

WOMEN'S EQUALITY: Is it really the End?

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Friends

A year ago, I published a book called *The End of Equality*. It surprised a lot of people many of whom said to me they thought it was a subject that

was a bit old-fashioned, that we had “been there, done that” when it came to women, that we had won all the battles and what could there possibly be to write about? I have spent most of the past year traveling round Australia answering these questions to a wide variety of audiences.

I would like to do so again today but also to add a new element, and that is what I regard as a new and extremely serious threat to women’s equality and women’s well-being that has emerged in recent weeks. I will come to this. First, let me outline for you my basic argument.

Thirty years ago we began a revolution in this country. It was a revolution that recognized the legal, social and attitudinal barriers to women achieving equality of opportunity and as it progressed – as these barriers were ripped away – I doubt if anyone in this country escaped the ramifications.

We were all affected. Some of us were pioneers and agents in this revolution – I certainly was myself. Others were beneficiaries, directly or indirectly, as educational opportunities widened, jobs that women once were not allowed to do became open, our incomes improved so that we had at least the possibility of economic autonomy *and* we had the means to control our fertility.

This opening up of opportunities benefited women of all ages and virtually all sectors of society. There really *was* a revolution in the way we women saw ourselves – and in how we expected to be seen and to be treated.

Moreover, these advances not only changed women, they also changed men. And they changed relations between women and men – or they should have, because women’s lives don’t change so comprehensively without impacting on men’s.

For thirty years we have seen progress towards equality – or so we assumed. If I can speak for myself, I had always been optimistic, even confident, that this was a revolution that was unstoppable and irreversible.

So it came as quite a shock to me to discover a year or so ago that in fact things were not as they should be, and that we had not merely stalled on our road to equality but that we were actually starting to go backwards.

This might seem hard to believe when all around us are visible signs of women’s accomplishments – we see women in all kinds of great jobs, still breaking all sorts of barriers, doing amazing things. Yet you don’t have

to delve very far beneath the surface to discover that things are not so rosy. In fact, you could describe them as terrible, even shocking.

We cannot ignore the facts of our regression. Despite appearances to the contrary, the proportion of women in full-time employment has not increased in thirty years. More Australian women work part-time than at any time in our past, and more than in any other country in the industrialised world. In a great many cases this is not from choice – they'd rather have full-time jobs – but because of the lack of childcare and other support for working mothers. As a consequence of working fewer hours most women do not earn enough money to support themselves.

Equal pay is a myth. Women are earning less, in relation to men, than they did a decade ago. Women's total average weekly earnings are just 65 per cent of men's.

In August this year women were earning \$301 a week less than men, an annual gap of \$15,600. In 1996 the gap was \$229.10 per week. Women are falling further and further behind when it comes to earnings.

Even graduates are affected. Despite having paid the same fees and studied the same subjects, women graduates earn less. The Law Society of NSW calculated that in 2003 the mean income for men with less than a year's experience since admission was \$52,600. For women it was \$44,000.

At the same time, the number of women totally dependent on welfare has increased to an unprecedented degree.

There are now almost one and a half times as many female-headed sole parent families with children than there were at the beginning of the 1990s and two-thirds of them are totally reliant on government support. These families receive only about half the income of families with two parents where the women are more likely to be in the workforce, even if only part time.

There are now more divorced women aged over 60 than there are widows and many of these women have limited means of support due to lack of superannuation and not yet being eligible for the age pension (due to the phase in of equal retirement and qualifying ages for men and women). As a result of all these factors, there are more women living at the economic margin, or in actual poverty, than ever before.

Many of the services women need in order to be able to participate equally in society, such as childcare, simply are neither adequate nor affordable.

There is, in fact, a childcare crisis in this country, with estimates of a shortfall of as many as quarter of a million places needed to meet the demand; in addition, the cost of care exceeds the means of all but the most well-off of parents.

Even when you can get a place, the cost is so great that it often becomes the determinant of whether or not a woman continues to hold down a job. In Sydney and Melbourne an average place costs \$350 a week yet the maximum government assistance is \$140.50 a week – and to qualify for that your combined family income cannot exceed \$32,485 a year.

The average payment in 2003 of the Child Care Benefit, the government's only assistance for childcare, was just \$28.12 per week.

For many parents and, especially, for women who want employment, this crisis in childcare is a constant source of anxiety and even panic.

Women have precious little power in Australia in the early 21st century.

When we look at the powerful public and commercial institutions of our society, we see that their top ranks remain closed to all but a tiny fraction of women. The numbers are rising slightly which is to be welcomed but while they hover at 10.2 per cent of all executive manager positions of our major companies there is not a lot to celebrate. There is just one CEO of a top company who is female – Gail Kelly of St. George Bank – and only 8.6 per cent of the directors of Australia's top 200 companies in 2004 are women.

When it comes to the legal profession, especially the courts, the picture is not much better.

Although in some states more than twenty per cent of the Supreme Court judges are women (in Queensland it is 29 per cent and in Western Australia 22 per cent) in Tasmania and the ACT there are none. As I am sure you are all aware, NSW is the third worst when it comes to women judges. There are only 5 women on this state's Supreme Court, just 10.6 per cent of the total. It is of course a big court.

At the federal level, the higher you go, the fewer the women. Women make up 33 per cent of Family Court judges, but only 13 per cent of Federal Court judges and there are no women at all on the High Court.

The federal Attorney-General, Phillip Ruddock, said last week that he did not see the need to appoint a woman to the High Court.

When it comes to the NSW Bar, things are looking up if the recent Bar elections are any guide. It was great to learn that women were elected to 10 of the 21 council positions. Unfortunately, those results do not mirror the overall position of women at the Bar. Currently, only 296 of New South Wales' 2099 barristers are women. There is, as you all know, a further discrepancy when it comes to female Senior Counsel. According to a recent edition of *Bar News* only 3 per cent of women barristers hold silk – a ratio that has not changed since 1998 – whereas overall, 15 per cent of barristers hold silk. (These figures do not take into account the 2004 appointments but I do not believe these would have changed the overall picture much if at all.)

There has been a large increase in the number of women in state and federal parliaments – there are now 59 women in federal parliament, one fewer than prior to October 9, and this is approximately 26 per cent of the total.

But this increase in numbers has not been matched by a corresponding increase in their being appointed to leadership positions.

Today the Northern Territory, with Clare Martin as Chief Minister, is the only part of Australia with a woman political leader. Twelve years ago there were two women state premiers. There have been none since Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence left their positions.

The increase in the number of women parliamentarians has not been accompanied by any noticeable improvement in the protection of women's entitlements; indeed, the decline in women's economic well-being and the roll-back in women's rights has been taking place while the numbers of women entering parliament soared. I will return to this point.

Then there's the collateral damage. Women's physical integrity and well being continues to be undermined by a huge and seemingly increasing incidence of sexual and domestic violence.

Although we do not often link the subject of violence to the question of equality of opportunity for women, I feel it is high time we did.

The last federal government survey on violence against women, in 1996, reported that 1.1 million Australian women had experienced some form of violence in a domestic relationship. This was equivalent to 23 per cent of all women who had ever been married or in a de facto relationship. Children witnessed the violence in almost half a million

cases. Almost one-third of these women reported that violence had occurred during a pregnancy, and 14 per cent of these women said the violence had been inflicted for the first time when they were pregnant.

Large numbers of Australian women's lives are disrupted or even destroyed by such violence. Often this violence requires them to flee from the violent partner and thus become homeless. Yet what are we as a society doing about this? Not much. We don't even know the full extent of the violence. There are no plans to repeat this survey and thus give us comparable data over a specified time period. We have no national data whatsoever on domestic violence and most states do not publish what information they have.

We do, however, have a national database on stolen vehicles, and it is updated *four times a day*. In mid-2000 it was linked to the New South Wales REVS (Register of Encumbered Vehicles) system for the first time, a move the NSW Minister for Fair Trading said would protect car buyers from unwittingly buying stolen vehicles. NSW police have details of more than 465,000 vehicles. We live in a country that cares more about stolen cars than it does about bashed and violated women.

Last year, according to ABS data, 18,000 Australian women reported to police that they had been sexually assaulted. This was a large increase on the previous year's reporting but, we know from crime studies, it represents the mere tip of the iceberg as most such assaults go unreported. Using the formula for under-reporting adopted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, the actual number of women sexually assaulted that year was more like 120,000 - about 328 a day.

It seems that even this figure might be an under-estimate. You will have seen in yesterday's *Sun-Herald* a report that the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research will release figures this week showing that in NSW alone 11,000 sexual assaults were reported to police in the year to June 2004. This was a marked increase on the 9,151 of the previous year.

If the figures are that high for NSW, it makes you wonder what's going on in the rest of the country.

In 1966, the total number of rapes reported to police in this country was 251; in 1972 it had risen to 544. What is happening to us that over the course of 40 years the number of sexual assaults perpetrated on Australian women can rise to such levels. It can't all be explained away by the different definitions for "rape" and "sexual assault".

How is it that in 2003 more than 18,00 women in Australia reported a sexual assault to police, and that this figure represented a 10 per cent increase over the previous year, which in turn was 9 per cent greater than the year before? Could we have imagined even ten years ago that conviction rates for rape and other forms of sexual assault would be declining? This is something that has been documented by the Victorian Law Reform Commission but it may be true of NSW as well. There were just 247 convictions for sexual assault in the past year.

This is another area where we are going backwards.

For all the reasons I have just outlined, I say we have reached the end of equality.

Although we never achieved full equality of opportunity between women and men in Australia, we did for a couple of decades at least have it as a national goal. It was up there on the political agenda and no prime minister, however conservative he – and the leaders were all, and still are, men – would have dared challenge its right to be there.

And, we were making progress. We could report encouraging statistics on women in the workforce, women's earnings, women's appointments to top jobs. This is no longer the case.

We have stopped even having the national conversation about women's entitlements and women's rights. Instead, all the talk is of families, or mothers, and women, especially women who *are* mothers, are left to feel that that's the only part of their lives that is held in any esteem.

There is another concept I want to introduce today and that is what I call the breeding creed. This is the philosophy of procreation advocated by the federal government and other powerful agents in Australia who are panicking about our declining birth rate. That rate has fallen well below what is needed to reproduce ourselves, so that we now need to rely on immigration to increase our population.

The brunt of government policy towards women for at least the last eight years has been designed to reverse this decline by making it more difficult for women to hold jobs, even part time jobs, *and* have children. The hope has been, apparently, that women would just give up any career aspirations and decide to stay home and have children.

I was shocked to discover just how much federal government policy in employment, taxation, family payments and child care has been manipulated to penalise women with children who want to work, just as I can still scarcely believe that a prime minister in the 21st century would come up with a policy as cruel and regressive as the Baby Bonus.

This policy has now fortunately been abolished but the thinking that lay behind it has not. We must remember that while that policy masqueraded as a fertility policy, a return of taxes paid by previously employed women when they had a baby, it was in fact an employment policy.

A fertility policy would have provided financial rewards for each baby, this one rewarded only the first – and to qualify for the full benefit, a woman had to stay out of employment for five full years.

I think we all know how hard it is to retain skills, qualifications and confidence in oneself after a five-year absence from employment. Here is ideology at work, an ideology that wants women to be breeders before they are anything else. Perhaps to the exclusion of anything else.

It is the breeding creed that has led to the end of equality. Instead of fostering a society where women can be mothers *and* be employed – and thus have an identity, not to mention an income, that is separate from their maternal status – the federal government has done everything in its power to impose on women who want to have children only one choice: that fulltime motherhood.

As a society, we should be acknowledging the fears many woman have when they leave their jobs to have a baby – and helping these women to maintain their skills and their feeling of attachment to the workforce. One way to do this, of course, would be to have a national scheme of paid maternity leave. Such a scheme acknowledges that women are “on leave” from their jobs. They have not been exiled permanently from the world of employment – which is what many women feel these days when they leave their jobs to have a baby.

For women in their late 20s or early 30s the crunch really comes when their biological clock starts to collide with their career path. This is the age when most women who are going to have children start to plan for motherhood. Yet more and more women, especially those with higher education and well-paying jobs, are recognising the high price demanded of them when they become mothers, and it is giving many of them pause for thought.

Around 28 per cent of young women today will not have children at all and they are most likely to be the well-educated, high earning ones who have so much to lose. It is women aged 30 and over with a university degree who have the lowest birth rate.

Most women start out wanting and intending to have children. Why do we make it so hard for them? If we really worried about the birth rate wouldn't we be making it as easy as possible?

That would mean acknowledging, and creating policies that facilitate, the fact that most women want to continue to have an economic life as well as have babies. Instead we try to force women into a strait-jacket - or what I prefer to call a "white picket prison".

The birth rate has continued to fall since the breeding creed became official policy, which suggests that it is ineffective and even counter-productive. And it is an illogical - as well as an ideological - approach.

Women need to be beware, however, that unless we can change the thinking of our political leaders, even more coercive measures might be in store for them.

Just in case you think I am exaggerating, I invite you to consider the political firestorm that is currently raging about abortion. In just the past few weeks we have heard the following:

- The federal health Minister Tony Abbott has asked "Do we really think 100,000 abortions a year is a good thing?" and has claimed that women are being "railroaded" into abortion by parents, husbands, boyfriends and "the culture of convenience"
- The deputy prime minister, John Anderson, has called for a debate "to re-examine our understanding of medical science and the law".
- The South Australian Liberal MP Christopher Pyne has asserted that in one wing of hospitals 24 week old fetuses are being aborted while in another wing, 23 week old babies are being nurtured in neo-natal units; he has called for a total ban of abortions beyond 21 weeks and questioned the need for terminations at all
- Tasmanian Liberal Senator Eric Abetz has said he opposes public subsidies for terminations via Medicare
- Queensland Senator-elect, and the man who gave John Howard control of the Senate, Barney Joyce said he wanted an end to public funding of abortion as the price for his vote to privatize Telstra
- The Governor-General, Michael Jeffery, has called for the number of abortions to be reduced
- Only one woman, Veterans Affairs Minister De-Anne Kelly has joined in the call for a limit on abortions; at the weekend she said "The death of 100,000 Australians is a national loss and tragedy" and argued that the loss of "these potential young Australians" was a problem for our ageing society.

If you don't think this cacophony adds up to a determined political assault on women's reproductive freedom then you are being very naïve. This is the breeding creed at full roar. And this is unprecedented.

We have never had a federal health Minister crusade against a legal medical procedure in this fashion before. We have never had a deputy Prime Minister and the Governor General jump in as well.

And are they being curbed? Hardly. A few women Liberal MPs have stood up for women's right to choose, which is necessary and about time, but where are the male political heavyweights. I don't find it all reassuring that the treasurer has jumped in merely to remind people that abortion law is a state matter.

Coming from the man who on the night he announced a \$3,000 "Baby bribe" as a key part of his budget told women to go home and "have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country", I hardly think this constitutes a rebuttal of what his colleagues are up to.

For the first week or so of the debate, the prime minister was conspicuously silent. He finally intervened two weeks ago but only to call for a calm debate. This was ambiguous; it was by no means clear that he was trying to prevent this further assault on women's reproductive rights.

The weekend before last, Mr Howard adopted a stronger position. He said there would be no parliamentary inquiry into abortion and that there would be "no government sponsored" changes to the law. He seemed to be trying to quell the debate.

However it is going to be very difficult to put this particular genie back into the bottle. The debate has begun and already it is pretty hysterical. It is probably too late to stop it - and I am not even sure that the Prime Minister wants to.

Although Canberra journalists such as Michelle Grattan and Laurie Oakes are being briefed that the Prime Minister is too politically astute to want to stir up this issue, I am pretty suspicious about all this. It is not beyond imagination that Tony Abbott is testing the waters, seeing which way the wind might blow and giving the prime minister room to move in case it looks politically tricky for him. Last week in federal parliament Mr Abbott refused to guarantee that he was not using his position as federal health minister to push this issue. If Mr Howard really wanted to quell the issue, he would sack Tony Abbott for abusing his position as Minister for Health.

Let's be very clear as to what it is about.

Tony Abbott and his cronies want to force women back to the bad old days of safe abortion being a prerogative of the rich. They don't of course have the power to change the law and ban abortion, except in the ACT and the Northern Territory, but they do have the power to make abortion expensive by removing the Medicare rebate.

They also have a broader and more ambitious agenda. In saying they want to have a debate, they are in fact trying to get the states to reexamine their laws. They say they want to have "a debate" on the issue; in reality they want to generate anxiety and disgust by concentrating on the issue of late-term abortions rather than on the reality of abortion in Australia today.

Tony Abbott says there are 100,000 abortions performed in Australia today.

I have challenged him to back up this figure, and he has since admitted that it is a "guesstimate". In fact, he made the number up. There are no national statistics kept so there is no way of knowing. He pulled a nice easy to remember round number out of the air and in a few short weeks that number has been treated as fact. Even people who oppose Mr Abbott are using this figure as the benchmark.

The reality is that Medicare rebates were paid for 73,191 terminations in the twelve months to June 2004. Not all of these were abortions; some were medically required procedures following miscarriage or done for gynecological reasons. The fact is we don't know how many abortions are performed in Australia.

All we know is what happens in South Australia, the only state that publishes data on pregnancy terminations. And, according to that data, the number of abortions is declining.

It was reported in the press that in 2003 there were 5214 abortions performed, down from 5463 in 2002 and 5572 in 2001. The same statistics show that less than one per cent of these terminations took place after 20 weeks.

The issue of late-term abortions being a national scandal is a total furphy but, if the experience of the United States is anything to go by, it will be used as an emotional weapon to distort the facts and try to muddy the debate.

Again, based on what we know from South Australia it seems that the majority of abortions are sought by women who are married or in a relationship, many of whom already have children. It seems that many

women are terminating pregnancies simply because they can't afford to have another baby.

If we were serious about helping women to have babies, we would be looking at a far wider policy palette than just the Medicare rebate. We would be looking at the range of issues I have already raised: access to full-time employment, equal pay, child care, maternity leave.

Instead of advocating a breeding creed, we would be listening to what women themselves say they want: lives that encompass a range of things – marriage, children, careers, travel and some time for themselves. But in pursuing these, they are paying a high price – emotional, financial and even physical – because our society has become one that penalizes women who want to be equal.

I regard this new threat to women's equality as extremely serious. Women everywhere, and especially our women MPs, and the men who agree with them have to stand up and be counted on this one. If we don't stop them now, the notion of women's equality will become a fleeting historical memory, something that occurred for a few halcyon years in the late 20th century but which was overturned by ruthless zealots in the 21st.

It is a history I hope never to read, let alone live through, but all the signs are there. When I named my book *The End of Equality* I meant it to be a wake-up call. I assumed, perhaps naively, that if I showed things as they really were, not as we imagined them to be or hoped they were, that change would follow. Instead the reverse seems to be happening. I hope we can head it off before the end of equality become a permanent reality and women are relegated back to where too many men obviously believe we belong.

Thank you.