

## THE END OF EQUALITY

Address to The Sydney Institute  
11 December, 2003

Thirty years ago we began a revolution in this country. It was a revolution that recognized the legal, social and attitudinal barriers to women achieving equality of opportunity and as it progressed – as these barriers were ripped away – I doubt if anyone in this country escaped the ramifications.

We were all affected. Some of us were pioneers and agents in this revolution – I certainly was myself. Others were beneficiaries, directly or indirectly, as educational opportunities widened, jobs that women once were not allowed to do became open, our incomes improved so that we had at least the possibility of economic autonomy *and* we had the means to control our fertility.

This opening up of opportunities benefited women of all ages and virtually all sectors of society. There really *was* a revolution in the way we women saw ourselves – and in how we expected to be seen and to be treated. Moreover, these advances not only changed women, they also changed men. And they changed relations between women and men – or they should have, because women's lives don't change so comprehensively without impacting on men's.

For thirty years we have seen progress towards equality – or so we assumed. If I can speak for myself, I had always been optimistic, even confident, that this was a revolution that was unstoppable and irreversible.

So it came as quite a shock to me to discover a year or so ago that in fact things were not as they should be, and that we had not merely stalled on our road to equality but that we were actually starting to go backwards.

This might seem hard to believe when all around us are visible signs of women's accomplishments – we see women in all kinds of great jobs, still breaking all sorts of barriers, doing amazing things. Yet you don't have to delve very far beneath the surface to discover that things are not so rosy. In fact, you could describe them as terrible, even shocking.

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 half 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.

It was reported recently that there are almost 2000 children under the age of two on waiting lists for childcare places in just two Sydney council areas alone. Even when you can get a place, the cost is so great that it often becomes the determinant of whether or not a woman continues to hold down a job. In Sydney an average place costs \$250 a week yet the maximum government assistance is \$137 a week – and to qualify for that your combined family income cannot exceed \$31,755 a year.

The average payment last year of the Child Care Benefit, the government's only assistance for childcare, was just \$28.12 per week.

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

Women have precious little power in Australia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When we look at the powerful public and commercial institutions of our society, we see that their top ranks remain closed to all but a tiny fraction of women and even here the numbers seem to be falling. Less than 10 per cent of the senior executives in our large companies are women. There is just one CEO of a top company who is female – Gail Kelly of St. George Bank - and only 8 per cent of the directors of Australia's top 200 companies are women.

There has been a large increase in the number of women in state and federal parliaments – there are now 60 women in federal parliament, equalling 26.5 per cent of the total. But this increase in numbers has 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.

Then there's the collateral damage. Women's physical integrity and well being continues to be undermined by a huge and seemingly increasing incidence of sexual and domestic violence.

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.

I should tell you that in researching this book, I took the somewhat unusual step of commissioning some market research to help me understand how ordinary Australian women today see their lives. I felt that to just do the usual research, using published sources, newspaper reports, government documents etc was not enough. I believe that there is also a lot to be learned from asking people what they think and in this instance, I believe the groups allowed me access to a wide-range of women whose opinions I would not otherwise have had access to.

It was these women who provided some of the language for this book, and they who gave me information and insights that I would not otherwise have had. They provided, if you like, a reality check. My book is not just what I think – it reports the views of ordinary Australian women speaking about their lives in all their complexity.

For instance, it was women from these groups who said that while they mostly enjoy being women in Australia today, they find their lives “hard” - and they were not talking about money. They were talking about the difficulties society now puts in their way when they want to exercise their choices about having jobs and also having kids.

It was also these women who said that much of the violence women experience today is a result of men not being to cope with women’s independence and women’s quest for equality.

In the book I call this phenomenon Payback but the thought came from the women themselves – rather too many of whom seemed to know, from personal experience, what they were talking about.

Some of the women in my survey had grown up with domestic violence. ‘I lived in a house where domestic violence was always a Friday, Saturday night thing,’ said a mother from Bathurst in the 30–40 age group. ‘That happened all my mum’s married life and we just grew up with it. It was horrible but we grew up with it.’

Women are now willing to talk about such violence. Many of them expressed the view that there is no longer a stigma in admitting that it has happened, that there are now places to go to escape and services to help women rebuild their lives. Almost all the women were pleased that this was the case, and that there are now options for women who once might have had to just put up with it.

But far too many women *are* still putting up with it. And it is rare, even today, for a woman to be able to admit that it is happening to *her*. Yet it was clear from the tenor of many of the remarks made in the focus groups that such violence was still a factor in the lives of at least some of these women. One or two cringed visibly when the subject was raised.

The women in my survey had very strong and definite ideas about the causes of much contemporary violence by men against women. As I have said, they saw it as a form of payback on the part of men who simply cannot accept or cope with the women in their lives having greater freedom and independence.

These men responded to women having 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.'

The last government survey on violence against women, in 1996, reported that 1.1 million Australian women had experienced some form of violence in a domestic relationship. This was equivalent to 23 per cent of all women who had ever been married or in a de facto relationship. Children witnessed the violence in almost half a million cases. Almost one-third of these women reported that violence had occurred during a pregnancy, and 14 per cent of these women said the violence had been inflicted for the first time when they were pregnant.

Large numbers of Australian women's lives are disrupted or even destroyed by such violence. Often this violence requires them to flee from the violent partner and thus become homeless. Yet what are we as a society doing about this? Not much. We don't even know the full extent of the violence.

Just two years ago, in 2001, 13,500 women reported to police that they had been sexually assaulted. This was a large increase on the previous year's reporting but, we know from crime studies, it represents the mere tip of the iceberg as most such 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 was more like 90,500 - about 248 a day.

In 1975 I wrote in *Damned Whores and God's Police* that the incidence of rape in Australia had 'considerably increased': the number of reported rapes had more than doubled, from 251 in 1966 to 544 in 1972. In other words, the total number of rapes reported in Australia in 1966 is now about equal to the probable number of sexual assaults perpetrated on Australian women every day!

Back then, who could have imagined that in 2001 more than 13,500 women in Australia would report a sexual assault to police, and that this figure represented a 9 per cent increase over the previous year, which in turn was 9 per cent greater than the year before? Or that conviction rates for rape and other forms of sexual assault would be declining? This is another area where we are going backwards.

For all the reasons I have just outlined, I say we have reached the end of equality.

Although we never achieved full equality of opportunity between women and men in Australia, we did for a couple of decades at least 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 all, and still are, men – would have dared challenge its right to be there.

And, we were making progress. We could report encouraging statistics on women in the workforce, women's earnings, women's appointments to top jobs. This is no longer the case. We have stopped even having the national conversation about women's entitlements and women's rights. Instead, all the talk is of families, or mothers, and women, especially women who *are* mothers, are left to feel that that's the only part of their lives that is held in any esteem.

There is another concept I want to introduce today and that is what I call the breeding creed. This is the philosophy of procreation advocated by the federal government and other powerful agents in Australia who are panicking about our declining birth rate. That rate has fallen well below what is needed to reproduce ourselves, so that we now need to rely on immigration to increase our population.

The brunt of government policy towards women for at least the last seven years has been designed to reverse this decline by making it more difficult for women to hold jobs, even part time jobs, *and* have children. The hope has been, apparently, that women would just give up any career aspirations and decide to stay home and have children.

I was shocked to discover just how much federal government policy has been manipulated to penalise women with children who want to work, just as I can still scarcely believe that a prime minister in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would come up with a policy as cruel and regressive as the Baby Bonus. This policy is one of the powerful financial incentives that has been created to try to induce mothers to leave the workforce altogether. In order to qualify for the full Baby Bonus, a woman has to stay at home for five years!

I think we all know how hard it is to retain skills, qualifications and confidence in oneself after a five-year absence from employment. The women in my groups were appalled by this policy, which had just been announced at the time the research was conducted. They had no illusions as to its basic purpose. Here is ideology at work, an ideology that wants women to be breeders before they are anything else. Perhaps to the exclusion of anything else.

It is the breeding creed that has led to the end of equality. 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 federal government has done everything in its power to impose on women who want to have children only one choice: that fulltime motherhood.

Those women in my focus groups who were full-time mothers – and they made up about half of the women - even those who were very happy with their situation, all characterised this phase of their lives as temporary. None of them doubted that they would return to employment but many of them worried about how they would do this, whether they would have lost their skills and their confidence.

As a society, we should be acknowledging these fears – and helping women to maintain their skills. One way to do this, of course, would be to have a national scheme of paid maternity leave. Such a scheme acknowledges that women are “on leave” from their jobs. They have not been exiled permanently from the world of employment – which is what many women feel these days when they leave their jobs to have a baby.

Since the book was published and I have had further opportunities to talk about these issues with women, I have heard young women about to leave their jobs to have a baby talk about it as being like “a death warrant”. Or it being the “end of their lives”. I find it truly shocking that many young women today are made to feel this way.

For women in their late 20s or early 30s the 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 not have children at all and they are most likely to be the well-educated, high earning ones who have so much to lose. It is women aged 30 and over with a university degree who have the lowest birth rate.

Most women start out wanting and intending to have children. Why do we make it so hard for them? If we really worried about the birth rate wouldn't we be making it as easy as possible?

That would mean acknowledging, and creating policies that facilitate, the fact that most women want to continue to have an economic life as well as have babies. Instead we try to force women into a strait-jacket - or what I prefer to call a “white picket prison”.

The birth rate has continued to fall since the breeding creed became official policy, which suggests that it is ineffective and even counter-productive. And it is an illogical – as well as an ideological - approach.

Women need to be beware, however, that unless we can change the thinking of our political leaders, even more coercive measures might be in store for them

Most women are not receptive to the breeding creed. They want lives that encompass a range of things – marriage, children, careers, travel and some time for themselves. But in pursuing these, they are paying a high price – emotional, financial and even physical – because our society has become one that penalizes women who want to be equal.

Yet the prime minister has the temerity to say, as he did to the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year, “We are in the post-feminist stage of the debate...I find that for the under 30s women...the feminist battle has been won. That is not an issue. Of course, a woman has a right to career. Of course, women are as good as men. Of course, they are entitled to the same promotion and they can do it as well. Of course. That is accepted.”

If only it were so.

This is the same man who bragged on the *Sunday* program earlier this year that we now “effectively” have income splitting in this country. This is a tax policy that penalizes couples where both partners work. This is the policy where millionaires with stay-at-home-wives do not have their family payments income-tested, whereas battlers who need two incomes to bring home \$35,000 are subject to brutal income testing. This is post feminism? This is equality? This is fair? Only on Planet Howard.

My book does not pretend to find answers. Its purpose is to hold up a mirror to our national life and to show things how they really are, not how we imagined them to be or hoped they were. Today I have been able to give you only a few glimpses of my arguments and my findings. You will find much, much more in the book itself.

In the book I ask the big questions, questions that we thought no longer needed to be asked. Unfortunately, as I have tried to demonstrate, that need is in many ways greater than it ever was. Once I got over my

surprise, what I discovered made me angry. I suspect that many who read the book will have a similar reaction.

I don't want people to get depressed from reading it – I want them to get active.

In my final two chapters, have suggested various forms of action we can take to try to restore equality to the national agenda. To get women back onto the political radar.

I have also recently established a website where all these same suggestions for action are “up” – and clickable. It's easy to find. Just go to [annesummers.com.au](http://annesummers.com.au) There is a “Don't Get Mad, Get Justice” button which takes you to all sorts of suggestions for action – from emailing politicians to boycotting companies that are unfair to women.

The issues and questions I have raised in *The End of Equality* are big ones. We need to talk about them, debate them, get them back on the political agenda so we can restore equality as a national goal.

I have been surprised and disappointed that this debate has not yet started. I had hoped the book would generate a lot of discussion and disagreement. That it has not is quite ominous. Does it mean that as a society we really don't care any more about the fate of women?

I believe there is a huge need to know how our choices are being manipulated and restricted in ways that are so unfair, especially unfair to women.

I believe – perhaps naively – that the only hope of stopping, and then reversing what is happening is for people to know about it. Information ought to be the first step towards change. I invite you all to become part of that process of change by raising these issues. If we can reverse the end of equality I believe we will *all* be better off.

Thank you.