The decision by the Tanami Tennis Club to review its election policies and processes has encouraged lawyer and Board member, Laura Williamson, to write a submission. She argues passionately that female representation on the Tennis Club Board should be increased to 50%, reflecting the proportion of women members in the club. She states that a “proactive quota policy” should be adopted to bring this change about over a period of three years. Longstanding Board member Brian Muldoon, in a verbal riposte, has roundly rejected the proposal, characterizing it as a “shrill submission” with “crazy ideas”.

With the benefit of tertiary education and legal experience behind her, Williamson delivers a submission strategically organized to discredit the present Board and to present the change she argues for as a just and timely reform. Williamson’s submission has two audiences: the current Board and also the other members of the club. She writes as a proud member, reviewing the club’s sporting success “spanning more than six decades”. Her claim that the club has always supported its female members is given credence by quoting the glowing testimony of two women players who are international stars, who “attribute their success to their beginnings at Tanami Tennis Club”. This creates a sense of authority for her.

Williamson assumes the role of spokesperson for all members and in ironic and precise understatement (“it is puzzling that some members...”) she delivers her case. She ‘discloses’ the Board’s recalcitrance in neglecting to adopt full democratic representation for women members. Holding the Board members to account, but not accusing them directly, she uses the passive voice (“vacancies have been filled”) to lay out the bald ‘facts’ before the Board, presenting her ‘facts’ as unarguable, letting them speak for themselves without any personal assertions from her. With phrases like the peremptory “I don’t have to remind you” and “it makes absolute sense”, delivered in a commanding tone, she presents equal democratic representation for women as a natural extension of the club’s values. She further asserts that the adoption of a quota policy is a logical and inevitable solution to obvious injustice.

Williamson argues for the benefits of having women as members, as she endorses in ringing tones the valuable qualities women can bring to the Board, some of which they have developed from dealing with the injustices of men. In sentences such as “Women are not susceptible to ‘group think’” she allows the reader to grasp by implication her conviction that the present Board is morally and professionally inadequate. In these next paragraphs Williamson demonstrates her credentials as an informed feminist, aware of the larger social implications of this issue. She critiques the Board’s present arrangements where “vacancies have been filled by ‘mates’”. She begins to explore the issues around setting quotas. Continuing to avoid direct personal attack, she courteously states an argument against quotas and then contemptuously dismisses it with the words “tired”, and “simplistic”, words that she intends the reader to absorb as indirect criticisms of the Board members. Her use of the term “gender inequity” and her reference to the
consequences of Government policy change many years ago in Norway, give her the authority to express the impatience revealed in “Someone has to force the issue”.

Williamson has remained focused on the issue as she sees it - the need to change. Having delivered her argument she addresses the Board members directly for the first time, courteously appealing to them for cooperation, becoming one of them and urging them to rise above the status quo and grasp the “opportunity to be leaders”.

Williamson’s submission has an implied audience wider than the Board and she sees the club issue of democratic representation in the context of the wider international movement to empower women. In contrast, Brian Muldoon defines the issue as a club issue only and addresses only the members of the Board.

Muldoon does not engage in a detailed, comprehensive way with Williamson’s submission but instead attempts to redefine the debate in his own terms. Muldoon signals immediately that he is not swept away by the force and substance of Williamson’s submission, but that rather he is angered by it, casting doubt on Williamson’s capacity to enter the discussion. Muldoon makes the argument personal. With a contemptuous rhetorical question couched in language designed to offend “Is this quota proposal political correctness gone mad?”, and an appeal to common sense that aims to sanctify the status quo “Surely the best person for the job is the one we should choose”, he casts doubt on Williamson’s credibility and mental capacity using insulting language to dismiss her submission out of hand. Interpreting Williamson’s complex submission as the demand of a “frenzied feminist”, Muldoon rejects the idea of quotas as “a token solution to a complex problem” but refrains from stating what that complex problem is. He omits to mention the larger social and moral issue of gender inequity that is the core of Williamson’s argument.

Muldoon narrows the scope of the discussion to enable him to speak from his own experience where he cannot be challenged. He does not respond to the empirical evidence offered by Williamson. Instead, the statement “as far as I’m aware there is no actual empirical evidence that proves quota systems work”, asks to be taken as authoritative. His tale of failure at the attempted imposition of quotas on business boards is meant to close the discussion on quotas.

Muldoon launches into a confident defense of the present Board’s treatment of women members. While his language suggests he sees women as a group distinct from the main membership, his tone suggests he is expressing good will. His opinion that the valuing of “female members” is a forward-looking policy is expressed with note of pride. His invitation to his audience to check the Honor Roll with its list of winners of undifferentiated gender indicates how confident he is that everyone will be able to read the Roll as he does – that everyone will know personally who the winners are. His breezy tone suggests he is convinced that the mention of the Honor Roll has clinched his argument.

Never engaging with the substance of Williamson’s argument, or with her pointed criticisms he completely dismisses her submission, concluding by returning to his ‘common sense’ understanding of how vacancies should be filled, i.e., “the person best suited for that position, regardless of gender”. He ends his speech with a grandiose, defiant flourish.