

Innovation in Praxis

Islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity:

Women Politicians in Australia Recoding Power Through Relational Governance

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Abstract

Islands of coherence are recoding power for women in Australian Parliaments. We reflect on the emergent work and impact of Next25's initiative, Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women, as an archive of how power can be recoded within formal institutions and resistant existing power dynamics to improve our democratic spaces for the participation and flourishing of all. A new form of relational governance has emerged from power being held with an open mind (new ways of seeing and knowing), open heart (new ways of being and

relating) and open will (new ways of doing), which has created spaces of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity for women leaders in politics in Australia. This initiative was catalysed by a group of women parliamentarians from across the political spectrum in the New South Wales state parliament, Australia, and has since gone nationwide. Their vision was to disrupt the way that politics is enacted in Australia, as reflected in their lived experience, and evidenced by the prevalence of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct documented in the Broderick Report (Broderick & Co., 2022), and the structural inequities of power and representation identified in the Australian Human Rights Commission report (2021). Four years on, these islands of coherence demonstrate that power in politics need not be zero-sum. When women politicians collectively align their attention, intention and agency, as described by Scharmer and Kaufer (2025), a more generative form of relational governance becomes not only possible but resilient.

Keywords

relational governance, power in politics, ecosystem leadership, awareness-based systems transformation

Introduction

When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order.

—Attributed to Ilya Prigogine

An Archipelago Emerges Across Australia's Parliaments

There have been many shifts and breakthroughs catalysed by individual trailblazers to transform the experience and position of women within entrenched parliamentary power structures. One notable example in the Oceanic region is the reverberation of former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Misogyny Speech (2012), in which she named and evidenced the systemic nature of misogyny in political life. Another is Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, from across the Tasman Sea, who in her recent book "Different Kind of Power" (2025) shows us that compassionate and inclusive leadership underpinned by clear values and purpose is not only possible, but capable of navigating times marked by a pandemic, polarisation and terrorism.

These rumblings and cracks are akin to the eruptions of individual volcanoes on the deep-sea floor, shifting the currents of the oceanic surface of existing power structures and norms in the political system. We are now witnessing a collective movement in Australian Parliaments that is making visible the volcanoes as *islands of coherence* above the surface of what is often experienced as a sea of chaos for women in politics.

The impact of this movement is reflected in the experience of a Member of Parliament (MP) who is an alumna of Next25's Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women Program, and recounts an experience during a particularly contentious debate:

Members of the public came into the gallery to protest, and because of where I sit in the chamber, they were behind me, which felt very unsafe. A woman MP from the opposition bench came to sit with me on the cross bench, and the willingness for her to do that in front of others was so powerful, I felt so seen, a feeling of solidarity. (Participant A, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

The other woman is also an alumna of the program, a member of what the women parliamentarians have self-named The Collective. This is an example of how women politicians are recoding power in Australian politics. They are demonstrating how new codes of power, grounded in principles of relational governance, can be transformational within existing codes that are constrained by established institutional norms. These new codes are being created by the women nurturing the quality of relationships as the ground and the social soil of their islands of coherence. They have been able to do this by aligning collective intention and attention to strengthen their sense of power and agency. The "social soil" has been cultivated firstly by having space to collectively experience sanity as clear seeing and sense making of the current parliamentary system with curiosity and an open mind (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). This enabled the co-creation of sanctuary, a safe and loving space with compassion and an open heart where trust was built. From this, solidarity, the capacity to resist orthodoxies to transform relations and outcomes with courage and an open will has arisen. This has propelled the emergence of islands of coherence in a sea of chaos—a safe and nurturing gathering place for women's business (Wright, 2023)—to co-create new implicit mental models: semi-explicit webs of relationships and explicit practices (Kania et al., 2018) that are recoding power in politics.

Sea of Chaos: Power in the Parliamentary System

Australia's parliamentary and political system is structured primarily on the Westminster model, but also on myriad informal and often invisible cultural structures and norms. Adversarial but also compliance-oriented by design, power in this system has a few distinctive features: it is hierarchical, formally concentrated and party-mediated. It is also inherently, historically gendered (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Significant informal power exists and shapes outcomes within Australia's political system. However, the exercise of this informal power is constrained by the same cultural norms and orthodoxies and trapped in incentive and reward structures that straightjacket new patterns or ways of thinking, doing and being from emerging.

The public, as well as many actors in the political system, are weary of this meta-narrative. And the way women are treated in politics and the

parliamentary system is a significant part of the overall problem of low trust in democracy (Baniamin & Jamil, 2022; Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019; Ulbig, 2007). A series of commissions and reports gave formal voice to what many parliamentarians felt and experienced, and what many Australians perceived as a system feature rather than a bug. Recent investigations of gender and of gender and parliamentary culture paint a clear message that the public expects that Australian parliaments have a role not only in legislating standards, but in role modelling them, particularly in relation to how power and gender play out in politics (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Broderick & Co., 2022; Sawer, 2021).

The Toxic Experience of Australian Parliaments for Women

Women in the political system are powerful agents of change despite the barriers they face (Benchakhan & Kulachai, 2023). What appears to be called for is a shift from egosystem leadership, characterised by power over and self-interest, to ecosystem leadership characterised by *power with* and a focus on the flourishing of all (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2018). Ecosystem leadership is based on relational power built through human connection and the intraconnectedness of shared interests, values and purpose (Heimans & Timms, 2018).

As an independent, not-for-profit think-and-do-tank Next25 is on a mission to improve the way Australia makes its future. We focus on understanding and addressing the complex, dynamic, deep-rooted contributing factors to Australia's biggest issues to accelerate efforts at the symptom level and unlock progress towards a flourishing future. Through our mixed gender Leadership Program, run with our partner organisation Corporate Evolution, we support parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to reconnect with their values and harness their power, not only as individuals within the political system, but also as individuals who can improve it.

In 2021, four New South Wales (NSW) women parliamentarians, all alumnae of Next25's mixed gender Leadership Program referred to above, representing Labor, Liberal, the Greens and an Independent, approached Next25 with an invitation. They had established unexpected, multipartisan, and sustained relationships within their system through the mixed-gender Leadership program. They wanted a program that would bring women together across parliament to address the gendered issues raised in the reports above, as well as those they had experienced themselves. They shared a mission to introduce what they collectively named the Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women program to transform women's experience and participation in the NSW State Parliament. These four women became the initiative's co-creators and enduring Steering Committee.

The Crack as an Opportunity

The slowly forming crack, which the women politicians could see, feel and sense, helped make a collective movement imaginable. It is as in the song Anthem that Leonard Cohen (1992) sings:

There is a crack, a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

The intention was not to condemn anyone, and the initiative was not directed against men. It was to create different patterns and codes for exercising power built by women inspired by their different ways of construing (Sanity), relating (Sanctuary) and enacting (Solidarity). The timing was not coincidental. They were sensing into something new that was wanting to emerge. The field was being recoded by the times, with notable women like Gillard and Ardern shifting the currents of the oceanic surface by challenging existing power structures and norms on the seabed.

Starting conditions matter. We defined our intention in the design stage of the Transforming Parliament for Women Program (the program suggested by the four alumni of the mixed-gender Leadership Program) as being the creation of a neutral, non-partisan “third space” (Bhabha, 1994). A breakthrough space to create the conditions for transformation. Partnering with Corporate Evolution, we used Scharmer’s Theory U (2018) to scaffold an awareness-based systems transformation program. The Theory U frame, with its five movements of *Co-initiation*, *Co-sensing*, *Presencing*, *Co-creating* and *Co-evolving*, has helped us to see ourselves and the wider system more clearly. It enabled us to nourish fertile relational “social soil” which is the quality of relationships and trust that are the invisible elements of social systems (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025), and to form the foundations for aligning purpose, values and actions to transform the system.

This collective intention created the conditions that drew in the people and elements of the system needed for the next stage of its evolution: an ecosystem that was more than the sum of its parts and more than human. The formation of an archipelago of islands of coherence was set in motion. As one MP said: “I was doubtful about the ability of a small group of diverse women to change the culture of parliament. Now I believe that we really can” (Participant B, Program 1, November 2022).

Since 2022, we have run three programs focused on NSW Parliament and count over one-third of sitting women in our alumnae community. In 2025, we expanded the program offerings with a nationwide iteration that brought together women from Federal, State and Local government, and a new program focused on the women of the West Australian State Parliament. We currently count 9% of all sitting women parliamentarians in Australia as alumnae. In each program the women politicians came together for two days in an in-person interactive workshop. In these two days they engaged in dialogue as well as

individual and collective reflection, to connect with purpose and vision to develop prototypes to transform the experience of power for women politicians.

This self-named “Collective” of women, the alumnae of the Transforming Parliament for Women programs, continues to meet regularly, across party lines, to share experiences and review their collective purpose and prototypes as described in the narrative to follow. This work is still in full flight, and what is written here captures the fragments, impressions and memories of what has taken shape so far as this archipelago of islands of coherence emerges. There is more to witness and experience. Writing this article is an artefact of that intention. It is a gift in thanks to the women parliamentarians who have co-created this innovation in praxis as a symbol of our gratitude.

Our Writing as Praxis

The anarchivite is not something “we” do. It is something that catches experience in the making. It is something that catches us in our own becoming. (Manning, n.d., para. 1)

The narrative presented below is not linear. It is offered in the mode of an *anarchive* as described by Erin Manning. It is a collection of traces that orient, activate, and carry potential as they unfold (Manning, cited in Conquet, 2025), rather than a static archive of past occurrences. We invite you to read the narrative we present as the emergent threads of an unfolding story. The whole process of unfolding and recounting this story has been an experience of learning by doing, melding theory and practice. It has involved innumerable cycles of action in the writing, reflecting, and refining of what we share here.

We feel deep humility. We did not write this piece, it wrote us. For us, gathering this anarchivite has been a labour of love. It has taken us untold hours of dialogue, co-creation, and listening to the resonances of the past, the sense of the now, and the call of the future. We moved with what the writing wanted to do—being pulled by more than just what we could think, by sitting with it, gaining insights through reflection, conversations, serendipitous encounters with people we spoke with, and material that presented itself into our field of attention to be known. Writing and rewriting over a period of nine months, with new flows, rhythms, phrases and movements emerging each time. It is still in movement.

In the main body of our narrative, we curate and distil the essence of three qualities: Sanity, Sanctuary and Solidarity, which have engendered coherence—a sense of unity and alignment among many parts, which bring the islands together as an archipelago in a sea of chaos.

Throughout this article, we weave in *social poetry* created by the three of us, curating *artefacts of remembering* in the form of quotations drawn from the women politicians who participated in the five cohorts of the Transforming Parliament for Women program. We have done this with particular care to

ensure the anonymity of the women by disidentifying any potentially attributable elements.

The poems were created by threading together direct quotes from women politicians, either as written public testimonials or captured by facilitators, with verbal consent, in the programs themselves, or at one of the many check-ins and workshops offered to alumnae in between. All verbal reflections captured were in response to structured questions on the shifts and impacts on (i) self, (ii) parliament, and (iii) system. We approached the poetry by clustering sentiments or sentences together where there was resonance in perspective or experience, and by aligning them with the respective islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, or Solidarity.

What results is a reflection of our own sense-making across programs and cohorts, shared in poetic form.

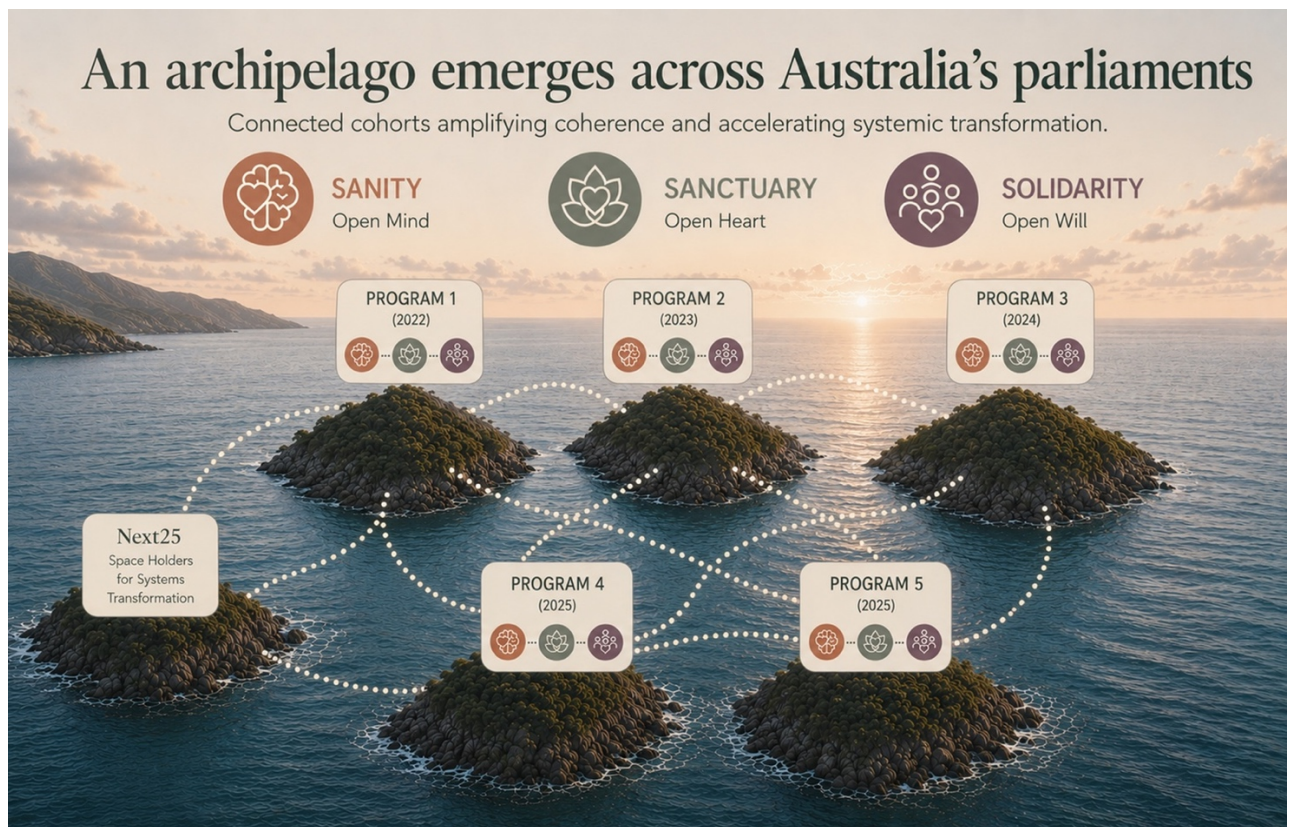


Figure 1: The archipelago of islands of coherence recoding power in Australian politics

Figure 1 summarises where we are with the evolution of the Transforming Parliament for Women Program as we have moved with the five cohorts of women politicians since the first program in 2022. It shows each cohort as an island in an emerging archipelago. We take you through the three movements of Sanity, Sanctuary and Solidarity initiated by the Transforming Parliament for Women Program as defining features of each of these islands in the main body of the story.

The three co-authors are also included in the archipelago. As space holders for this work, we are united in our passion for awareness-based systems change, which has shaped our response to the invitation to serve the women parliamentarians. Our island is where the women come to gather and enact rituals, ceremonies, storytelling, songs and dances as metaphors for what happens at the workshops, that are different to what they experience in parliament.

Sanity – Clear Seeing and Sense-making with Open Mind

In this dark time, the practice of creating islands of sanity is essential. (Wheatley, 2024, p.17)

By Sanity we mean sense-making with an open mind. This requires expanding our consciousness to create a shift in beliefs and ways of knowing which are our mental models (Senge, 1990), essential to be able to navigate through the sea of chaos. To hold the space for the emergence of a collective shift in the parliamentary system, our starting point was to meet the women parliamentarians where they were at: listening to their needs, challenges, frustrations, and hopes, both in the parliamentary system and at a personal level, through one-on-one pre-workshop interviews.

The women conducted stakeholder interviews before coming to the two-day Transforming Parliament Workshop to see and sense what was being asked of their leadership. Repeated themes emerged, regardless of their party or political position: the unequal distribution of power, feelings of being constrained and frustrated, a lack of safety online, in the chamber, amongst colleagues, and out in the world. The meaning-making started to move from the “me” to the “we” to the “all.”

Expanding Consciousness as the Ground for Awareness-based Systems Change

You could think of a social system with interiority, or, perhaps, a social system with a soul. (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 28)

Our level of conscious awareness, the lens through which we see and make meaning of the world, influences our intentions, attention and agency. It can keep us protected by the ego in the socialised mind, or it can develop to allow us to self-author our lives. Our consciousness can expand even further to allow us to step into our self-transforming, authentic and integral self (Barrett, 2013; Kegan, 1982; Wilber, 2024). The more expansive our consciousness is, the more able it is to hold an ecosystem worldview including all its complexities and entanglements.

A defining moment in each workshop was when there was the realisation that power in the existing system was shaped by a 1.0, input and control-based operating system, organised around centralised power (Scharmer & Kaufer,

2025). The transformation called for by the reviews and reports to improve trust in democracy by politicians' role modelling ways of doing so, as well as the transformation that the women parliamentarians desired, required regeneration-centric 4.0 operating system principles (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). They needed to create new ways of harnessing shared awareness and intentions for collective agency, impact and accountability to transform the experience of politics for women and in so doing, strengthen trust in democracy more broadly. This was a clear invitation for the women to step beyond the norm—the prevailing model of heroic leadership in a sea of chaos. They saw the opportunity to step back from the centre and move to the edges of the system: to create space for others by listening and being present, to harness emerging future potential when opportunities arose, while attending to the whole.

The message to the women by participating in the workshops was reflective of the question posed by Bayo Akómoláfé (2015): what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis? The work for the women parliamentarians lay in creating islands of coherence that operate from the integral or self-transforming mind. A mind that can hold complexity and paradox in the sphere of politics to transform the system in innovative ways.

We shared origin and personal stories, often of pain and injustice, and realised that we also play a part in creating the stories of our current reality. We invited the opportunity to apply to ourselves Viktor Frankl's powerful invitation in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) that when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.

We held space for personal shifts by inviting the women to see their upsets and challenges as opportunities to expand their awareness and make values and purpose-aligned choices. The collective shift was only possible because of the individual transformations and the courage it took to make these shifts in a shared space. It took vulnerability to let go of old stories that no longer served, such as feelings of being an impostor, disempowered, or being excluded. We could now collectively see a higher future possibility and be “at choice” of who we are being called to be, who we really are. These were sacred moments of stillness and authenticity. We perceive what emerged to be Sanity marked by presence and a sense of grounded inner peace:¹

¹ The poems shared here do not represent the perspective of any individual participant but rather are a compilation of individual quotes from participants during Next25-run programs and subsequent workshops, and in personal exchanges between the programs. These curated reflections come from seventeen of the women—Participants A to Q—across programs, workshops and check-ins from 2022 to 2025. The social poetry is not intended to serve as evidence of the program's results or impact but rather is a product of our sense-making as facilitators and authors.

The whole framework of thinking has given us a shared language.

I was able to identify all of my learned beliefs and behaviours that are holding back my potential. Then I could challenge them and find the pathway forward.

It allowed me to recognise the needs of self and how I can apply values and behaviours in a practical way to transform.

In order for me to be someone who creates change, I also have to create change for myself. The ability to get on the balcony and see the bigger picture.

A journey of evolution and transformation of self, which can be applied to all aspects of professional and personal life.

I now have the tools and the understanding to create powerful and impactful change personally and for the parliament and the people we serve.

From an awareness-based systems change lens, what is deeply personal is also deeply systemic (Senge et al., 2005). The more sense the women made of themselves as a system, the more sense they were able to make of the external social system of parliament in which they are embedded. As women, they could see everyone in parliament with more compassion and empathy as fellow humans on their own journeys.

The Power of Purpose

The ignition of the participants' highest purpose arose from alignment of their deepest values, from where they find their greatest fulfilment and where they felt called to something greater than themselves. We observed that connecting with personal purpose, which made conscious the life of meaning to which the women were already committed, led to powerful declarations of sovereignty:

I now have the tools and the understanding to create powerful and impactful change personally and for the parliament and the people we serve.

I initially felt like an imposter in parliament; there are so many smarter people, now I know I'm meant to be here.

I feel I can do anything; I've got this power I didn't have before, I'm not scared.

I don't need the cape, I am a superhero without it!

After listening to common themes in personal purposes such as making a difference, community, integrity, equality and love, the group sensed into the

question, “What is our Collective Purpose? What is the Work only we can do?”. This was the moment of true emergence, a moment where the recoding of power was birthed.

For the first group of women in 2022, the labour of co-creating a collective purpose that everyone was aligned with and inspired by took over an hour. By 2025, the labour lasted a mere ten minutes, culminating in a moment of stillness and reflection, when one woman shouted, “Sisterhood!” and was met with an instantaneous, intuitive “YES!” The response was unanimously “10” when the group was asked on a scale of 0–10 how aligned and inspired they were to this shared purpose. The emergence we felt came from “the field”, from 4th Person Knowing that transcends first, second and third person knowing (Pomeroy & Scharmer, 2024). It is knowing that emerges from the more than human, from the whole in service of the whole, when an unimagined possibility feels real.

The evolution of the shared purposes over time shows a shift, from trying to transform the existing system within existing institutional constraints, to harnessing the power of women to transform the system from a new perspective. There was fierce, almost warrior energy in the first group’s purpose, in their wish to disrupt and reshape parliament to transform the existing culture. The second group’s desire was to role model courageous, collective and visible action. The third aimed to transcend barriers and transform parliament through their presence and choice to commit to love, compassion and understanding. The fourth group aspired to foster sisterhood for the greater good. And the most recent group we worked with wished to leave a better parliament for future generations by developing a more joyful, equal, and kind culture.

We also see a field shift in the essence of the Purpose Statements, moving from transforming elements of the existing system to transformational intentions rooted in relational power for the well-being of all. As one alumna reflected:

I’m noticing that the last words (of the 2022 group’s purpose statement)—and then seeing that the words of the 2024 statement, were actually created from this space of those women being valued and empowered (through this program). I can really see the impact, particularly the everyday impacts that aren’t easily documented. (Participant D, Alumnae Workshop 1, October 2025)

Sanctuary – Co-creating a Safe and Loving Space with Open Heart

As the fires rage, we will not just need to fetch water, we will have to become water. We will not merely claim sanctuary, we will make sanctuary. (Akómoláfé, 2025, para. 2)

The workshops created islands as a space for us to make Sanctuary, spaces for respite where we could breathe deeply and just be. Spaces where we could be sovereign and rest in our shared humanity; where we could let down our armour, be vulnerable and feel safe to share our fears and pain, knowing that we held

each other with generosity of spirit. The women continue to hold spaces of sanctuary with and for each other in parliament and during check-ins and group coaching sessions offered by Next25 to alumnae after they complete the program.

A Shared and Safe Container

There are often looks of surprise as the women parliamentarians walk into the workshop space where the chairs are set up in a circle with no tables, no screens, only a few charts on the walls. The set-up of the space is the first facilitator in creating a sense of sanctuary.

We focus on creating the conditions to build a safe and respectful container at the beginning of the workshops. Together, we slow down to become more mindful and present. We take time to consider our comfort zones and set intentions to step into our brave and expansive learning zones. We practice stepping onto the balcony (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) of our inner experience so we can choose how we show up in the outer world. We codify and commit to shared agreements that support safety, with room to express and explore disagreements, and to make space for contradictions.

If you put on shoes that are too tight and walk out across an empty plain, you will not feel the freedom of the place unless you take off your shoes. (Rumi, translated by Barks, 1995, p. 122)

When it felt safe enough to take our shoes off, the ground was marked by deep respect, inclusivity, and a willingness to be authentic. We were able to stay with discomfort, to see and move past fears. We provide the space to create an inner sanctuary, a place to pause, reflect, be still, feel free and be resourced. It is a space where we felt, as women, we could take our shoes off.

Outside we are expected to be perfect, but here we can work on ourselves.

I recently had an incident that, if I hadn't taken this course, would have broken me...but because of the course, I had the strength and the resources to get through it.

It feels like a big shift to be able to observe my reactions on a bad day.

My biggest personal shift was patience and restraint; now I can put into practice calm and compassion.

Developing Deep Connection and Trust

We observed a sense among participants that we cannot do this alone and that the capacity to serve requires coming together with others who are motivated by the same sense of calling.

I have immense gratitude for being able to share this space with (another woman MP from an opposing party), who is a role model for what it means to be a compassionate leader.

The most insightful two days with incredible leaders from all levels of government, connecting and sharing ideas, while being vulnerable and creating a safe space for all.

I am starting to go down the U on a bad day at work, and I can go to my colleague and fellow program alumna down the hall, so we can coach each other

The workshops cultivated sanctuary on islands made up of fertile social soil (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025) nourished by the rich quality of connections and a deepening awareness of self and the wider ecosystem. The four core nutrients of the relational field brought and amplified by the women by engaging in dialogue as well as sharing their stories and experiences in parliament were empathy, the ability to feel with others; compassion, the desire to reduce suffering; trust, the belief in another's reliability, involvement, sincerity and competence; and love, unconditional positive regard for each other.

Making sanctuary together developed resilience marked by the strength and the capacity to stay together, figure things out, succeed, fail, forgive, laugh and persevere. Each island has a synchronised heartbeat, marked by safety and trust. Having the space to be kind, generous, vulnerable and authentic with each other led to the reflections that make up the compilation below

The feeling of operating in a space of love.

I came in sceptical, but I get it now.

The best thing is having a group I trust 100%.

It gives you the wisdom to understand who you are, who our colleagues are.

How together we can influence and change things for the better.

I use this space to connect at a deeper level.

These opportunities don't come around often.

The network that we've established is a safe place.

Sometimes you don't even get that in the party room.

The shared heartbeat led to deeper connection among the women, which stands out as one of the most valuable elements mentioned by three-quarters of the women in the program feedback. We observed that it was not superficial networking, but meaningful connections that make women "feel less alone" to create closeness:

We are so comfortable in each other's space.

I formed connections that are strong and helpful from a space of love.

Honesty and conversations are not affected by our politics.

Knowing that we are in a place of trust rather than political risk.

Formed friendships that will last beyond politics.

Freedom to Exercise Relational Power

Co-creating places of sanctuary allowed for the expansiveness of the ground from which power is exercised. Women have been able to show up with open hearts in bold ways, within the prevailing institutional systems and structures. An embodied demonstration of comfort with exercising relational power was when the Minister and Shadow Minister for the same portfolio drew looks of surprise from their parliamentary colleagues when seen sitting next to each other, having a deep and convivial conversation at the first women's dinner in the parliamentary dining room, organised as a prototype by the alumnae of the first program. This did not stop both women from holding each other to account across the floor when parliamentary business demanded it.

The women who participated in the workshops recoded power such that relational power became influential within polarised and hierarchical structures. A new possibility has emerged for the women. It is a recognition that relationships are foundational in all systems, as held by the physicist Niels Bohr (1948). There was recognition that individual agency indeed arises through intra-action and relationships enmeshed in social, political, and historical contexts (Barad, 2007). The power lay in making this visible in embodied ways.

Solidarity – Resisting Orthodoxies, Transforming Relations and Outcomes With Open Will

The women call themselves The Collective, highlighting the sense of belonging and solidarity they feel with fellow women who participate in the program. Solidarity as a sense of unity and a call to action despite differences, has arisen from the coherence that emerged from the shared experience of sanity and sanctuary by the women in the Transforming Parliament for Women workshops.

Overcoming Cynicism and Fear

Many women who join our programs are initially sceptical about the value of an approach to change where they connect with their “opponents” from other parties, those they often see as enemies. It is not surprising, in a system designed as the Australian political one is, where trust is fragile and hard to come by, that word of mouth and testimony from colleagues have been essential means of recruitment to the program. Recruitment is our most persistent challenge. Sometimes we encounter understandable cynicism and mistrust at the preparatory one-to-one meetings prior to the workshop. We listen deeply, with an open will and compassion, to set the conditions for trust.

Once they take the leap, the women see that they do not have to abandon their convictions, robust debate, or the contest of ideas central to democracy, to connect on a human level. We ask them, can you set down your assumptions about others—just for now—to make space for something new? This mindset has helped women in our workshops engage more openly.

Coherence as a sense of unity despite difference, arising from sanity and sanctuary, underpins the solidarity being demonstrated by the women politicians. Solidarity can coexist with disagreement and does not require uniformity in opinion. The women’s power does not reside in consensus; they will continue to debate one another over ideological differences. They will disagree, at times vehemently, in their roles as elected representatives. The quality of their shared holding environment as a Collective (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 305) will be tested, as it should be, in the arena of Parliament, as they renegotiate, evolve, and demonstrate their commitment to a different system of power and governance. It is their ability to stay engaged with each other and to remain in a relationship even in the face of conflict (Kahane, 2017) that encodes a new type of power through solidarity.

It’s transformational because it gives you the wisdom to understand who you are, who our colleagues are, and how together we can influence and change things for the better.

I developed profound relationships with women from across the parliament.

We now work closely together in various aspects of our parliamentary roles.

The biggest shift is what we have created because of our intentions.

The next generation of women (newly elected into NSW Parliament) came into a different space than we did.

Relational Power, Love and Agency

For their solidarity and relationships to affect the political system, to act and hold ground, both power and love are needed, in tension and in balance, as fundamental forces for positive change (Kahane, 2023). The women have cultivated and reintroduced love, grounding it in power and action. They have disrupted language as the dominant currency of power by embodying ways of showing up in brave spaces and creating community to enact relational governance and collective accountability.

The sanity of having shared mental models and the experience of sanctuary enabled new ways of exercising agency to influence policies, practices and resource flows, all conditions required for systems change (Kania et al., 2018). The prototypes designed by the women across programs are diverse and fall across a spectrum from visible to invisible—from formal, structural reforms to shifting cultural norms in interstitial places. They include reforms to the rules of the house (the “standing orders”), the establishment of formal mechanisms to support women MPs, including a women’s induction, and informal customs such as a regular women’s dinner on the first Wednesday of each sitting period, and making women’s achievements in politics more visible and celebrated through art and ritual.

Engaging with colleagues in their full humanness brings new awareness to speaking in an abusive manner or making personal attacks, as so many parliamentarians do, and as the system sanctions. Across cohorts we could see that the women have an informal “womanly agreement” to maintain relevance when their parliamentary debates become heated.

Women are no longer attacking each other in Question Time.

There are more men calling out bad behaviour.

We are pushing back, making the environment friendlier.

We’re not going to mould to the institution anymore.

The biggest change for women has been that I came into a parliament that was so much more inviting than parliaments before.

Every time we bring new people in, we change the system.

And we can only see that with perspective.

Group chats, maintained by The Collective, provide space for women to share challenges and triumphs with each other and to share messages of solidarity or helpful tips with ease. They have formed intentional yet informal practices of friendship and coffee catchups, and they have paired up for mentor walks around parliament during sitting weeks, when their connection can be witnessed by colleagues. They are taking up space and making the invisible visible.

Through alumnae, we have heard of scenarios in which they have been able to connect across party lines, behind closed doors, to pre-negotiate outcomes in the chamber on contested issues. In these instances, the trust they have built through participation in our program has helped avoid critical issues from failing to progress through parliament, as they fall victim to the zero-sum, performative, and win-at-all-costs traps of parliamentary debate.

The biggest Impact on the ecosystem is the underlying level of trust among alumnae of the program, regardless of party. I ran into a colleague from another party in the corridors outside the chamber. I had a formal motion, and she spoke to me about some small amendments her party was asking her to raise to block the motion, so we were able to resolve it in one conversation, and there was no need to formally oppose in the chamber. (Participant A, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

Culture Shifts

There has been a noticeable improvement in parliament's culture and collegiality, with alumnae advocating for and implementing more inclusive practices. Women who entered the NSW Parliament after the 2023 election and were unaware of the original Steering Committee and program for women reported a friendly, cross-party welcome from incumbent women in the NSW Parliament—a marked difference from those who came before them.

Transformation is ongoing at individual, organisational and system-wide levels, although not necessarily in a linear manner. The feedback and reverberations are messy, unpredictable, and multidirectional. Each time we meet with women parliamentarians, whether they are new to a program or long-term alumnae, we encounter a new reality.

In one of our alumnae workshops, we brought together women from across four program iterations, spanning different states and levels of government. Despite these women not having experienced the program together and, in most cases, not knowing each other, they commented on the instant trust and solidarity they felt as they entered the room.

In this workshop, the women reflected that change cannot start where power is most entrenched. Instead, it emerges through connection, creativity, and intention. Their vision for the alumnae network focuses on scaling connection opportunities (mentoring, cross-parliamentary relationships), broadening the sisterhood across party lines and communities, creating collective accountability, and amplifying stories of change. Some members of one group concluded, after a 3D mapping exercise, that the small changes that will make the biggest impact are simple but radical. They reflected that the prevailing perception is that women's ideas are feathery or wispy. That, in fact, by doing this work, they are going to change the experience and therefore outcomes of

sitting days and other parliamentary practices. (Participants C, F, G, J, Q, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

Power is being recoded by women politicians through the force of the minor gesture, the micro-movements that activate a shift in tone, a difference in quality (Manning, 2023). As Manning says in her digital essay, “a minor key is always interlaced with major keys – the minor works the major from within. (...) It has a mobility not given to the major, (...) and in the resonances that are awakened, potential for difference looms” (Manning, 2023, Sections 2-4).

We have gathered the collective words of many alumnae in social poetry to reflect the enactment of their power and solidarity. We offer it as a moment of reflective pause in the journey that is still unfolding.

Power, Recoded in a Minor Key

We needed this 25, maybe 30 years ago

I felt like an imposter in parliament

So many smarter people

Feel your back is against the wall

So busy,

No time to do this.

There has been talk, but no action.

Frustrated.

I came in sceptical.

I don't need the cape

Feeling freer, safe space to be expansive

I feel empowered, immense gratitude

My quiet core of self-assuredness

More whole and comfortable

Able to contribute without anxiety.

There has been a shift and change in the power dynamics
I see women answering questions in question time with new
confidence
More powerful than I expected
I can do anything; I've got this power I didn't have before
Now I know I'm meant to be here.
Better able to delve into the uncomfortableness
Experiencing joy in my work
Women are standing up.

A growing trust that people are in it for the right reasons,
An active desire to understand each other before anything else.
Transformation is needed if we are to have a parliament
reflective of our community.
The feeling of operating in a space of love.
I want to help other women in parliament feel the same.
The greatest possibility is legacy
Identifying other women who could go on to be MPs and sharing
these skills with them.
Space to work on the longer-term vision of making the parliament
a better place
Not just for women, but for everyone.

As Above, So Below

Before we conclude, we would like to acknowledge our place as an island in the emerging archipelago as space holders for this work. We are three women, each with very different professional and life journeys. The three of us come to this work from different places.

Our shared intention to hold space for unimagined possibilities to emerge has held more transformative power than any fear we have felt. Our responsibility is to ensure that the space and activities are safe and nurturing. Part of this requires us to provide gentle hospice for that which stands in the way

of creating space for new ways of knowing, being and doing to emerge. We shared our own personal stories of pain, fears and vulnerability in the workshops. We were co-travellers in the journey of making meaning of our lives and work with open minds, open hearts and open will. This helped to create relational attunement and the sense that we were on the same transformational journey as the women.

We live this work and cannot do it without honouring the wisdom of the principle of “as above, so below.” Being mindful and intentional about and paying attention to our individual and collective presence was critical for dealing with any discomfort and tension that arose in the room, for both the women parliamentarians and us, as we stepped into uncharted territory. We were particularly aware of this at the start of the first workshop.

We trust and support each other when we have moment-to-moment upsets during the journey to see them as setups for our growth and learning, which is a core practice and skill that we include in the workshops. It is interesting that none of us can remember a large or significant upset in our journey together with the women politicians when we looked back when writing this paper. What we do remember are moments of awe for the courage, resilience and commitment that the women politicians embody.

We feel very humbled and honoured to do this work. Our part is also noted as a score in a minor key (Manning, 2016) as we observe the women MPs’ work is. Our hope is that this work seeds forward even more unimagined possibilities for recoding power in politics.

Where to From Here?

It is clear the program depends on sustained engagement and opportunities to embed mindsets, connections, and actions alongside the ongoing pressures and shifts of political life. Systems transformation is a long game, and the impacts of creating the conditions for recoded power to transform parliaments and political cultures from the inside will not be fully observable for some time. Yet, shifts in women’s day-to-day experience are already rippling outward into the wider system. The women of the original NSW program created a safe, authorised foundation for future ones, for many who will never meet them. These pioneers did not just change outcomes; they changed the field, so those who follow no longer need to start where they did.

We are encouraged by one of the alumnae who recently said: *“I have a renewed sense of shared purpose and commitment. I would love to see this transform and extend to other jurisdictions, and globally”* (Participant D, Alumnae Workshop 1, October, 2025). We, the co-authors and the collective of women, strongly hold this intention.

And so, new power courses out beyond the walls of parliament, strengthening the currents, reaching new islands.

The Coda

Rather than a summary, we leave you with the red thread of our story captured in a poem that came through Renu in one of her early morning reveries while writing this piece.

From Rupture to Rapture

Ruptures opening bold cracks for possibilities
Subtle shifts created in interstitial spaces
Inviting the potential for human connection
To recode power beyond real and imagined boundaries.

The in-breath drawing in what is
Abiding in the pause, making sanctuary
Opening minds, hearts and will collectively
For the out breath to enliven unknown possibility.

Fractals of the whole holding space for it all,
Illuminated with feminine presence, generosity and grace
To face fear and darkness alone and together
For without it there is no light.

Sensing, feeling and stepping in with choice
Savouring the preciousness of our shared humanity
To abide in the rapture of knowing love is power
Generative, expansive and in service of the whole.

About the Authors

Chloë

My life and work reflect a movement from the mountains to the sea: a kind of kingdom crossing. Born on the lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina and the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, in Canada, and raised in Sydney, Australia, I live, work, and raise my sons on the lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people. My earliest memories of noticing and caring about the diversity of human experience are of accompanying my mother to the homes of recently arrived women refugees and asylum seekers, so she could teach them English and support their transition to Australian life. My nearly two decades of work share a common thread of celebrating the beauty and complexity of the world and creating conditions for curiosity and connection across difference. It is a privilege to steward this work and, alongside the women, pursue the question that underlies all of it: how change happens.

Renu

I am a Nair woman hailing from Kerala in South India, grateful to call Boorloo (Perth), on Wadhjuk Noongar Boodja in Western Australia as home for most of my life. My personal calling to this work is influenced by my matriarchal Nair heritage and the legacy that I would like to leave as the mother of three daughters and a grandmother to a feisty granddaughter. I feel blessed to work with the women Parliamentarians who also hold my passion to make space for the invisible to be made visible and the unspoken to be spoken in service of the flourishing of all. It is a joy to see insights and learnings from 40 years of holding space for awareness-based leadership that transforms systems being brought to life so powerfully by women in Next25's Transforming Parliament for Women initiative.

Lisa

Born in Chicago, as the youngest of four girls, I felt I needed to chart my own path, moving to Boston, then UK for 10 years, before moving to Australia 30 years ago. My career in leadership transformation began 25 years ago, initiated by my own wake-up call. Similar to many women, becoming a workaholic trying to be the perfect wife, mother, leader, and friend. The person I had not nurtured, or indeed, truly understood was myself. The red thread that has run through my life is having a new idea and manifesting it into form. What I came to believe deeply is that anything is possible, that we create our own reality. It takes passion, commitment and deep belief in a meaningful purpose. This is the resonance with the women parliamentarians, that collectively, through shifting consciousness, we can change the world.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge our immense gratitude for the contribution of Megan Seneque (Associate Editor) and Fiona McKenzie (Contributing Editor) of this journal for their valuable feedback and support. It helped us sharpen our focus on how the women parliamentarians are recoding power within the existing institutional system and gave us the confidence to step into our writing as innovation in praxis.

Funding Statement

While no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors was received to support the writing of this paper, we gratefully acknowledge that our work together has been supported by funding to Next25 from The Wright Burt Foundation, The Bell Family Foundation, and Jibb Foundation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Whilst this reflective practitioner inquiry did not require formal ethics review, we confirm that all co-authors of our submitted article followed ethical principles in publishing. The contributions presented here are a mix of public testimonials and reflections shared with informed consent and protected by the confidentiality protocols integral to the program's design, including those that preserve participants' anonymity.

AI Statement

The authors used ChatGPT to assist in creating the image for Figure 1. The authors confirm that all content has been verified by them.

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