

A black and white photograph of a woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark, fur-trimmed coat. She is standing in front of a highly ornate, classical-style architectural structure, possibly a monument or a part of a building. The background is a plain, light color. The text "Women of politics and parliament" is overlaid on the lower half of the image in a yellow, sans-serif font.

Women of politics and parliament

Parliament
of Victoria
Education

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Introduction

Lady Millie Peacock was the first woman elected to Parliament of Victoria. In honour of International Women's Day 2021, we take a closer look at Lady Millie Peacock's life in politics and ask students to explore what impact women – whether in public political life or working behind the scenes – have had on Parliament of Victoria and on all Victorians. Regardless of whether we're aware of their lasting legacies or not, these women - Lady Millie Peacock, the women referred to in the activities, and many more – were and are, pioneers in politics and parliament.

Lady Millie Peacock: First woman elected to the Parliament of Victoria



“One of Victoria's distinguished daughters”

Lady Millie Peacock became the first woman elected to the Victorian Parliament when she won a by-election for the seat of Allandale on 11 November 1933. She was 63 years old at the time and recently widowed. The by-election followed the death of her husband, Sir Alexander Peacock, who had held the seat for 44 years.

Millie Gertrude Holden was born on 3 August 1870 in Port Fairy, Victoria and attended school at Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne. In 1899 Millie met Alexander Peacock when her family hosted delegates from a conference of the Australian Natives' Association. Millie and Alexander married at St Andrews Church in Port Fairy, on 1 January 1901.

At the time of their wedding, the Hon. Alexander Peacock was Chief Secretary in the Turner government. Six weeks later, he became Premier of Victoria, Treasurer and Minister of Labour. A popular and skilful politician, Sir Alexander Peacock was Premier three times, held several ministerial positions and ended his career as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

Lady Peacock had been an enthusiastic supporter of her husband's parliamentary career, regularly hosting functions, helping with campaign planning and occasionally addressing meetings on her husband's behalf. Sir Alexander Peacock acknowledged his wife's role in advancing his political career, often referring to her as the 'deputy member for Allandale'.ⁱ

She was also actively involved in her local community as president of the Creswick Red Cross and an enthusiastic supporter of the Ladies Benevolent Society and the Children's Welfare Association.ⁱⁱ

Soon after Sir Alexander Peacock's state funeral, Lady Peacock accepted an invitation from the United Australia Party to contest the by-election for Allandale. The electorate covered the region north-west of Ballarat (electoral redistribution saw the seat abolished in 1955). She considered the invitation a great tribute to her late husband.ⁱⁱⁱ

A decade earlier the *Parliamentary Election (Women Candidates) Act 1923* had passed the Victorian Parliament allowing women to stand as candidates for election to both houses. By 1933 five women had contested Assembly seats without success.^{iv}

Several women's organisations offered Lady Peacock their support.^v As she was in mourning she chose not to campaign, instead allowing members of the United Australia Party to speak for her. Premier Sir Stanley Argyle described Lady Peacock as a worthy potential first representative of Victorian women in Parliament as she was enthusiastic, active and capable with a keen knowledge of political matters.^{vi}

Although a 'silent' candidate, Lady Peacock circulated several policy statements during the campaign. These were focused on balancing the state budget, ensuring sympathetic treatment for soldier and closer settlers and making improvements to social services.^{vii} On polling day Lady Peacock won the Allandale seat comfortably with a majority of 1,500 votes over her sole opponent, the Labor candidate William McAdam.

At the declaration of the poll, Lady Peacock suggested the time had come for women to participate directly in politics 'to safeguard the interests of women and children'.^{viii}

Lady Peacock was sworn in as the Member for Allandale on 21 November 1933. Her friends and representatives from women's organisations, including the National Council of Women and the Australian Women's National League, crowded parliament's public galleries. *The Argus* newspaper reported that she appeared 'calm and self-possessed'



(allegedly much calmer than her three sisters who attended the ceremony).^{ix} As she took the oath Lady Peacock received applause from all sides of the house.

Learning the intricacies of parliamentary procedure and responding to letters from her own constituents, Lady Peacock reportedly found the workload demanding. She observed that the role of an MP involved 'dealing with human problems every hour of the day, getting into the lives of people and coming into contact with conditions that would pass one by in ordinary life'.^x

Lady Peacock made her first speech in the Legislative Assembly almost a year later. In September 1934 she spoke on a bill to amend the Factories and Shops Act, a subject previously championed by her husband. The press reported that she spoke with feeling, particularly on the history of the legislation and the provisions made for out-workers. Her style of delivery was reported to be 'equal to the demands of a memorable occasion'.^{xi}

The speech would be her only contribution to parliamentary debate. In January 1935 she announced her decision not to contest the next state election. When asked if she felt politics was not a 'woman's sphere', she answered 'I would not say that, but I will say that representing a country electorate is really a man's job'.^{xii}

Her remark sparked uproar in the press from women's groups and feminist clubs. The President of the National Council for Women, Mrs J. H. Moss, said that Lady Peacock's statement '...may prejudice the chances of other women standing for election'.^{xiii} Lady Peacock later clarified that

voters in rural electorates were ‘...not yet used to representation by women...they were used to discussing their farming and politics with men’.^{xiv} She spoke highly of the women’s movement acknowledging that her election had at least ‘broken the ice’ and suggested it would not be long before the parliament comprised ‘more women members on the benches’.^{xv}

Lady Peacock continued to be actively involved in community work and women’s organisations after she left parliament.^{xvi}

She died at home in Creswick in February 1948.

On the event of her death the Premier, Thomas Hollway, said she was a ‘kind-hearted and public-spirited woman’ and one of ‘Victoria’s distinguished daughters’.^{xvii}

*This story is based on research from the Parliamentary Library,
with thanks to Debra Reeves.*

Teacher's notes

Each activity focusses on the role of women in the Victorian Parliament, both historically and currently. Each activity explores the contributions of Lady Millie Peacock to Parliament of Victoria and Victorians in general. The different activities may be useful as either an opportunity for class discussion or as discussion starters leading to more detail research. An overview and relevant notes about each of the activities are discussed in this section.

The 'Values, Identities and Actions' and the 'Step In – Step Out – Step Back' thinking routines may be useful in exploring Lady Peacock's story either as an activity in and of itself, or in conjunction with the activities throughout the resource. The Reciprocal Teaching strategy (the Department of Education, Literacy Toolkit) may be useful to help scaffold students' understanding when reading the story. This approach maybe especially relevant to the upper primary school levels, especially as an alternative to Activity 2.

The first activity, *Recognising women and their contributions to Parliament of Victoria*, is designed to establish prior knowledge and open up discussions about the first women in politics and parliament, their roles and contributions.

Some points worth noting for this activity include:

- Not all of these women will be recognisable to students, depending on their roles.
- Alicia Katz, Lady Millie Peacock and Joan Kirner may be familiar because they were public figures and their contributions have been celebrated in a variety of ways. However, as historical figures, students still may not know who they are.
- Many of the other women listed, while they are breaking ground as the first woman in that particular role, they are working behind the scenes at Parliament of Victoria; students may have never heard of them or their particular role in parliament.
- All the women on the list have made contributions that have paved the way for future women in politics and parliament.

The list below provides some brief details about the roles each of the women had and have.

- Alicia Katz – 1924, first woman to stand for election in Victoria
- Mary (Mollie) Clark & Flora Theresa Brennan – 1926, first women to work in the library at the Parliament of Victoria
- Lady Millie Peacock – 1933, first woman to be elected to Victorian Parliament through by-election for Allandale
- Ivy Weber – 1937, first woman to be elected through a general election to Parliament of Victoria (Independent representing the then rural electorate of Nunawading)
- Grace Muriel Stratton – 1952, first woman to stand for the Victorian Legislative Council (province of Higinbotham)
- Josephine McGovern – 1970, first woman to be appointed to the role of Parliamentary Librarian
- Joyce Bates – 1970, first female Hansard reporter
- Enid Chandler – 1978, first woman secretary of a parliamentary committee, a joint position as Secretary of the Statute Law Reform Revision Committee.
- Charlene Kenny – 1980, first woman doorkeeper and chamber attendant in the Legislative Assembly
- Joan Kirner – 1990, First woman Premier of Victoria
- Bridget Noonan – 2017, First woman to become Clerk of the Legislative Assembly
- Sally West – 2019, first woman to become Usher of the Black Rod

This activity can be extended further by asking students to select one of the women listed and complete some brief research. Their research could consider how each woman has contributed to, or is continuing to contribute to, Parliament of Victoria, what is or might be their lasting legacy, and how their role may have and potentially will pave the way for other women to take on leadership roles in Parliament.

Activity 2, *Lady Millie Peacock and her life in parliament*, asks students to explore more closely Lady Peacock's story and some of her responses to her role in Parliament. These questions provide students with an opportunity to consider how far the inclusion of women in public service has come, as well as potentially some of the work left to do. Students could also complete a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats analysis) on the importance of including diverse voices in parliament.

In Activity 3, *Women in parliament: then and now*, students are given an opportunity to develop and extend their responses by considering the experiences of several women who are current Members of Parliament of Victoria. These questions draw on The Age article '*We can't leave parliaments to men*': *Leading in Spring Street*, by Sumeyya Ilanbey (13/02/2021).

Finally, Activity 4, *Significant moments for women in Victoria*, is a short research task where students can explore some of the key moments for women in parliament and what these moments may have meant for women in Victoria both at the time and now. This activity can be further extended by students researching relevant policies about women in the workforce and reactions to these significant moments. Students can annotate their timelines with these details.

The Additional Resources section has some websites that may be a useful starting point for research and the development of an online timeline, as well as links to the thinking routines mentioned above.

The relevant links to the Victorian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship can be found at the end of the document under the heading Curriculum Connections.

For any further inquiries or teacher support please contact education@parliament.vic.gov.au

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Activity 1 Discuss and reflect

Recognising women and their contributions to Parliament of Victoria

How many of the following women's names do you recognise? Do you know what their important contributions were to Parliament of Victoria and to the Victorian people?

- Lady Millie Peacock
- Grace Muriel Stratton
- Charlene Kenny
- Josephine McGovern
- Joyce Bates
- Alicia Katz
- Enid Chandler
- Mary (Mollie) Clark & Flora Theresa Brennan
- Sally West
- Bridget Noonan
- Ivy Weber
- Joan Kirner

Why might we know some of these women and their accomplishments and not others?

How might someone who is not a public figure, who works behind the scenes, contribute to the changing the perception of women in politics and parliament?

Why is it important that women who are not public figures continue to be the first women in roles historically held by men?

Why is it important to have diverse voices in parliament, not just as Members of Parliament, but across parliament, including the library, Hansard, clerks and committees?

How might we celebrate and acknowledge these, and the many other women, who have contributed to Parliament of Victoria throughout its history?

Activity 2 Explore and respond

Lady Millie Peacock and her life in parliament

After reading the story of Lady Millie Peacock, and her election to and time in parliament, discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think Lady Peacock said that “representing a country electorate is really a man’s job”?
 - To what degree do you think Lady Peacock’s statement was true at the time?
 - To what degree do you think this statement is true today?

Lady Peacock was also reported as saying the following:

“Notwithstanding anything in The Constitution Act or The Constitution Act Amendment Acts no woman shall by reason only of sex or marriage be disqualified or disabled from or be incapable of being a candidate at any election whether for the Council or the Assembly or being elected a member of the Council or the Assembly or sitting or voting therein if elected.”

*The Parliamentary Election (Women Candidates) Act 1923
Hansard, Parliament of Victoria, 22 December 1923, p. 339*

- Why do you think that Lady Peacock considered some roles in Parliament to be a man’s job, while stating that women should be allowed to stand for election and sit in parliament?
 - What do you think that tells us about the role of women in society in 1923?
 - How much do you think the role of women in society has changed? What examples can you provide to support your answer?

“I feel very proud that I have been able to stand up in this House, which is really representative of the people, and give my support to legislation, which, I feel, is not only due and necessary, but reflects the highest instincts of humanity.”

*Lady Millie Peacock, speaking on the Factories and Shops Bill
Source: Hansard, Parliament of Victoria, 3 September 1934 p. 1638*

- What do you think Lady Millie Peacock was referring to when she spoke of legislation that reflects the highest instincts of humanity?
 - How might women representatives in parliament support legislation that is “not only due and necessary, but [reflect] the highest instincts of humanity”?
- Why do you think it is important to have diverse voices represented in Parliament?
 - Does Parliament always reflect the diversity of its people; i.e. the diversity of the people of Victoria?
- Apart from becoming a Member of Parliament, what are some ways you can have your voice heard?

Activity 3 Explore and respond

Women in parliament: Then and now

Read the article *We can't leave parliaments to men: Leading in Spring Street*, by Sumeyya Ilanbey, The Age, 13/02/2021.

Weblink: www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/we-can-t-leave-parliaments-to-men-leading-in-spring-street-20210210-p571by.html

- How would you explain the experiences of these five women in Parliament of Victoria?
 - What might have been their motivations for becoming a Member of Parliament?
 - What do you think are some of the barriers these Members of Parliament face as women in politics and parliament?
 - What are the opportunities they might have as women in Parliament?
- How do the experiences of Lady Millie Peacock compare to the experiences of some of the Members of Parliament featured in the article?
- What actions could be taken to increase the number of women who are Members of Parliament? Develop an action plan that includes:
 - Why is it important to have more women as Members of Parliament?
 - What actions will need to be taken?
 - Who would be responsible for these actions?
 - When and where do these actions need to take place?
 - How will these actions create change?

Activity 4 Research and present

Significant moments for women in Victoria

What are the significant moments throughout Victoria's history for women's rights and their role in parliament? These may include, but are not limited to:

- First woman (Lady Millie Peacock) to be elected to Parliament of Victoria
- First woman Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
- First woman president of the Legislative Council
- First woman premier of Victoria
- When non-indigenous women first won the right to vote in Victoria
- First woman elected to Parliament at a general election
- When indigenous women first won the right to vote in Victoria

Create a timeline of these key events. You may wish to annotate your timeline to include key state government policies or significant other events happening at the time that may have influenced or impacted on these women, the women of Victoria, and their rights and roles in parliament and society in general.

Additional Resources

Listed below are resource links that may assist yourself and your students to engage with the questions and activities.

- Women in Parliament, Parliament of Victoria
www.parliament.vic.gov.au/about/the-history-of-parliament/women-in-parliament
This webpage provides an overview of some of the key moments in history for Women and their involvement in Parliament, including a mistake in legislation that gave women rate payers the right to vote in the 1863. The legislation was amended in 1865.
- Women's right to vote, State Library of Victoria
<http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/fight-rights/womens-rights/womens-right-vote>
The website gives a brief history of the suffragette movement in Victoria, including the 'Monster Petition' which was 260 metres long and 20cm wide, needing several attendants to carry it into parliament when it was tabled in 1891.
- Women's Suffrage, National Library of Australia
www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/year-10-11-12/Feminism/womens-suffrage
While the activities are more suitable to Senior Secondary students, there are some images and audio recordings that provide background to the national suffragette movement; these could be adapted for younger year levels.

Teaching tools

- Reciprocal Teaching, Literacy Teaching Toolkit, Department of Education and Training
www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/readingviewing/Pages/teachingpracguidedrecip.aspx
- Step in – Step out – Step back, Harvard Project Zero Thinking Routines
www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/step-in-step-out-step-back
- Values, Identities, Actions, Harvard Project Zero Thinking Routines
www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/values-identities-actions

Timelines

The following list of online programs maybe a useful starting point to help students generate their timelines. All have free versions (some limitations such as limited number of templates) but provide some download and sharing options

- Abode Spark
<https://spark.adobe.com/make/timeline-maker/>
- Padlet
<https://padlet.com/>
- Visme
www.visme.co/

Victorian Curriculum connections

The curriculum connections below relate, but are not limited to, the Victorian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship; there are also several additional Victorian Curriculum areas, such as History and English, for which these activities would be relevant.

The activities have been mapped from Grade 5 to Year 10, as each of the activities have been designed to be adaptable to a range of classroom contexts and work flexibly, especially in terms of the amount of time spent and the depth of discussion.

The description at the beginning of each grade/year level provides an overview of how the resource maps to the achievement standards of that level. The content descriptors following this overview relate to the most relevant connections between the content, activities and Victorian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship.

Grades 5& 6

The activities in this resource provide students with an opportunity to identify the values that underpin Australia's democracy and explain the importance of the electoral process. They explain the role of women in parliament – including Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff – whose roles contribute to creating laws. They identify various ways people can participate effectively to change or amend laws, specifically focussing on the 'first women' in Parliament of Victoria and their legacies. They analyse contemporary issues, such as women in politics and parliament, and use evidence to support the discussion. They identify possible solutions to the issue of women under-represented in parliament as part of a plan for action.

Government and democracy

- Discuss the values ... that underpin Australia's democratic forms (VCCCG008).
- Identify and discuss the key features of the Australian electoral process (VCCCG010) through the comparison of general elections and by-elections.
- Identify the roles and responsibilities of electors and representatives in Parliament of Victoria (VCCCG011), including the responsibilities of women who work in parliament and their role in passing laws.

Citizenship, Diversity and Identity

- Identify different points of view on a contemporary issue relating to democracy and citizenship (VCCCC015) through exploring the need for diverse voices in parliament.
- Investigate how people with shared beliefs and values work together to achieve their goals and plan for action (VCCCC016) by exploring the suffragette and women's rights movement in the early 1900's and the lasting effects of this movement.

Year 7&8

The activities in this resource allow students to explore how democracy in Victoria has changed over time to enable active participation by a greater number of Victorians, specifically in this case, women. Students identify the importance of different points of view and the diverse nature of Victorian society, both in historical and contemporary contexts. They analyse issues about gender representation in Parliament and the opportunities created as a result of women such as Lady Millie Peacock. They identify ways they can take action in different contexts.

Government and democracy

- Discuss the freedoms that enable active participation (VCCCG019) specifically through exploring the roles of women in Parliament.
- Explain how citizens can participate in Australia's democracy (VCCCG020) by considering what actions they can take to have their voices heard.

Citizenship, diversity and identity

Through exploring the stories of Victorian Women in parliament, their roles, responsibilities, and legacies, students:

- Identify how values can promote cohesion within Australian society, including the values of freedom, respect, inclusion, civility, responsibility, compassion, equality and a 'fair go' (VCCCC025).
- Explain how groups express their identities ... and how this expression can influence their perceptions of others and others' perception of them (VCCCC026).

Year 9&10

The activities in this resource provide students the opportunity to investigate the influences on people's electoral choices and responses to elected representatives. Students analyse a range of factors that influence identities and attitudes to diversity, specifically exploring issues and attitudes relating to women in politics and parliament. Students evaluate a range of factors that sustain democratic societies, including Parliament's response to changes to women in the workforce and political life.

Government and democracy

- Analyse how citizens' political choices are shaped, including the influence of the media (VCCCG030) through analysing and reflecting on the changes in society and the influences of women in politics and parliament.

Citizenship, diversity and identity

- Analyse contemporary examples and issues relating to Australian democracy ... including key aspects of citizenship in a pluralist society (VCCCC035) through comparing historical and contemporary examples of women in politics and parliament.
- Discuss challenges to and ways of sustaining a resilient democracy and cohesive society (VCCCC036) through the inclusion of diverse voices and representation.

Story footnotes and references

- ⁱ (1933) 'Allandale: Lady Peacock returned', *The Argus*, 13 November, p. 9.
- ⁱⁱ <https://awhf.wordpress.com/2009/02/08/millie-lady-peacock-mla-victoria-1933-35/>; (1933) 'Lady Peacock: Parliamentary candidate', *Australasian*, 14 October, p. 11.
- ⁱⁱⁱ (1933) 'Lady Peacock to stand: U.A.P. invitation accepted', *Herald*, 12 October, p. 11.
- ^{iv} M. Allinson (2011) *Early women candidates for Parliament Victoria 1924-1970*, Melbourne, League of Women Voters of Victoria, p. 5.
- ^v (1933) 'Allandale by-election', *The Argus*, 18 October, p. 8; (1933) 'Allandale by-election', *The Argus*, 13 October, p. 10.
- ^{vi} (1933) 'Allandale vacancy', *The Age*, 14 October, p. 13.
- ^{vii} (1933) 'Policy for Allandale', *Herald*, 7 November, p. 8.
- ^{viii} (1933) 'Allandale poll declared', *Herald*, 17 November, p. 1.
- ^{ix} (1933) 'The Member for Allandale', *The Argus*, 22 November, p. 14.
- ^x (1934) 'Lady Peacock has found political feet', *Herald*, 21 June, p. 36.
- ^{xi} Editorial (1934) 'Three keen contests', *The Argus*, 6 September, p. 8.
- ^{xii} (1935) 'Lady Peacock to retire', *News*, 12 January, p. 1.
- ^{xiii} (1935) 'Lady Peacock 'storm'', *Truth*, 13 January, p. 15.
- ^{xiv} (1935) "Why politics is a man's job", *Herald*, 12 January, p. 1.
- ^{xv} *ibid.*
- ^{xvi} (1935) 'Lady Peacock, M.L.A.', *The Argus*, 14 January, p. 8.
- ^{xvii} (1948) 'Obituary', *The Age*, 9 February, p. 2.