

EQUALITY FOR WOMEN, AT WORK AND EVERYWHERE

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Keynote Address

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Good morning delegates

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning to be able to talk to you on the subject of women's equality, and especially women's rights when it comes to employment and other fundamentals.

As you are no doubt aware, women are the drivers of the Australian workforce. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in July this year that women have been entirely responsible for the expansion of Australian workforce participation over the past decade. Women's participation has increased from 69 per cent to 73 per cent. This great movement of women into employment has profoundly revolutionized this country but, as I shall explain, the benefits that women were entitled to expect from this revolution have either not materialized, or are in jeopardy.

In November 2003, I published a book called *The End of Equality* which tried to put into perspective where we are at with the women's revolution. Let me share with you what I argued then. In the course of my remarks I will also try to update the statistics that I quoted in the book.

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.

For the thirty years since 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 couple of years 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. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the Australian workforce is that all the growth in women's employment is in part-time work.

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 many 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. You might have seen some recent press reports that women's incomes are closing in on men's – that women are now earning as much as 90 per cent of men's salaries. The trouble is, that figure applies to full-time work only. Yet 45 per cent of employed women are not in full-time work and the percentage of women working part-time and casual is growing. This is a major reason for women's earnings being less than men's.

In August last 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. If the government's proposed industrial relations "reforms" were to come into effect, women's incomes would decline further. As we know, women's award protection would be lost and women would be exposed to an individual bargaining system that would drive down the wages and conditions of the least powerful member of the workforce – casual and part-time workers, the vast majority of whom are women.

Even graduates are affected by the lack equal pay. Despite having studied the same subjects and paid the same fees, 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. If graduates have reduced bargaining power, you can imagine what it's like for women with little education and few skills - especially if they are casuals.

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. (I think we all know that the cost of childcare invariably comes from the woman's pay packet.) In Sydney a place can cost as much as \$450 a week yet the maximum government assistance is \$144 a week - and to qualify for that your combined family income cannot exceed \$33,361 a year.

The cost of childcare is escalating at a frightening rate, and far faster than inflation. It was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on August 31, 2005 that the cost of childcare has risen 12.4 per cent in the past twelve months - five times the cost of other goods and services.

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.

There has been a large increase in the number of women in state and federal parliaments. As of July 1 there are now 64 women in federal parliament, up from 59 women in the old parliament. Women make up 24.7 per cent of the House of Representatives and 35.5 per cent of the Senate.

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. In the early 1990s 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.

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.

Recent research conducted at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne shows some similar trends - and a few that are different. Deborah-Anne Walsh's doctoral research *What A Smile Can Hide* interviewed 400 pregnant women about their experiences of violence and abuse during pregnancy. The study found that 27 per cent of women experienced violence in their relationship and that 20 per cent experienced "a substantial level of physical violence throughout pregnancy". Unlike the findings of the federal government's *Women's Safety Survey* that I referred to above, for most women the violence did not start while they were pregnant; it merely continued. Or, in a few cases, it actually decreased. Pregnancy became, for these women, a form of protection against violence.

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. In Victoria, however, it is heartening to see the new Police Codes of Practice on Domestic Violence reflect Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon's strong commitment to addressing violence against women.

In 2003, 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.

In Victoria, the Vichealth report on the Health Costs of Violence found Intimate Partner Violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44. It is responsible for more of the disease burden than many well-known risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity.

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 18,000 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. 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. 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.

Paid maternity leave also, of course, provides some financial support although the amounts can vary, and not all employed women can access a scheme. We used to have up-to-date and accurate information on this subject, but the federal government put a stop to that. The last Australian Workplace Industrial Relations survey, which included detailed data on the availability of paid maternity leave, was conducted in 1995.

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 Prime Minister, Mr Howard admitted this just last weekend (3 September, 2005) in a speech to the Tasmanian Liberal Party State Council:

“... one of the features of the new family tax system that we have brought in over the last 10 years is that we have restored to a very significant extent the reality of choice for parents to decide when their children are very young whether they themselves will provide the full time care for their children as an alternative from them going into paid childcare. I believe that this is something that should be a matter of parental choice; it's not the role of the Government to tell people how they should care for their young children, it's the role of the Government to provide Australian families with choice and we have been prepared to underwrite that choice by increasing the opportunities for families to remain single income families while their children are very young. Equally we have provided very generous additional support for the cost of childcare, including the introduction of the 30 per cent tax rebate on net childcare expenses announced in the last Budget.”

What the Prime Minister did not say is that the tax system loads the so-called choice in favour of one-income families where no income test applies to the primary earner in determining the amount of family payments. Last year more than 70 families where the sole earner brought home more than \$1 million dollars received the full amount of Family Tax Benefit Part B. By contrast, two income families start to lose their benefits on a combined family income of just over \$33,000. How fair is that?

It was reported in the *Australian* on September 1, 2005 that the introduction of family benefits for stay-at-home mothers combined with tax cuts, has increased the real after-tax income of single income families between 28 and 30 per cent. By contrast, dual income families were reported to be 24 per cent better off.

The other thing the Prime Minister neglected to mention in his speech that the 30 per cent childcare rebate announced at the last election has been capped at annual expenses of \$4000, is only able to be claimed annually on one's tax (which won't help find the money to pay the weekly childcare bills) and cannot be claimed at all until 2006!

If this is “help” with childcare, I hate to think what would be happening if the government was doing nothing!

The birth rate has continued to fall since the breeding creed became official policy, which suggests that it is ineffective and even counter-productive. 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 recent political firestorm that has been raging over the subject of abortion. In just a few weeks late last year we heard the following:

- **The federal health Minister Tony Abbott 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 then deputy prime minister, John Anderson, called for a debate “to re-examine our understanding of medical science and the law”.**
- **The South Australian Liberal MP Christopher Pyne has drawn attention to what might be happening in the abortion clinic in one hospital and the neo-natal wing of the same institution. 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, Barnaby Joyce said - before he entered Parliament - that he wanted an end to public funding of abortion as the price for his vote to privatize Telstra. (His current position is not known, although I am trying to find out.)**
- **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. She was also the only person, apart from Tony Abbott, to directly link abortion to the population issue. Late last year 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 we don't think this cacophony adds up to a determined political assault on women's reproductive freedom then we 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.

Now it's gone quiet for the time being, but don't think the issue won't be back. Both the Catholic and Anglican Churches are conducting enquiries into abortion and their reports are likely to trigger further public debate.

In addition, Queensland National Senator Ron Boswell has said he plans to introduce legislation on abortion in the present term. He has not said exactly what the legislation will cover, only that it will be based on information he received in answer to a large number of questions on the public funding of abortion that he placed on the Senate notice paper earlier this year. (See my website for details www.annesummers.com.au). My guess is that Senator Boswell's legislation will be designed to restrict the Medicare rebate for abortion.

I have been assured that a large number of women Liberal MPs have been fighting a rear-guard action behind the scenes in order to stop the undermining of women's right to choose. This is necessary and about time. Let's hope they will be successful because the political forces ranged against them alarm me. Even the supposedly more liberal treasurer has jumped in, not to put his foot down and say he'll defend women's right to choose, but 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 last year 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.

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 and good family support services.

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, tragically, even physical - because our society has become one that penalizes women who want to be equal.

Women are facing threats on so many fronts but the two I regard as most serious are those that affect women's two most fundamental freedoms: the freedom to determine our fertility and the freedom to

be able to support ourselves. The abortion push threatens the first, while the industrial relations legislation threatens the second. If women's incomes decline even further, and if they are forced into unwanted pregnancies, then they lost their independence.

These threats to women's equality are extremely serious. Women everywhere, and especially our women MPs, and the men who agree with them have to stand up and be counted on these two. 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 – not a prophecy. 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.