

Sadly, women are having to win back ground lost to Howard

By Anne Summers
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JANINE Haines was one of the first women in Federal Parliament to not be afraid to speak up for her sex.

She saw her role in public life as being partly to represent the interests of other women although, of course, she also recognised her wider responsibilities — especially once she became leader of her party.

It is noteworthy that women politicians' standing up for women's interests is still seen as being sectional, as representing a special interest, or as being outside the mainstream.

Women in politics who aspire to higher things are often counselled not to champion women's issues if they want to be taken seriously. This places them in an invidious position.

Sadly, it is impossible to exaggerate the damage that has been done to women's interests by the Howard Government.

Perhaps the act that most symbolised the Government's attitude to women was the political downgrading of the Office of the Status of Women by its removal from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the policy powerhouse of the government, and its relocation to the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and its renaming as the Office for Women.

All notion of women's status in society has gone. Now we only exist in the eyes of the government in our family roles.

This political demotion of women's issues followed the Government's enfeebling of the sex discrimination commissioner by a reduction in her powers and her ability to investigate complaints.

This was accompanied by a staggering 40 per cent reduction in the budget of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the loss of the commission's powers to conduct public hearings.

When it was first established, in 1984, the position of sex discrimination commissioner was a relatively powerful one. Today, the role of the sex discrimination commissioner is, to quote from the HREOC website, to "undertake(s) research, policy and educative work designed to promote greater equality between men and women".

In other words, no power to do anything. The enforcement of the Sex Discrimination Act is a thing of the past. The commissioner's job is to research and educate — but not to ensure that people comply with Australia's landmark anti-discrimination legislation. As a result, they don't.

You won't be surprised to learn that firing women while they are on maternity leave is rife in corporate Australia today.

Within three years of the sex discrimination commissioner losing her powers, the number of complaints under the act had dropped from more than 2000 a year to just over 300. What are they today? They are not reported. AdvertisementAdvertisement

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Are women in Canberra these days more likely to defend women's interests? This question can also be broadened and extended to other areas — for instance, business, the education sector, the trade union movement.

In business, the number of women directors of large companies is not increasing and may even be falling slightly.

It's even worse in education. My research showed that in 2002, nine of the country's vice-chancellors were women. Today that number is three.

I believe there has been a noticeable change in the willingness of women in Canberra to take a stand on women's issues or issues of great concern to women. The stellar example has been the leadership on the overturning of the ban on RU486 provided by women senators.

Two things were rare — and encouraging — about this action. It was instigated and run by women, on an issue of deep personal concern to women. And it was run across party lines.

At the time, senator Lyn Allison told me there was "an ongoing agenda" and that there was plenty more to come. If this turns out to be the case, we will have witnessed a seismic shift in federal politics.

There are some encouraging signs. Women across the parties are calling publicly for reforms and increased funding for our antiquated and biased child-care system. Senator Natasha Stott Despoja is promoting a bill that would require government-funded pregnancy counselling services to inform pregnant women of the full range of options available to them, including abortion.

If you see the federal Health Minister's multimillion-dollar funding package for pregnancy counselling services as being a form of payback for having "lost" on RU486 — and I do — then it is obvious that the Stott Despoja bill is the next staging ground for the new women's politics in Canberra.

It will be a test of the extent to which there is indeed a seismic shift in politics, with women — and their supportive male colleagues — willing to take a stand in defence of women's rights.

Violence against women continues to be a national disgrace. Recent ABS figures confirmed a rise in the incidence of physical and sexual violence against women, especially against women aged 35 or older. Yet we do nothing. The Government runs expensive TV and cinema ads saying "Australia says NO to violence" while the evidence suggests the reverse.

Women who are free of violence and who can seek employment because they can find and afford child care are going to have an independence and a control over their lives that is impossible without them.

The best hope for women's political leadership is for there to be a field of experienced and talented women who can move up through the system and be part of the pool from which leaders are tested and drawn. That's how the boys do it.

And while there are lots of things about male politicians that women would not want to emulate, there is one quality they have a proven track record on: winning.

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