

THE CRISIS IN MASCULINITY

MEETS

THE END OF EQUALITY

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This is a work in progress.....

On March 8 this year, instead of his usual message of solidarity to Australian women in which he promised to do everything in his power to remove any remaining obstacles towards their attaining full equality with men, the Prime Minister chose to do something different.

He used International Women's Day, instead, to have introduced into federal parliament the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004. The purpose of this legislation was to amend Australia's landmark anti-discrimination legislation to enable the Catholic Education Office to offer scholarships to men to undertake tertiary education in return for which they would be bonded to work for the Catholic schools system.

Why did John Howard do this?

Ostensibly, it was in response to an application from the Catholic Education Office for an exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) to enable it to offer these scholarships. Yet the Catholic Education Office's submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity (HREOC) had been submitted on 30 August 2002 and rejected by HREOC on 27 February 2003.

Why did John Howard suddenly take up the case now – more than a year later?

It might have had something to do with Mark Latham, the new Opposition Leader, who since his elevation to the job just a few months earlier had shown a distinct propensity to steal headlines from the prime minister and to make him look shifty and indecisive.

Just two weeks before IWD Mark Latham had made a major speech to the National Press Club in Canberra in which he declared that “our boys are

suffering from a crisis in masculinity”. Mr Latham mentioned, among other things, that boys were leaving school earlier with lower literary levels.

These remarks must have infuriated Mr Howard. Just six months earlier he had tried to get this very notion onto the political agenda.

“Far too many boys are growing up without proper male role models,” he’d told federal parliament on 24 June, 2003. He had specifically noted the number of boys in the care and custody of their (single) mothers and his concern with “the overwhelming numbers of teachers being male”. These comments had failed to gain traction (except with me!) The media largely ignored them and there was no ensuing public debate.

So Mr Howard was clearly chagrined when Mark Latham’s remarks ignited a huge debate. Clearly he needed to claw back the initiative. He had to bring in the Big Guns.

Hence his International Women’s Day gift to us all.

This was not the first time the prime minister had used the SDA as a political – and, I would argue, ideological – tool in this fashion.

He’d tried in 2002 to use the Act to prevent a single woman from using IVF to have a baby.

“We want to change the Sex Discrimination Act, “ Mr Howard told a Melbourne radio station, “so that if a state, as a number do at present, decides to restrict the IVF program to married or de facto heterosexual couples, it can do so”.

(It is also worth noting that Mr Howard and the Catholic Church were also collaborators on this attempt to undermine the SDA. The federal government had, without precedent, allowed the Catholic Bishops Conference to intervene in the High Court proceedings on this case, and to argue against HREOC – its own agency.)

Mr Howard failed in this effort to amend the Act, only because it was realized that to achieve his stated aim would have required removing a fundamental provision of the SDA: discrimination on the ground of marital

status. Once such a major plank was interfered with, the legislation would have been close to collapse.

This effort was not proceeded with, although an even more draconian proposal replaced it: the abolition of HREOC and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's position. See my book for details on this one.

The point to remember here is that the prime minister has had the Sex Discrimination Act in his sights for a long time now.

I ask you to hold that thought.

Now let's pause for a moment and look at the actual merits of the original case for exemption made by the Catholic Education Office.

Their submission argued that it was necessary to grant special scholarships to men because in the NSW Catholic education system only 937 teachers, or 18 per cent of the total of 4265, were men. The submission bemoaned that "feminisation of teaching as a profession is starting to occur" and made the case that "the presence or absence of male teachers has major implications for the culture of schools and the education of children". Strategies needed to be put in place to attract more men into teaching, the submission said, in order to address learning difficulties in boys and to redress the inaccurate gender stereotypes the majority of female teachers gave rise to.

So what did the Catholic Education Office propose to remedy this dire situation?

I know you will find this almost impossible to believe but in order to redress the imbalance of having only 937 males in the system, the Catholic Education Office proposed to offer twelve scholarships.

How serious were they about redressing the gender balance? Or was this just a political ploy? If the latter were the case, it would not have been the first time the Catholic education system had been to HREOC seeking exemptions from the SDA. Back in the 1980s they had tried to gain exemptions from having to employ single mothers – on the grounds that they were bad role models (sorry no details on this one.)

So how serious is this shortage of male teachers? Does it constitute a crisis? For education? For men? Let's look at the situation today.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian Social Trends* series on education published in 2003, "The majority of school teachers are women, and the proportion of female teachers increased steadily over the 20 years to 2002. In full-time equivalent terms, there were 2.1 teachers for every male teacher in 2002, up from 1.4 in 1982. The female/male ratio was most pronounced at the primary school level where there were 3.8 female teachers for every male teacher in 2002, increasing from 2.4 in 1982."

The ABS made no comment on whether these trends were having a negative impact on boys – or on girls for that matter.

But is the male/female breakdown of teachers the whole story here?

I would say No. Let's look at the picture another way. Let's look at the male/female breakdown of school principals. When we do this a whole other picture emerges.

In the Victorian public education system, 55.4 per cent of school principals are men. This is one of the lowest percentages in Australia. In NSW the figure is closer to 70 per cent.

In the Catholic education system, men still rule. According to a publication of the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocese, men make up 18 per cent of the system's primary school teachers but are 66 per cent of its principals. It's even worse in the secondary system, where 70 per cent of the principals are men, although they are only 25 per cent of the teaching force.

What kind of role models are these situations presenting to girls and boys? As Mary Bluett, Victorian president of the Australian Education Union puts it, having a male principal and an overwhelmingly female staff presents children with the wrong message about gender and power.

But where are the measures designed to help women become principals? Where are the scholarships for women? Why is no agency applying to HREOC for permission to discriminate in favour of girls to give them a leg up to help them reach the top of their professions? And not just in teaching?

The Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, made the point well in her press release protesting Howard's IWD gift to Australian women. What about scholarships for women who want to be executive board members? she asked. Or university professors, or surgeons, or engineers or senior military officers or judges? Or, I would add, Prime Ministers.

I would ask you to also hold that thought.

So we have a shortage of male teachers, especially in primary schools. But where is the crisis in this? Hasn't it always been the case? Haven't most of us been taught by women in our primary school years? Where is the evidence of damage?

Interestingly, Mr Howard does not even try to make a case. He simply asserts: "It's a problem." He told Sky News on 10 March this year. "A boy grows up without a father because of separation or death or whatever, has no older brothers, no close uncles, goes to school, no male teachers, how can he develop a role model?"

(I would argue such boys could look to the principal but I guess that is being facetious.)

Instead, Mr Howard makes only political points, attacking the Labor Party for failing to support his proposed amendment to the SDA to "help address the crisis in the shortage of supply of male teachers in our schools".

So what is going on here?

Is there a crisis? There is no evidence of one.

Some men are disadvantaged but many, probably most, are not.

Those who do suffer disadvantage, at school at work or elsewhere in their lives, deserve our attention and our action – not just token measures of insulting side-shows such as trying to tear up a premier piece of legislation designed to outlaw discrimination against women.

When he made his National Press Club speech, Mr Latham went much further than allude to the lack of male school teachers. He talked about real

problems suffered by many boys who “were disproportionately more likely to be victims of drug overdose, road trauma and youth suicide.”

Mr Howard does not bother with any of this. He simply repeats the mantra of “crisis” and “shortage of male teachers”. What is he up to?

I believe he is playing politics. He is using the language of male crisis to create divisions within our society. He is implying that it is the fault of women – single mothers, primary school teachers, girl students – that boys are doing badly. He is creating one of his famous wedges. He has done it before.

Remember “the black armband view of history” – that gave us permission to deny Aboriginal suffering and resistance to European invasion?

Remember the 1996 election where he promised to govern “for *all* of us”? Or was that “for all of *us*” – a coded appeal to the Hansonites? That gave us permission to side with the seeming majority who were against Asian immigration and special assistance for indigenous people.

Remember the last election: “We alone will decide who comes into this country”? That gave us permission to dehumanize asylum seekers, to turn our heads while people were dragged from the *Tampa* and sent to Pacific prisons, and to not lift a finger while more than 300 people from the SIEV X drowned just off our waters.

(Just this week, the last of the *Tampa* people were given refugee status!!)

So for the 2004 election, is it the “crisis in masculinity” giving us permission to see women as the enemy? Are women the ones who are holding men back?

It is noteworthy that in this debate, we concentrate only on those boys – a minority of students – who suffer learning difficulties. We do not look at the overall situation of men where, far from being in crisis, many are doing very nicely thank you.

After all it is men who occupy 52 per cent of the full time jobs in this country, who earn on average 35 per cent more than women do, who hold 90 per cent of the top management jobs in this country, who are 92 per cent of

the boards members of our top companies and who are – and always have been – 100 per cent of our prime ministers. Not much talk of crisis around this group.

HOWEVER there is another, more serious side, to the situation with men.

It was expressed rather eloquently by Senator Brian Greig on ABC TV's *The Insiders* on 4 April this year:

What is this crisis in masculinity we keep hearing about? Mark Latham tells us that it's single-parent families and boys being raised with dads, John Howard says that it's lesbians adopting sons and the Catholic Church says that it's a lack of role models in the classroom.

But just scratch the surface of these arguments and what you find is sexism and homophobia.

The unstated concern here is that a lack of male role models produces an effeminacy in boys or the fear that it might lead to homosexuality itself.

No, the real crisis in masculinity is the macho male culture of violence and rape, the rejection of female thinking and behaviour and the deep insecurity that many men have towards sexual difference.

Women's roles as mothers and teachers is a positive on boys and small counterbalance to the overwhelming macho male imagery that floods their senses daily through popular culture, television and sport.

I won't even start on the details of the macho male imagery he refers to. We know all about the reality of that from the Bulldogs rape scandal, the antics of some of our cricketers and from the very mature way some of the NSW State of Origin players made very mature use of a mobile phone last week.

Instead, I want to look at another reality:

What I call in my book *Payback*. This concept came from the women who participated in focus groups that formed part of my research – my attempt at a "reality check" in addition to the more formal types of research based on newspaper and government reports and so on.

The women in my survey had very strong and definite ideas about the causes of much contemporary violence by men against women. They saw it as a form of payback on the part of men who simply cannot cope with the women in their lives having greater freedom and independence. These men responded to women have greater equality by trying to knock them down to size. "I think they feel they have lost control and the only way to get back

up there is by putting the women down,” said a working mother, 33-39, from Sydney’s west. “It’s a top dog kind of attitude. That is the only way they are on top,” said another woman from the same area. “And they have friends that make them feel that it’s comfortable or right to do that.”

Two of the most chilling comments that were made, time and again, in the groups were; “You don’t want to be earning more money than him” and “You better make sure you are home before he gets there”. This was in Australia, in 2001.

This is one area where the crisis in masculinity intersects with, and reduces, women’s equality.

There are other examples that are perhaps not so obvious but are even more insidious.

I want to quote from myself here and introduce you to a concept from my book that I call “the breeding creed”:

Equality between men and women is no longer something we as a society strive for. Equality has been usurped by a new doctrine, the breeding creed. This is the philosophy of procreation being advocated by the federal government and other powerful agents in Australia who are panicking about our declining birth rate. The breeding creed is a powerful new ideology that defines women first and foremost as mothers. It aims to subsume all of women’s other choices and ambitions into a motherhood mentality. This ideology is new in the sense that it is being articulated as a social goal in this country for the first time in almost one hundred years (it used to be called ‘populate or perish’), but it is also, in many ways, a restatement of a very traditionalist view of women’s role and women’s possibilities. It has been described as a ‘white picket fence’ view of the world and that is exactly what it is: a view of the world that would see women confined to domesticity and motherhood. It is an ideology that does not merely want to turn back the clock for women; it wants to pretend that the equality revolution never happened.

The breeding creed aims to reverse, or at least arrest, that falling rate in fertility by making it difficult, even prohibitive, for women to have jobs, even part-time jobs, *and* have children. Since the late 1990s the government has made ruthless use of childcare, employment, family assistance and taxation policy to steer women with children out of the workforce and into full-time motherhood. It has imposed substantial financial penalties on mothers who continue to work. The intention is, apparently, to make it financially attractive for women to become full-time mothers in the hope that this will encourage more women to have children, and for those who already have them, to have more. As it stands, the birth rate in Australia has fallen well below what is needed to reproduce ourselves, so that we now need to rely on immigration to increase our

population. There is considerable pressure, especially from big business, to increase Australia's internal markets, and to halt the ageing of our population, by developing a population policy. Such a policy would involve maintaining high levels of immigration – something that is already occurring, albeit covertly, under the Howard government – but it would also entail measures to encourage natural population increase. In other words, how to get women to have more than the 1.65 babies per woman which was the fertility rate for urban Australian women in 2001. (A rate of 2.1 is needed to reproduce the population.)

For women in their late 20s or early 30s the breeding creed 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. At least 25 per cent of young women today will end up not having children at all. For some this will be a matter of active choice. Others will find themselves unable to conceive – sometimes after having ‘put it off’ until their mid-30s. Infertility is a growing problem with Australian women of this age, and more and more couples are resorting to IVF treatments in an attempt to have a successful pregnancy. These treatments are financially expensive and emotionally exhausting and many couples, reconciling themselves to not being able to have a family, abandon this course of action after three or four treatments. The lesson the breeding creed draws from such experiences is that women should have their children young, while they are at the height of their fertility. This, of course, means postponing – perhaps permanently – any prospect of a career. It is a tough call and one that only women are expected to make.

The breeding creed so far has been punitive mainly in its use of financial sanctions. What women need to worry about is whether it could become coercive in other ways, especially in developing measures to get educated women to have babies. At present, the more educated, and the higher earning a woman is, the less likely she is to have any children at all. Already there are proposals around to address this. For instance, a professor at the University of New South Wales has advocated cancelling HECS debts for graduates who have babies. It is difficult to imagine a more discriminatory idea. It is unfair to male graduates – it treats fathers and mothers differently – but it also creates barriers between women because, in effect, this proposal advocates paying educated women to have babies while their non-graduate sisters are expected to procreate for nothing. But we can expect more of this sort of thing as the breeding creed insinuates itself into our society. 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 breeding creed seeks to limit women's options and, ultimately, to curtail their freedom of choice.

At present women are not buying this because they want to enjoy other options as well. But in resisting the breeding creed, women are the ones who have to suffer. They pay a financial penalty by being unfairly taxed if they try to keep their jobs once they

have children, they pay an emotional and physical price in that they are constantly exhausted and stressed by trying to juggle the various bits of their lives – employment, childcare, housework – with so little support (only the lucky few have husbands or partners who really share the load) and some of them, in the most extreme cases, suffer a physical penalty as well in the form of violence inflicted by partners who simply cannot cope with women trying to be independent.

The breeding creed also makes women feel bad about themselves. Not only do women continually have to hear about the success stories of the lucky minority who seem to have everything going for them, or who can juggle the various bits of their lives without stress or anxiety, but they also have to put up with being told that in fact we women have gone too far. The scales have tipped the other way, we are told. Now men are hurting. Boys are doing badly at school and the implication is that it is the fault of girls finally catching up and starting to shine. There are too many female teachers, the prime minister says. He does not praise the work of these women, or argue that it is good for boys to learn that women can occupy positions of authority and respect. No, it is all about boys not having male role models. The fathers who walk out on their families and fail to pay child support are increasingly portrayed as victims rather than as irresponsible or even cruel, and their neglected families are seen as avaricious. Men who are beaten by women for job promotions or political pre-selection are seen as having legitimate grievances whereas the same does not apply if another man beats them. All these attitudes accumulate into a huge pile of prejudice designed to make women feel that their basic desire for career advancement, for success in the outside world as well as the world of home, is selfish. It's not good for her children, she's told. She should be home breastfeeding them while they are babies and being there for them as they grow, preventing them from becoming hyperactive, or juvenile delinquents. (Her job and her responsibility, mind you. Where's the father in all this?) And if she isn't having children, then a woman is increasingly told that she's letting the whole country down. Talk about can't win.

And in talking about “can't win”, the stakes against women are increasing at a rapid rate – shockingly so in my view.

The media coverage of what it likes to call the “fertility crisis” is quite extraordinary. Words like “panic”, “hunger” and “grieve” are now routinely used to describe the phenomenon of so many women reaching their early 30s and still not having had children.

There is virtually no presentation – in the same stories at any rate – of *why* so many women are deferring having babies. Today up to 30 per cent of young women will not have children, many of them by choice, others regretting that it is not possible

(see my book for quotes from women grappling with what I call the “hard choices” about motherhood today)

There are many reasons women decide not to have children – as distinct from those who find themselves unable to conceive or who are unwilling to have a child without a life partner. These reasons include:

- women’s job prospects after having a baby
- lack of paid maternity leave
- lack of affordable child care
- the cost of having children (\$160K in foregone income, after tax, for a woman with secondary education)
- lack of status of mothers

Have you been holding all those thoughts I threw out earlier?

I hope I can now bring them all together.

Before I do, let me quickly review the factual case I make in the book for saying we have reached the end of equality:

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 66 per cent of men’s. In May 2002 women averaged \$555 per week while men got \$839, and this was a larger gap than ten years earlier.

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

The top ranks of the powerful public and commercial institutions of this country remain closed to all but a tiny fraction of women with fewer than 10 per cent of board positions or senior executive jobs in large Australian companies occupied by women. There has been a large increase in the number of women elected to state and federal parliaments but these numbers have not been matched by a corresponding increase in their being appointed to leadership positions. Ten years ago there were two women state premiers. Today there are none (although there is a woman chief minister – in the Northern Territory). 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.

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 physical integrity and well-being of many women is being constantly undermined by a huge and seemingly increasing incidence of sexual and domestic violence. The last government survey on women's safety, in 1996, reported that 1.1 million Australian women had experienced some form of violence in a domestic relationship. In 2001, 13,500 women reported to police that they had been sexually assaulted. We know from crime studies that this figure

represents the mere tip of the iceberg since most sexual 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 could be as high as 90,500 – or about 248 a day. In other words, large numbers of Australian women’s lives are disrupted or even destroyed by violence. Often this violence requires them to flee from the violent partner and thus become homeless. This is a high price to pay for what many women themselves say is often men fighting back against women’s equality.

Although we never achieved full equality of opportunity between women and men in Australia, we did for a couple of decades 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, and still are, always men – would have dared challenge its right to be there. And throughout the 1980s and early 1990s we were making progress. Women’s journey towards equality of opportunity with men was the subject of frequent government and parliamentary inquiries and reports, newspaper articles, women’s studies in tertiary institutions and some schools and each year a number of books on the subject were published. There were encouraging statistics on women’s increased participation in the workforce, women’s rising earnings, women flooding into higher education, women’s appointments to top jobs. This is no longer the case. We have come to the end of equality.

All that is bad enough. Who thought they could have got worse? If further proof were needed that the “breeding creed” is not just official government policy but that it has been elevated in importance, just consider the following:

Tony Abbott, the federal Minister for health, has stated that there are “too many” abortions performed in this country. This is the first time that a federal health minister has raised this issue. It sent shivers down my spine, I can tell you. Especially when he linked it to the population issue.

Now we have Peter Costello vying to be the father of the nation.

At last year’s budget he released his Intergenerational Report which showed the dire financial consequences of our ageing population. That didn’t work so now he’s got very explicit:

“One for the father, one for the mother, and one for the fatherland”

Although his comments have been greeted with ridicule, we should not ignore the seriousness of what is he proposing and putting the weight of government policy behind:

- a generous maternity allowance but no paid maternity leave
- even greater financial penalties against women working full-time
- It was pointed out by Elizabeth Hill in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (17 May, 2004) that the Budget tables show that “the biggest winners are dual-income families with children in which the ‘primary earner’ (read male) contributes 80 per cent of the household income and the ‘secondary earner’ (read female) ‘helpmate’ the other 20 per cent”.

Hill goes on to argue that a family where both partners contribute 50/50 to a household income of \$100,000 would receive a mere \$7.69 extra from the Budget measures. If however, the women’s contribution is reduced to 20 per cent the family is eligible for an extra weekly payment of \$42.21 – or a \$34.52 weekly premium for working part-time. She comments: “By formalizing the notion of primary and secondary earners in the structure of the package, the government is entrenching the status of mothers as ‘secondary earners’”.

- A token increase in child care places but no help with child care costs (cf the UK this week which introduced tax deductibility for nannies.)
- No recognition of, let alone help with, the problems of balancing work and family – the so-called work/life balance which is one of women’s major concerns today.

Instead, it’s all about breeding.

Who would have thought this could happen? That a political leader in Australia in 2004 could urge women to go forth and breed to the virtual exclusion of all else?

I don’t think that the women of Australia are ready to give up their hard won freedom and their quest for full equality – but the federal government is sure making it hard for them.

It would be nice to hear a bit less about the crisis in masculinity and a whole lot more about the crisis in women's equality – but don't hold your breath.