

Glass ceiling needs a bit of leverage

Column by Anne Summers

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If it were going to happen naturally, it would have happened by now. Women would be moving and shaking their way around corporate Australia, holding down sizeable numbers of senior and chief executive jobs, they'd be visible and active on corporate Boards.

It isn't happening. Instead, as the recent census of women executives and directors conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) demonstrated, the numbers are miniscule, they are not going up and, in some cases, they are actually going down.

Only 8.8 per cent of executive managers in Australia's top 200 companies are women, up from 8.4 per cent in 2002. When it comes to boards, women comprise 8.4 per cent of our company directors (up from 8.2 per cent last year). These statistics are risible.

It is impossible to claim now – as perhaps you could once – that women are not qualified or experienced enough to be running our leading institutions. For at least thirty years now women have been pouring out of universities armed to the teeth with degrees and other qualifications. For more than two decades women have done the hard yards in the corporations, the professional firms and in every area of the country where work gets done. We've had more than twenty years of laws banning discrimination in employment and laws that supposedly promote equal opportunities in employment.

What has gone wrong?

Clearly the laws are being flaunted. Discrimination against women at all levels of employment is a daily occurrence yet employers seem to think they can get away with it – and mostly they do. There is no longer a culture in this country of promoting and encouraging equal opportunity. The government doesn't talk about it any more. It watered down the already tame Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986, reducing the requirement for employers to report on the progress they were making in promoting women. That was a sure signal to employers that they could forget about compliance – and they have.

How else do we explain that fewer women occupy line management positions this year than in 2002? And why has the number of companies with no – that's right none! – women directors increased in the past twelve months?

It's not that progress is slow. There's no progress. Nothing. Nada. And this is 2003 by which time we could reasonably have expected that all the political agitation of the 1970s

would have paid off and women and men would work together, shoulder to shoulder, at all levels in all enterprises, large and small, public and private.

Instead, women are an endangered species in the upper ranks of the private sector. Look at companies such as NAB, CBA, Macquarie Bank, Coca-Cola, Fosters, Burns Philp, Telstra and Lend Lease – to name just a few of the scores that were identified in the EOWA census - where the only women to be found on the executive floor are the PAs?

This is no glass ceiling. This is outright refusal by the men who run corporate Australia to open up their ranks to competent and qualified members of the female sex. Another word for it is discrimination. And it is pretty obvious now, after all these decades, that the problem not going to fix itself.

Unless some effective leverage is applied to corporate Australia this dismal record will continue.

The Victoria Attorney-General Rob Hulls had already reached this conclusion about the alarming lack of female barristers working on government contracts. Hulls now requires law firms working for some state government agencies to adopt equal opportunity principles when allocating work to barristers.

The Federal Minister for Revenue, Senator Helen Coonan, has done a similar thing, undertaking to look at agencies under her portfolio control to guarantee women barristers get government work. She has also said she will encourage her ministerial colleagues to do the same.

It will be interesting to see what kind of response she gets.

Former Attorney-General Daryl Williams wasn't having a Bar of it when the president of Australian Women Lawyers, Dominique Hogan-Doran proposed to him last month that he use government purchasing power to drive cultural change through the private law firms that are the beneficiaries of millions of dollars of federal government work.

Williams – the man in charge of the fair administration of justice in this country – apparently could no need to ensure the nation's anti-discrimination laws were being applied to achieve their original purpose.

Will new Attorney-General Philip Ruddock feel any responsibility towards the nation's women? Let's hope so.

He and other government ministers only have to look to their own departments to see what can happen if a policy of encouraging women is in place and actually applied. Back in 1984 the senior ranks of the Australian public service looked even worse than today's corporate sector. Only 3.9 per cent of the country's top bureaucrats were women.

The newly elected Hawke government decided this had to change and the late Peter Wilenski was given the job of making it happen. The Public Service Reform Act 1984 required all federal government departments to develop action plans to increase the employment opportunities of four groups that had previously suffered disadvantage: women, people of non-English speaking background, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and people with a disability.

The employment track record of all groups has improved over the twenty years the act has been in force but women represent perhaps the most spectacular example of what can happen if a government puts it mind to giving qualified people a go.

Anyone who last week watched new Health Minister Tony Abbott sitting down to deal with the doctors could not have helped noticing that his right-man at all those meetings was in fact a woman. Jane Halton, secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing, had had the job of bringing her new Minister up to scratch on the issues and was clearly as important in these meetings as the Minister. She is one of many women in Canberra who hold senior jobs in a public sector whose record should put the corporates to shame.

In 1993, women made up 15.4 per cent of the Senior Executive Service (SES). After just ten years of the reforms, women in the public sector were already faring much better than their corporate sisters. Since then their position has improved even more. Today, fully 28.4 per cent of the SES are women. There are now two women Secretaries of major departments, 15 Deputy Secretaries and scores of women doing big jobs such as running Centrelink, the National Library of Australia or the Museum of Australia.

In other words, women are in all sorts of serious jobs and in the ruthless Canberra bureaucracy would not survive if they weren't competent. It shows what a little encouragement can achieve.

I took considerable pleasure from the fact that Tony Abbott who last year spurned the benefits to working mothers of paid maternity leave by saying it would be introduced "over the government's dead body" was now so dependent on a senior bureaucrat who has children and who undoubtedly would not be where she is today with the benefits of such paid leave.

The government will have to start using its muscle – purchasing policy is just one possibility – if it seriously wants to ensure women in the private sector have a chance at the top jobs. I know it will entail a big ideological back-flip, but if in the space of a week Tony Abbott can morph from trade union buster to doctors union booster, anything's possible. Even a fair go for women.