

# Labor brings women in from the cold

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At the last election, the federal Labor leader, Kim Beazley, slipped out a women's policy two days before polling day. Its centrepiece? A promise to remove the GST on tampons. There wasn't much to sell and no time to sell it.

It was pretty much the same in 1998, another year in which far fewer women voted Labor than for the Coalition.

So it was a distinct break with recent Labor tradition on Monday when Mark Latham strode into a child-care centre in the marginal Sydney seat of Lowe and, surrounded by some of his most prominent women MPs, launched a commitment-laden women's policy.

It was also a pretty big change for Latham, who is on record as disdaining women's issues as elitist feminism (which he dislikes) or as wanky "identity politics" which, he argued in his 2001 book, *The Enabling State*, had cost Labor the 1996 election.

You would have thought he wouldn't be caught dead presiding over a women's policy launch. But that was not the only surprise on Monday.

Introducing him, Nicola Roxon, the savvy young Victorian who is the shadow attorney-general and assists the leader on the status of women, reminded him of a pledge he'd made to the Caucus women the night he was elected leader. That was, she said, to launch a women's policy and to do it before the election campaign.

In fact, several women had made it a condition of their breaking factional ranks to vote for him for the leadership and this week he delivered.

The policy, entitled "Choice and Opportunity", contains potent campaign ammunition and, if communicated adequately, could help to win over enough of those women in marginal seats whose vote will determine the outcome of the next election.

Latham says the central issues as conveyed to him by women all over the country were preserving Medicare and providing quality child care. He also dealt with a range of economic, social and other issues. There were plenty of specifics that would provide a welcome restoration of women's equality to the national political agenda, but what was most interesting to me was the language the Labor leader brought to this subject.

He talked about "power imbalances" in women's jobs and pay (compared with men's) and promised a raft of reforms so "people don't have to make the false choice between being a good parent and a good worker".

He addressed women's disadvantages but he brought men into the solutions. This is unprecedented in an Australian political leader. In the past, leaders on both sides of politics have tended to either ignore or marginalise women, to address them only in their role as mothers or to subsume them within the rhetoric of families.

Surprisingly, Latham did none of these things. Instead he caused a frisson of anxiety with some Labor women on Monday when he said, "I know from personal experience that women's issues are now men's issues." Was this the crisis of masculinity all over again? Perhaps.

But it seemed more as if he had achieved a personal policy reconciliation between the sexes. He talked of men needing to be more involved in raising children and managing the home (that'll be popular with blokes, I bet), and he also spoke of the need for men to "own" the "dreadful cycle of domestic violence" if we are to really "tackle" (bad word, Mark) something that afflicts as many as a quarter of Australian women.

With his speech, Latham signalled that it's up to men, not just women, to redress the power imbalance. In doing so, he placed women's policy firmly into the mainstream of his political agenda.

In the process perhaps women themselves will finally be brought back in from the political cold.

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