woman member of the Derby Club, Vuich

also earned the club's esteemed "Man of the Year" award in 1981.

Although Vuich was the first woman in California to confront the male chauvinism long present in the state Senate, she was far from the last. And even though the more obvious signs of inequality have been eliminated and women representatives have gained greater acceptance among male colleagues, sexism is still alive and well under the Capitol dome.

While the women of the Senate advocate feminism in varying degrees, all acknowledge the existence of an old boys' network that impedes their access to inside information and campaign dollars. "It's very easy for the guys to slap each other on the back," according to Los Angeles Democrat Diane Watson. "And it's

that slap on the back that produces camaraderie. When I approach somebody, they say, 'Oh, you don't need any money.' But whenever a guy looks another guy in the eye and slaps him on the back, it's 'Let's see what we can do. Let's work out a deal.' And I don't care how powerful we become, women still don't have that."

Sen. Rebecca Morgan, a Republican from the Silicon Valley, explained that while she has equal access to committee staff and caucus leaders, it's "the informal network that provides information. It's the luncheons, the dinners, where information is shared, that give you an edge in making decisions and knowing what's going on." Morgan points to her sports activities—tennis and skiing—as a means of providing her with an informal way to access male colleagues.

Overcoming a mind set that has difficulty relating to women in roles of power is nothing new for the five females currently in the Senate. They have been dealing with the problem as long as they have been in politics.

Morgan, for instance, could have made good use of Vuich's brass bell on one occasion shortly after her election in 1984, when she became a member of the Energy and Public Utilities Committee. At one committee hearing, a lobbyist testifying on a bill continuously addressed the members as "Gentlemen of the Committee." After three such references, Morgan finally asked, "Sir, are you so sure of your votes on this committee that you don't need mine?" The lobbyist responded, "Well, I was thinking of you as a senator, not a lady."

In fact, it seems many people—particularly members of the press corps—have a hard time getting beyond gender-specific labels. Sen. Marian Bergeson, a Republican from Newport Beach and last year's GOP candidate for lieutenant governor, is often referred to as "grandmotherly." While she's proud to be a grandmother, Bergeson believes the connotation is sexist. "Never do I remember any of the gentlemen of the Senate who are perhaps comparable in age levels ever being called 'grandfatherly,'" she commented.

Sen. Lucy Killea, a San Diego Democrat, is also labeled "grandmotherly" by the press, and she points out that such language violates laws against sex and age discrimination. Killea, who is not a grandmother, believes journalists should be sensitive to unconscious discrimination.

As one who has been involved with politics for nearly all of her adult life, Killea is well-acquainted with the barriers women face in elected office. Shortly after joining the San Diego City Council in 1978, Killea gave her "maiden" speech at the local Rotary Club, where membership is still the litmus test of acceptance by the San Diego estab-



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEX GOTTLEIB

(L-R) STATE SENS. DIANE WATSON, ROSE ANN VUICH, LUCY KILLEA, REBECCA MORGAN AND MARIAN BERGESON.

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Mandela's efforts to end apartheid in South Africa. Republican John Doolittle, a former state Senator from Roseville, criticized the resolution because he believed that by endorsing Mandela's actions, the Senate was condoning the violence of the African National Congress. In the Los Angeles Times article the following day, Doolittle's name was prominently mentioned, Watson's name, however, was nowhere to be found in the article, despite the fact that it was her resolution and she represents Los Angeles.

WHEN WOMEN LEGISLATORS get coverage, the media often seems more interested in their physical appearance than significant issues. A 1985 Los Angeles Times article related Marian Bergeson's political style with her hair style: "Like her upswept, elaborately coiffed, frosted blonde hairdo—colleagues joke that no one has ever seen a single strand out of place—her legislative presentations are always extremely well-prepared."

The first time Morgan received national press was not on a major transportation project she was undertaking, but rather when she wore a pantsuit on the Senate floor. Morgan was frustrated by the fact that she would get press on a trivial item rather than on one of substance. That particular story led one constituent to write a letter to a paper explaining how ironic it was that "a woman legislator of (Morgan's) caliber wins national attention only for

something as inconsequential as wearing a pantsuit."

Watson's criticism of the media goes beyond content. Her concern is also that when she is covered, a bad impression is sent to her constituents. When male senators take an aggressive approach, they are described as "committed, dedicated, effective, articulate," according to Watson. "We become 'loudmouth, controversial, confrontational, abrasive.'"

All five SENATORS belong to the Women's Legislative Caucus, which includes the women of the Assembly. The caucus meets for monthly dinners at a member's home, where members try to get past partisan politics and

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sometimes break with party loyalty.

"We're getting an old girl's club in there now," Bergeson said. "The power has equalized." Despite that belief, Bergeson admits some vestiges of the old boys' club remain. Gaining access to the back rooms where deals are sometimes cut, however, is not on her agenda. "Generally, it's my policy to do my work up front and in full view. But it's a matter of style, and not all women work alike."

But they are attempting to cross party lines occasionally and work together.

At one meeting of the Women's Legislative Caucus, Morgan argued passionately for members to support the reapportionment initiatives on the June 1990 ballot, not because she wanted more Republicans in the Legislature, but because she believes competitive districts will bring more women into office. Killea upset fellow Democrats when she endorsed Proposition 131, a campaign reform and term limits initiative on the ballot last November. But Killea also believed the Prop. 131 term limits would bring more women into the Legislature.

Though California voters defeated Prop. 131, a more severe term limits measure, Proposition 140, did pass. One provision of the measure limits senators to serving two four-year terms, and Assembly members to three two-year terms.

Although there is considerable debate about the overall effects of Prop. 140, the new term limits will

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most likely provide a bonanza of opportunities for women seeking higher office. History shows that only one woman has ever beaten an incumbent male legislator. All five of the women in the Senate won their seats in races where no incumbent was in the running.

Term limits will provide for a greater number of open races, thereby boosting the odds of success for female candidates. But as the women of the Senate can attest to, the dismantling of the old boy's club has only just begun. □

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ishment. Naturally, her husband was invited to the event, and upon conclusion of her speech, a club member turned to Mr. Killea and said, "That was a nice speech you wrote."

Watson, the only black woman in the Senate, is often asked the question, "How do you feel as a woman, as a black, in the Senate?" "Everything is preferenced," she said. "It's really difficult to answer that question, because I don't wake up in the morning and look at myself in the mirror and say, well, I'm a woman and I'm black, how am I going to feel today?"

Watson believes such treatment carries over from the Senate chambers to the press. In February 1990, Watson carried a resolution on the Senate floor supporting Nelson