

Parliament becomes 'friendlier for women'

Parliamentary staff are hurriedly making changes to accommodate the increased numbers of women expected to take up parliamentary seats after the election. But these efforts have stirred controversy over 'special privileges'. SHIREEN BADAT investigated.

THE face of Parliament, white for centuries and almost as entirely male, is about to change forever. For the first time in the history of South Africa, significant numbers of women of all races will help to reclaim the space between the neo-classical facades associated for so long with the twin enterprise of privilege and oppression.

Before they can do so, however, Parliament must be transformed into a "women-friendly" place. So says a memorandum from the ANC Women's League delivered to Parliament on International Women's Day last month.

In concrete terms, the memorandum demanded child-care facilities, including provision for collecting children from school and after-school care. It also called for adequate cloakroom and toilet facilities for women.

The immediate response was a feasibility study into the issue of women-friendliness under the command of Secretary of Parliament Robin Douglas. According to Douglas, the study found that there was indeed a need for further cloakroom facilities, and extensive refurbishing and renovation is under way.

On the question of child care, Douglas said the recommendations of the study would be implemented after the elections, since there was a need to see "who is elected to Parliament, how many women there are and what their needs are".

"We have been looking at what facilities are available in the vicinity of Parliament,"

he said. "We realise that Parliament is not an ideal place for children to be running around, although we will be able to make use of existing facilities, for example the huge catering facilities and the trained nurses who are on the staff of Parliament.

'Because of the history of this country, white, wealthy women in particular have been able to participate more fully than their black counterparts because they were in a position to employ people to look after their children'

"We do not want to spend a lot of money on new structures when we may be able to use existing facilities. It could be necessary to embark on a staff recruitment campaign to meet these new needs."

Surprisingly, these efforts have not received a unanimous welcome from all women involved in politics. Helen Suzman, for years the sole female in an otherwise male Parliament, described the demands of the ANC Women's League as unrealistic and unnecessary.

"There has always been more than one lavatory in Parliament," Suzman said. "For many years I was able to confront 164 men in Parliament without demanding special privileges."



OLD GUARD MAKES WAY: Fleur Ferri's July

She agreed that women with small children might struggle to meet both parental responsibilities and the demands of parliamentary life, but said: "If women want to enter the political arena they must realise that it's a big, tough world out there."

The Democratic Party's Dene Smuts dismissed the demands of the ANC Women's League as a political ploy "to make the papers and impress the voters".

"Demands for special rules for female Members of Parliament will reduce us all to second-class MPs," said Smuts. She conceded that most law-making bodies worldwide were still male-dominated, but said changes were under way.

"There are women prime ministers and speakers now. Our capacity for competence has been established by a generation of pioneers who didn't have the luxury of being able to demand a women-friendly world."

Nina Romm, of the Women's Rights Peace Party, agreed with the position of the ANC Women's League that practical measures were necessary to facilitate women's participation in government.

In particular she agreed that the issue of child care was central. "If you want a true democracy, then you have to have proper representation of women. This means that the issue of crèches needs to assume national importance and not remain a secondary issue."

As important, she felt, was that women support each other in Parliament.

"It is important for a women's caucus to



ting of the Cabinet currently on display in the Poorthuis entrance to Parliament.

be formed in Parliament to advance women's issues. As long as women continue to fight each other along party-political lines, we will remain a minority in Parliament."

Citing the Women's National Coalition as a useful exercise in this kind of co-operation, Romm urged women in the public arena to support each other and lobby collectively around the need for women in government.

ANC candidate Tasneem Essop, who is also the mother of a four-month-old baby, said it was important to introduce mechanisms to enable women to be active in all aspects of life. She said the demand for crèches in Parliament was a progressive one, made on behalf of all working women. Those working away from their homes needed to be confident that their children were in a safe environment.

"It comes as no surprise to me that some women feel this is an unnecessary demand. Because of the history of this country, white, wealthy women in particular have been able to participate more fully than their black counterparts because they were in a position to employ people to look after their children," Essop said.

"Women have been reduced to the position of second-class citizens because they

have been confined to their homes due to the restrictions placed on them by society."

Mojanku Gumbi of the Black Lawyers' Association said black women entering Parliament would probably face the same problems she had faced when she became the first black woman at the Pretoria Bar.

"I was expected to change at a public toilet way across town. No provisions were made for female advocates. It was as if no one had thought that women could become advocates.

"I refused to do this and used the cloak-rooms at court, although it was characterised as a men's room. The chairperson of the Bar called me in after receiving complaints."

Gumbi said women's demands for crèche facilities at Parliament were not selfish. "Children are the responsibility of society," she said. "Women reproduce in order to ensure the perpetuation of society and not for selfish needs."

Lynne Brown of the ANC Women's League pointed out that "Parliament must be a place for everyone". She said it was important to ask: "Why is it that for the past 43 years the South African Parliament has been the domain of white males and that only one woman was able to play an active role in it?"

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