

# Women's rights pushed back to the margins

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The femocrat must be sacrificed for the women's movement to progress, writes **Anne Summers**.

The defenestration of the Canberra femocrat by the Howard Government was inevitable so the only question is: why did it take the Prime Minister, John Howard, so long to dump the Office of the Status of Women?

For three terms Howard permitted what used to be a policy powerhouse to stay in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet where, despite its advice being largely ignored, it still retained some bureaucratic status by virtue of its proximity to power. Now, the office is to be "incorporated" into the Department of Family and Community Services where it will lose its unique focus on women's needs and issues.

This is not just the downgrading of an office. This is the dumping of women from the political agenda in Canberra. From now on, women will only be considered in their family roles. The implications of this are ominous.

In 1997 the women's bureau in what was then the federal Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs was abolished. Since then, there has been no monitoring or reporting of trends in women's employment, earnings and entitlements.

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Perhaps it is just coincidence, but in the same period women's full-time employment has declined, women's earnings compared with men's have dropped, and a payment of \$3000 to women when they have babies has been deemed to be an acceptable substitute for a national paid maternity leave scheme.

This last policy has bipartisan agreement, as does "incorporating" the women's policy office. In fact, Labor has led the way in downgrading women's policy.

Although it was the Hawke government in 1983 that resuscitated OSW by putting it into the Prime Minister's Department, upgrading its status, its staffing and its political clout, Labor today has no interest in championing women's policy.

In the past year, NSW, Victoria and Queensland have downgraded their women's policy advice units.

The comprehensive women's policy of the Opposition Leader, Mark Latham, released in July, conspicuously failed to mention OSW. Observing this, Howard realised he would cop little or no flak if he changed his tack from ignoring OSW to dumping it.

Despite some protest the decision will stand because women do not have the political clout of miners or veterans, let alone loggers.

One reason for this is that unique Australian phenomenon, the femocrat - or feminist bureaucrat - who ran governmental women's policy advice units. "The most distinctive feature of the Australian feminist scene was the prevalence of femocrats," wrote US academic Hester Eisenstein in her 1996 book *Inside Agitators*. She noted that the term femocrat applied, not to any woman working inside the public service, but "to a woman, feminist by personal conviction, who works within a government bureaucracy at a senior level to advance the status of women in society".

(While Howard's appointment of a record number of female departmental secretaries is to be welcomed, these women are bureaucrats not, as some claim, femocrats).

The tactic of working from the inside was always controversial. Femocrats were criticised as "selling out" and it was argued that governments thus got power to determine the feminist agenda, but femocrats succeeded in placing child care, access and equity in education and employment, sex discrimination, and sexual harassment and violence against women on the political agenda.

Working from the inside always required some degree of governmental acquiescence. That's long gone. Instead we now see overt discrimination as the Government tries to water down the Sex Discrimination Act, we face tax and family policies that actively discourage mothers from working, and we have a federal health minister using totally fabricated statistics to rampage against a legal medical procedure.

Fighting these blatant anti-women policies is going to take a lot more than inside agitation. Although I'll probably make myself unpopular with many feminists for saying so, I believe the women's movement has suffered from its over-reliance on femocrats to win the political wars.

We have to acknowledge that the age of the femocrat is over and a new approach is urgently needed. Women need political clout. These days that comes from the outside, from the kind of tactics the loggers and other successful groups use, and that is what women are going to have to do.

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