

SOUTH AFRICA

An independent nation since 1931 and a Republic since 1961, South Africa has been home to one of the epic struggles of the twentieth century: the battle of its people against apartheid, a system of institutionalised racial segregation and oppression, backed by state violence, that dominated national life from 1948 till the 1990s. The long walk to freedom has brought in its wake a heightened sensitivity within the new, multiracial South Africa to all dimensions of equality and justice, including the issue of gender justice and the need to involve women actively at all levels of national politics.

South Africa is a multi-ethnic society with a complex history. In essence, European colonial expansion in the mid-1600s introduced to the Cape region, for centuries the homeland of San (Bushman) and Khoikhoi (Hottentot) tribes, white settlers from Holland and, later, Britain. As the settlers moved deeper into the interior, they encountered settled populations of Xhosa and peoples with whom they battled for control of the land. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the late nineteenth century raised the stakes, and also intensified tensions between the British and the Dutch settlers, or Boers. Britain went to war with the Boers and gained control of all South Africa. In 1910, the British formed the Dominion of the Union of South Africa.

The fertile farmlands, vast mineral wealth and rapid industrialisation of South Africa rendered its people vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation that from early on assumed racial expression. In effect, class and race were made to dovetail, with the black population – the overwhelming majority of the people – forced into menial labour.

This was the reality that the full-fledged apartheid system, introduced after the electoral victory of the white supremacist National Party in 1948, sought to institutionalise and perpetuate. Under it, the people of South Africa were divided into rigid racial categories ranked hierarchically from the whites at the top, through intermediate categories such as Asians and “Coloureds”, to blacks at the bottom. These racial divisions were reinforced by physical segregation, bans on intermarriage, ceaseless policing of the black population through such devices as the pass laws and the outlawing of all civil rights and liberties, especially attempts to organise politically across racial boundaries. The racist regime was ever ready to resort to extreme violence to uphold the status quo.

In the 1980s, however, various factors combined to undermine the apartheid edifice. The remarkable resilience and durability of the anti-apartheid struggle from both within and outside the country, led by the African National Congress (ANC), resulted in the growing international isolation of South Africa during a period of escalating economic difficulty. As ever, the regime resisted change but the reality of changed times could not be repudiated. In December 1991 there began multiparty negotiations

to dismantle apartheid. These resulted, in December 1993, in the adoption of an interim Constitution providing for the historic, first non-racial elections which were held in April 1994.

In the 1994 elections, the ANC won 252 seats in the National Assembly and 62.6 per cent of the popular vote. Second place fell to the National Party, with 82 seats and just over 20 per cent of total votes, while the Inkatha Freedom Party of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi came third with 43 seats and 10.5 per cent of the vote. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as post-apartheid South Africa's first President on May 10, 1994.

In the Government of National Unity formed after the historic elections of April 1994, former President F W de Klerk, leader of the National Party, was appointed Second Executive Deputy President, serving under the presidency of Nelson Mandela. (Subsequently, however, de Klerk and the National Party withdrew from the government.) The new constitution was approved by Parliament in May 1996.

Of special relevance to the position of women are the constitutional provisions for gender equality. Unfair discrimination on the grounds of "race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status" and a list of other factors is specifically outlawed. The new constitution, widely regarded as one of the most liberal in the world, incorporates an Equity Clause in a Bill of Rights; provides for affirmative action; and lays down rights to health care, basic education and adequate housing.

Women in Politics

In the old South Africa of white rule, women comprised only a tiny minority within Parliament. This situation has been sought to be remedied by the ANC, which at its first openly held National Conference in South Africa in 1992 resolved that women should constitute at least one third of candidates on its electoral list.

Largely as a result of this decision, contemporary South Africa has one of the highest proportions of women in Parliament: 27.8 per cent in the National Assembly and 16 out of 90 Senators, for an overall figure of 25 per cent female Parliamentarians. The seventh highest proportion in the world and the highest such percentage in the Commonwealth!

Both the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are women, and there is a significant representation of women in the Government of National Unity. Honouring a pledge made on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, President Mandela has used cabinet reshuffles to raise the proportion of women Ministers from 15 per cent in 1994 to 25 per cent in 1997.

Women parliamentarians have constituted a multiparty Parliamentary Women's Group (PWG), intended to function as a critical mass to help push through legislation on women's equality. This is seeking a formal status within Parliament and a budgetary allocation for a permanent sec-

retariat. It has lobbied for improved facilities for women in parliament and has initiated a Women's Budget, a critical analysis of the national budget undertaken each year to assess the extent to which the government's financial plans are contributing to women's advancement.

Besides the provisions for gender equality in the new Constitution, legislation since 1994 has introduced separate taxation for men and women and has instituted a Commission for Gender Equality.

FRENE GINWALA

African National Congress (ANC) Activist and Leader

Speaker of the National Assembly

Former Convenor of the Women's National Coalition

Like others belonging to South Africa's non-white majority, Frene Ginwala does not recall a specific moment when she entered politics. Growing up in the apartheid state meant exposure to an oppressive political reality from birth and ever sharper awareness of state-mandated, institutionalised racism.

Her opposition to apartheid led Ginwala into the African National Congress and into long years of exile from her native land. While living overseas she was sometimes challenged by feminists who took issue with her for concentrating on the struggle against apartheid rather than making women's equality her priority. To this, she would reply: "Well, look, what do we fight for? To be equally oppressed with black men?"

For her, the view that removing apartheid was not the top priority for South African women was nonsensical. But she also became sensitised to the gender oppression that was integral to the apartheid regime. Within the ANC, she became an active lobbyist for the position equating anti-racism and anti-sexism.

As the edifice of apartheid crumbled, Ginwala helped shape the fledgling women's movement in South Africa. An important milestone was the setting up, in 1992, of the Women's National Coalition, which brought together women from all major political parties, trades unions, and other organisations across racial, religious and other divides. Within the ANC, Ginwala lobbied for a one third quota for women on party lists. She also campaigned for gender parity in party delegations to the multi-party talks that preceded the historic 1994 elections.

Today, as the Speaker of democratic South Africa's National Assembly, she is a forceful, articulate and effective advocate of women's equality and women's right to be at the heart of the political process. Within the ANC, she does battle with all remnants of sexist thinking and behaviour. "Racism and sexism," she says, "are both structured forms of oppression which have been integrated into society and must be eradicated, not reformed."

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Frene Ginwala was born in Johannesburg in 1932; her family was of South Asian origin. Following the National Party victory in 1948 and the introduction of full-fledged apartheid, her family was forced by the Group Areas Act to move from the centre of Johannesburg to a barren and dusty area some thirty kilometres away from the city. This was “reserved” for Indians.

Her parents sent Frene to study in the United Kingdom, where she eventually read for a law degree. On her return, she became active in the Indian Congress, established early in the twentieth century to mobilise the Indian community against apartheid, and then moved to the African National Congress (ANC).

By the 1960s, she was so respected within the ANC that the leadership sent her abroad to help arrange the escape from South Africa of the party President, Oliver Tambo, who, like other anti-apartheid activists, was facing arrest. She remained in exile for more than twenty years, returning to South Africa only in 1991.

Exile

While in exile, Ginwala lived in the United Kingdom, Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia. She made her mark in political research, served as the ANC’s spokesperson in London, and managed to continue her studies. She also became a journalist of some note; among other responsibilities, she edited the ANC publication, *Spearhead*.

As she travelled the world on behalf of the ANC and participated in the formulation of its policy, she became aware of the rumblings which heralded the movement for women’s equality in the 1970s. She and fellow ANC activists began to be challenged about their politics from a feminist perspective. “We’d be asked why we were working in the ANC and not fighting for women’s equality,” she remembers. “We would say, ‘well, look, what do we fight for? To be equally oppressed with men?’ That’s what a purely feminist fight would have been. And that was absolute nonsense. One had to focus on the removal of apartheid.”

Ginwala concedes that at that time her attitude towards gender politics was coloured by her disdain for the ANC’s Women’s League. Some members of the League, she recalls, tended to view it as a welfare agency, and interpreted their role as little more than looking after male exiles in the camps run by the ANC.

But it was while working within the women’s wing of the party in Zambia that Ginwala found herself becoming more overtly committed to the struggle for gender equality. In Lusaka, she met Florence Mposho, a veteran ANC activist who had left South Africa after organising the famous Alexandra bus boycotts.

Mposho made Ginwala confront and recognise the reality of gender oppression. She also helped her to see that it was integral to the apartheid

system. "Mposho forced me to recognise that it was not something I could opt out of," Ginwala recalls. "I owe a lot to her. She pushed in her own way to help me make the connections between national liberation and women. She was saying that if you did not address the issue of gender oppression, you were going to end up starting a new battle at the end of apartheid."

The issues became clearer for Ginwala as she and Mposho sat up late into the night debating and arguing. "I began to see that just as I was saying that we couldn't fight to be equally oppressed with black men, so too we had to fight not to be oppressed by black or white men."

Promoting Gender Equality within the ANC

In the wake of her discussions with Mposho, Ginwala became active within the ANC on the question of gender justice and women's equality. Her focus was on getting the organisation to equate racism with sexism. "The concepts of anti-racism and anti-sexism are equally important to me," she says. "Racism and sexism are both structured forms of oppression which have been integrated into society and which must be eradicated, not reformed."

By the mid-1980s, Ginwala and women colleagues with the ANC were seeing concrete results. At the Second United Nations World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, Oliver Tambo of the ANC made a joint declaration with Sam Nujoma, leader of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). The two leaders pledged before the world assembly that they would not consider the Namibian and South African liberation struggles complete until the women of both countries were liberated. "We could now call the ANC to account," comments Ginwala with a hint of pride visible. "We could say, 'Now, redeem your pledge'."

It was at Nairobi, too, that Ginwala became conscious of the contradictions within the United Nations system. "You had a lot of delegations led by Mrs Head of State," she recalls. "But as the groups got smaller and smaller, you saw more and more men. Countries fielded men in all the important debates." The only real exception was the ANC delegation. "To my great pride, the only all-woman delegation was the ANC one."

For Ginwala, the demonstration of male power at Nairobi was instructive. "When it came to the crunch, there were very few delegations where the women had the power." She began to notice certain parallels within the comparatively enlightened ANC, particularly during meetings: "You'd be there and you would eventually force yourself to intervene in the sense that the chair would finally recognise you. When you stopped, the debate just went on as if you hadn't said a word. Or you would say something and nobody would pay attention. An hour or two later, a man would say the same thing and suddenly everybody would see the point."

At Nairobi, the South African women in exile established strong links with women from other developing countries. In the conference, they got together and pushed for gender rights to be seen as political and economic issues, not simply as social issues. This placed them in opposition to the US lobbying effort. "We said again and again that social and economic conditions are political issues," remembers Ginwala. "We also argued that the Conference marked a shift in international feminism. The battle for equality was not a battle against men; it was part of a social shift that was necessary."

The Women's National Coalition

When Ginwala and her fellow ANC exiles began returning to South Africa from 1990 onwards, they found a women's movement that was vibrant if embryonic. The movement was largely confined to supporters of the anti-apartheid struggle who had for many years been influenced by ideas and movements from outside the country. Its adherents included women workers in trade unions, students and political activists.

The two strands – the returning exiles and the South Africa-based women's movement – began working together to form one movement out of two. This involved disbanding anti-apartheid organisations which had been formed during the period in which the ANC was banned. And ANC structures such as the Women's League and the Youth League had to be re-rooted in the country.

This period saw the ANC and the struggle against apartheid move away from opposition politics to negotiations for a transfer of power. The challenge of public office drew closer. It was in this new context that the Women's National Coalition was born in 1992. This brought together women from different political parties and different sections of civil society, cutting right across racial, ethnic, religious and other divides.

Ginwala, who was deeply involved in the formation of the coalition and was its convenor until her appointment as Speaker of the National Assembly, views it as an attempt to ensure "that women were part of the process of bringing change to our country and that women would benefit from the process." More specifically, the coalition was established to draw up a women's Charter for incorporation in the constitution.

In the process of preparing what became the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, the coalition conducted research that put it in contact with more than one million women. This was all the more impressive, Ginwala reminds us, in view of its small budget. Its spirited team of women researchers provided a richly detailed picture of South African women and their economic and social status. This research was put to use in the design of a Women's Empowerment Policy within the framework of the

Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Ginwala, who stepped down as convenor of the coalition just before she was appointed Parliamentary Speaker, believes it has lost momentum in the period since the April 1994 Elections. She is particularly critical of the coalition's decision that no MPs could hold executive positions. "The coalition took a decision to cut women MPs adrift," she says. "They're out on a limb. This has created tension between the coalition – which many believed was the embryo of a South African women's movement – and women in Parliament. Women MPs have got to be rooted in the women's movement. They must constantly be reminded by women that their job is to help remove the structured obstacles which they themselves have overcome."

Affirmative Action for South African Women

Ginwala, a strong advocate of affirmative action for women, played an active role in efforts within the ANC to secure a one third quota for women on party lists. A resolution proposing that one in three of those on the ANC's lists must be women was put forward at the organisation's first national conference within South Africa in 1992. Debate was fierce, with many opposed to the idea.

"It was a problem to push through the quotas," recalls Ginwala. "But I blame us – the exiles. We came into the country and took a decision on a quota and the Women's League did nothing about it. They did not produce a single leaflet explaining the quota." But despite this, the resolution went through.

The battleground then moved to the multiparty negotiations known as CODESA, or the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. During the first stage of the negotiations, no women sat on the delegations of any of the parties at the talks, although a gender advisory committee sat at the talks to appraise various constitutional proposals from a gender audit point of view. Women were far from satisfied, and it fell to Ginwala to intervene. "I made the point that women were not only the majority of the population, they were the majority of voters, too. If parties wanted to win elections they had to offer women something."

At about this point, the breakthrough came. It was decided that the delegations of all parties to the talks would consist of two members: one male and one female.

For many of the women who sat on the delegations, it was like being thrown into a choppy if not turbulent sea and told to swim. "Most of the women did not intervene" remembers Ginwala. "It was very difficult, even for the most articulate of women. You would be sitting next to probably the most powerful leader in your party." But as the party realised the great advantage of having two negotiators instead of one, the situation began to change. "They began to change the women on the delegations to bring

in people who were able to contribute. By the end of the multiparty talks, you had women intervening on all kinds of issues.”

Since becoming Speaker in 1994, Ginwala has striven to remove the obstacles in the path of women Parliamentarians. As she notes, “Most of our national institutions are fashioned to suit men. And they are fashioned on the assumption that outside of that situation there is a world in which there is someone who will take care of a whole range of things called the domestic sphere.”

At the level of physical amenities, she has been instrumental in starting a creche within Parliament and in getting more toilets for women. She has explored the possibility of changing Parliament’s working hours to suit women with family responsibilities better. She has also challenged the long-established geographical split within the Government of South Africa that locates the executive branch of Government in Pretoria and the legislature a thousand kilometres away in Cape Town. This, she points out, imposes a taxing dual existence on women ministers and deputy ministers, especially those with young children.

Ginwala played a key role in getting the Parliamentary Women’s Group off the ground. It was at her initiative that a Parliamentary Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women was constituted. A strong advocate of opening up Parliament and the corridors of power to ordinary people, she has established the post of Parliamentary Liaison Officer and she consistently makes herself available to groups of students and other visitors to Parliament.

Ginwala is widely known and respected outside South Africa. Her years in exile saw her lecture at universities and institutions in a number of countries. She participated in international conferences on South Africa held under UN auspices, and she also attended major fora on conflict resolution, women, development and technology transfer. She was one of fourteen international experts invited to advise the Director-General of UNESCO on the agency’s programme on peace and conflict resolution.

Ginwala has been named by a US-based women’s lobby group as a potential candidate for the post of Secretary General of the United Nations.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Ginwala is a strong advocate of affirmative action to get women into positions of political responsibility. As we have seen, she played a central role in efforts within the ANC to establish a quota for women on party lists. Today, she advocates filling any further Cabinet vacancies with female appointees.

Looking back on a life of networking, she is clear that women should work across party lines to further common objectives. Strong links should be created, she says, between women in office and those in civil society.

And women should consciously foster an international perspective, building networks with activists in other lands.

The qualities she believes women in politics need to develop include assertiveness and the boldness to tackle leadership structures. Women, too, should always try to “marry theory and practice, so that decisions are firmly grounded and well conceived and that slogans don’t prevail.”

It is essential, she argues, to tackle in a very practical way the obstructions women in political office confront. Efforts such as lobbying for a change in Parliament’s working hours or to get creche facilities are of crucial importance. Otherwise, “women go into an institution and they can’t function and people say, “You see, they were tokens.” But they can’t function not because of their innate capacity but because that institution was never designed for women.”

Most important of all, suggests Ginwala, women in politics must work to change the basic attitudes of the men with whom they work and struggle. Within her own lifetime, she has seen a sea-change in the attitude of her male ANC comrades. For the leadership, she says, “there is no question of saying, “Ah, she’s just a woman,” and paying no attention.” And change has come, too, at the level of ordinary party workers: “Men in the ANC have begun to know how to treat women as cadres. There is a consciousness about including women. If you set up a group and there are no women in it, somebody will say, “Hang on, there are no women.” And it won’t only be the women who say it.”

DR NKOSAZANA ZUMA

ANC Activist and Leader

Minister of Health

When Nkosošana Zuma was a young trainee doctor in the South Africa of the 1970s, one particular encounter brought home to her the interconnectedness of racial and gender oppression under the apartheid regime.

One day, she was assisting in surgery at the King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban when a pregnant and very sick woman was wheeled in. The woman had breast cancer and the pregnancy was taking its toll, but she would not permit an abortion. She desperately needed a son, she said, to take care of her daughters. Without a brother, the girls would become dependent on the extended family who would not be able to provide for them. In the woman’s experience, it was very difficult to live without a man, to sign things and to help navigate a system that was vicious to black people and doubly so to black women.

The woman went through with the pregnancy and had a son. She died a year or two later. Zuma, deeply moved by her plight, found herself beginning to relate to the struggles of women. Her new consciousness would

follow her abroad into exile and, years later, on her return to South Africa and subsequent appointment as the newly democratic country's Health Minister, it would continue to shape her vision.

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Nkosazana Zuma was born in 1949 into a politically conscious family and one to which racial and gender discrimination were anathema. Unusually for a black woman in South Africa at that time, she completed high school and went on to read for a science degree at the University of Zululand – one of the few universities for blacks in the country. She went on to enrol for a medical degree at the University of Natal, a white institution which, in the 1970s, opened its doors to a limited number of black students.

South Africa's university campuses were in the 1970s greenhouses of anti-apartheid political struggle. At the University of Natal, Zuma joined the growing ranks of young activists led by black consciousness leader Steve Biko, with whom she studied. Biko was later to be tortured to death in apartheid prison cells.

Zuma became involved in underground political work for the ANC. Eventually this caught up with her and she was forced to flee the country. She went to the United Kingdom, where she completed her medical degree at Bristol while continuing her work for the anti-apartheid movement.

Exile

After she completed her medical studies, Zuma was sent by the ANC to Swaziland, on the borders of South Africa. Her job at the biggest hospital in the country provided a cover for her to continue with her underground political work, which took her to Botswana, Tanzania, Lesotho and other African countries.

At this point in her life, Zuma recalls, she regarded herself as “an activist within the broader struggle. Women's consciousness came later.” She worked with the women's section of the ANC (later to become the ANC's Women's League) but did not “package” her political work “into anti-apartheid and women's work.”

The ANC's women's section came to be influenced by the growth of women's consciousness internationally and by developments back home in South Africa, where women were making their voices heard in protests against the pass laws, in boycotts and in other forms of struggle. As the organisation came to reappraise its gender politics, women members found Oliver Tambo, then ANC President, a firm proponent of women's rights and equality. “No nation can boast of being free until its women are free,” Zuma remembers him saying. “It is the duty of every member of the ANC to ensure this.”

Zuma, who headed the ANC's health committee, chose maternal and child health as her area of specialisation and focus. In 1986 she obtained

a diploma in tropical child health from the School of Tropical Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

Return to South Africa

When she returned from exile in 1990, Zuma was stunned by the level of sexism she encountered: she could not get a bank. She asked them, "Who do you think is going to pay?" she remembers. "Here I was, a grey-haired professional woman, and I couldn't do the things I wanted to do."

Before the start of political negotiations, Zuma headed one of the ANC's provincial health committees. She was also leader in Natal of the Women's Alliance, which for the first time in South Africa's history brought together women from across the political, ethnic and racial spectrum.

She actively pursued the organisation of women across racial and political lines during the arduous political negotiations that preceded South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. She remembers early pictures of the talks showing "row upon row of men (black and white) in black or grey suits with only one or two women dotted in between."

Zuma was among the group of women which successfully lobbied for women to be included in every single delegation at the talks. She also sat on a gender advisory committee which checked every clause of the draft constitution to ensure that it would advance women's equality.

Rise to the Top

When President Mandela came to select his Cabinet in May 1994, Zuma was the natural choice to head the Health Ministry. During the first weeks of the new administration, the Minister of Health signalled her intention to bring about profound changes to the health system.

One of her first steps was to introduce stringent new anti-smoking regulations, to the dismay of the powerful tobacco industry. She then announced free health care for pregnant women and children under the age of six in families without access to health insurance.

Since taking office, Zuma has also restructured the health budget so as to provide health care to areas which previously had none. Her Ministry has built or refurbished hundreds of primary health care clinics. And efforts have been made to improve the situation of doctors in the state sector. Foreign doctors have been brought in to help plug serious staffing gaps, while Zuma has successfully pressurised the Cabinet into substantially raising doctors' salaries and paying them overtime.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Like her fellow ANC activist, Frene Ginwala, Zuma is a staunch supporter of the ANC's one third quota for women on its electoral lists. She is clear that without it women like her might never have got into parliament. "I

have no hesitation in saying that whether I came through the quota or not, I am capable," she adds.

Zuma has made it a priority to appoint women to top positions within her Ministry. "It's not enough to say 'I've made it' and leave it at that," she says. When she took over as minister, white males made up 99 per cent of its management. Under an agreement made between the ANC and the outgoing white minority government, civil servants were guaranteed job security for five years. Despite this, Zuma has been able to effect gender-related changes in top management – 30 per cent of the department's directors are now women.

To her male Cabinet colleagues who claim there are just not enough suitable women around, Zuma replies, "If you look, you will find. Women must be in decision-making positions; they must not just be making tea and cleaning."

Her years as part of a great democratic movement of national liberation have made Zuma very much a team player. This history leads her to urge women in politics to see themselves as part of a larger struggle. And it infuses her advice to young women hoping to enter government. "Organise!" she tells them. "Belong! For as an individual you can only achieve a limited amount."

SHEILA CAMERER

National Party Spokesperson on Justice and the Status of Women

Member of Parliament

Former Deputy Minister of Justice

Sheila Camerer, a long-standing Member of Parliament for the National Party and a Deputy Minister during the period of transition to democracy, is regarded as one of South Africa's most dynamic woman politicians outside the ANC. Her achievement has been to rise to the top of a party that, for much of its history, has had no serious space for women. Between 1948, when it came to power, and 1989, the National Party did not appoint a single woman to any of its successive cabinets. When it eventually gave up power, only eight of its 308 MPs were women.

In the apartheid years, Camerer recalls, "parliament was run by men for men. There were no spouses' galleries, there were wives' galleries. To reach the showers, women members had to walk past the men's urinals. And in the chamber, every time a man spoke after one of the handful of women, he would say how pleasant it was to speak after such a charming lady! The Speaker used to send little notes saying, "I like your dress, you're wearing a smart suit today."

But times, believes Camerer, have now changed – even within the conservative National Party. "Relative to what there was," she says, "there

has been a burgeoning of commitment and realisation that women are definitely on the agenda.”

Early Years and Entry into Politics

Sheila Camerer was born in Cape Town. Her father was a long-serving MP for the United Party, and for this reason her family was based in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. She attended Pretoria High School for Girls and in 1964 obtained a law degree from the University of Cape Town.

During her student days, Camerer was not politically active. “I think my involvement amounted to going out with the Chairman of the Progressive Party at the time,” she recalls. “I remember carrying a placard down Adderley Street in Cape Town once.”

Camerer married a businessman who developed an interest in politics. It was as a mother with young children and as a lawyer seeking to run a legal practice that she first became actively involved in political campaigning. “The National Party was looking for a candidate to contest a marginal council ward, and I was sort of talked into it.” The party, she says, did field some candidates at that stage, but this was no sign of commitment to women’s equality. “Women were usually ‘victim candidates’. I don’t think they expected me to win the seat, but I did. And I’ve been involved ever since.”

Rise to the Top

When Camerer was first elected to Parliament, she was one of just a handful of women members, and had to face the condescension and patronising attitudes of the conservative male majority. Change came only in the late 1980s, when Dr Rina Venter was appointed Minister of Health. In 1993, Camerer became the first woman in the National Party to be appointed a Deputy Minister when she entered the Justice Ministry. She served until the installation of the new government in 1994.

She became Deputy Minister of Justice again for a few months under the Government of National Unity arrangements, but gave up this post when the National Party withdrew from the Government of National Unity in March 1996. She is now the party’s spokesperson not only on justice but also on women’s affairs, the latter a newly created post.

Perspective on Women in Politics

The National Party, says Camerer, is still ambivalent towards affirmative action for women in politics but is “coming round to” the idea that quotas are an important way of getting women to test the political waters. Her own reviews reflect something of this ambivalence. “The problem with quotas,” she argues, “is that they tend to seal participation at the set quota.” She points out, however, that even the German Christian

Democratic Party, with which the National Party has close links, has now adopted the quota system it used to speak disparagingly of.

Networking at home and abroad seems to have brought Camerer closer to a position of support for quotas. "I have done a lot of trips abroad talking to other women politicians," she notes. "All of them swear that the only thing that gives women that lift to a level where they can compete with men is quotas to bump up women's representation. That, and winning women's votes, of course."

Camerer highlights the importance to political women of a networking strategy. The National Party is a participant in the Parliamentary Women's Group established since the 1994 elections. Camerer, who sits on the group's Steering Committee, recognises the inherent difficulties of establishing a multiparty political caucus of this kind but regards the experiment as important. There remain, she says, elements of male "clubbiness" about Parliament in a situation where the power structures are still male dominated.

She believes women hoping to enter politics should first gain experience in local government, a "university" for politics where they can learn the ropes. "It really does help you to see what works and what doesn't and to see how committees operate – because a lot of work in Parliament is done in Committees. Experience of working in NGOs is also helpful.

Camerer advises aspiring women politicians not to "get stuck on a single issue." She says this was one of the first lessons she learnt on entering parliament: "I realised the importance of getting the air of the house and never becoming a single-issue person, because you'll just switch them off. Try to say something new and interesting. You should try to be reported because then they must sit up and take notice."

In recent years, the National Party has established a Women's Caucus which includes male MPs. Camerer, a strong supporter of the initiative, points out that this provides a forum in which party policy on gender issues can be thrashed out. But it is not something which sits easily with all her party colleagues. "A large number of National Party MPs are white, Afrikaans-speaking men who have a very Calvinistic background. I think this change of attitude has been quite difficult for some of them and I don't think all of them have made it entirely."