

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
AT THE OPENING OF THE  
WOMEN AND POLITICS CONFERENCE  
CANBERRA, 31 AUGUST 1975

For most of this country's history women have lived without visible political power; they have been excluded from almost all levels of government in our society. The momentous decisions of war and peace, of finance and technology, as well as the everyday decisions which affect how all people live, have been made by a minority of individuals who happen to be born white and male.

Women - whether they be conservative, liberal or radical - should be fully represented in the political power structure simply as a matter of right: not just because they are women, but because they are capable human beings with skills, abilities and creativity from whom the world has much to gain.

We all of us live in this man-made, man-defined and man-controlled world. But if women are to change it they need to understand the complex processes of this world. They need to understand how economic, political, educational and organisational power interacts with and affects their daily lives. Determination to have a say in matters affecting the lives of women is not sufficient. Women must learn how to make their words effective. Women must learn how to bring about those changes they want, be it in their own lives or in the institutions in our society that affect them.

It was a genuine determination to bring true representative government to all levels of government in Australian society and to allow women full access to all those institutions whose decisions are of as much concern to them as to men that prompted the Australian Government to hold this conference. The aim of the conference is to understand the lessons that the past can teach us in this area, to bring about a greater awareness of the political processes and to increase the participation of women in political activities. It is, in other words, our intention to bring about, in the course of this conference, a greater understanding of the means by which women can participate in the making of political decisions and the difficulties that will confront them in so doing.

Many of the women who have fought and worked so hard in the past, in the parliament, in the parties, in the trade unions and outside in the community are here with us tonight and during this conference. We have much to learn from them and are deeply grateful to them for being prepared to share their wisdom with us. We have also invited women from other countries to help us in this task that we have set ourselves. I take this opportunity to welcome these distinguished and outstanding guests both to this conference and to our country. It is a pleasure and an honour for us that you have accepted our invitation to attend.

The claim that the rights of men and the rights of women are one and the same, particularly in the political arena, is a time-honoured one - though, sadly, too often either disputed or dismissed.

One of its outstanding defenders was Mary Wollstonecraft who in 1792, 3 years after the outbreak of the French Revolution and 4 years after the establishment of the British colony in Australia, published her Vindication of the Rights of Women. Her theme is that women are first and foremost human beings, that the mind has no sex, and that society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistresses, denies them economic independence and encourages them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else.

She claims that the full achievement of social equality will not come about until women begin to take an interest in politics and in particular in parliamentary representation.

The Sydney suburb of Wollstonecraft is named after her nephew, Edward, who fled to Australia from the notoriety of his aunt, an unrepentant and outspoken unmarried mother.

The fight for the right to vote and the right to sit in parliament left Australian women relatively untouched and unaware. In England the King and the Prime Minister could not even go to the races without facing a demonstration by suffragettes.

In 1908 in Hyde Park, London, women gathered from all over the United Kingdom to listen to the preachers of the cause. The Times next day estimated that there were half a million people there. (For comparison, even the great civil rights demonstration in Washington in the summer of 1963 at which Martin Luther King made his "I have a dream ..." speech attracted fewer people than this.) There was nothing like this in Australia although in Victoria a suffrage petition one mile long was collected by the women and refused lodgement by the parliament.

The issue in Australia which in fact brought women into the political and social arena and forced them to become politically active was the anti-conscription campaign during the First World War. Adela Pankhurst, who had migrated to Australia some years earlier, fought, marched, and was imprisoned along with our own women over this issue. For the first time women were seen by governments, political parties, and trade unions, as a force to be contended with rather than mere political domestics: brewers of tea, bakers of cakes and very efficient raisers of money.

The dilemma is that women have actively sought election to our parliaments and have actively fought to have women's issues seriously discussed within them. Yet over the decades success at either of these endeavours has been at best only sporadic.

The political activity of women began first with the establishment of women's unions in the 1880's and 1890's, in Victoria in the clothing trades, in Queensland amongst the women shearers and in South Australia as a direct protest against the sweatshop working conditions of the majority of women workers. The first woman trade union organiser, Emma Miller, was appointed in Queensland in the 1890's. Women's unions were seen as a necessary step in the fight to win economic equality and

subsequently political equality.

Women were on the whole agreed, as Vida Goldstein herself said, that through not having women in parliament the energy and valuable time of individual women and women's organisations had to be spent on the often Herculean task of educating members up to a point of seeing the injustices affecting women.

Groups formed with the aim of increasing the political representation of women. At times these were affiliated to a political party as, for example, were the Women's Central Organising Committees of the A.L.P. and the Australian Women's National League, but time and time again women's groups such as the Australian Women's Party, the Women for Canberra Movement, the Women's non-Party League, the Women's Political Association and the Women's Electoral League prided themselves on their independence from the existing political parties.

These groups supported women candidates in spite of the overwhelming historical evidence that few independents are ever elected to parliament and despite the knowledge that in the practical conduct of political life there is on the whole a limit to what an independent parliamentarian can achieve. Doris Blackburn, the second woman to be elected to the House of Representatives, was one of the few independents to have ever sat in it.

This is not to say that women have not stood for the Federal and State Parliaments. Indeed up until 1943 when the first women were elected to the Federal Parliament - Dame Enid Lyons to the House of Representatives and Senator Dorothy Tangney to the Senate - at least 53 women had stood for the Federal Parliament. Of these, 33 stood as independents and 2 were sponsored by the Australian Women's Party. But during these 42 years only 7 women were pre-selected by a major party. The story was much the same or worse in the state parliaments. The first woman to be elected to any parliament in Australia was the Honourable Edith Cowan, who was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1921, the year after women were first given this right in Western Australia. She, along with Catherine Spence, who was one of Australia's greatest champions of the cause of proportional representation, has been honoured in our recently released set of stamps of famous women.

Within the ranks of those women who have worked throughout the decades to bring about the changes needed by women there was a similar division between those women who felt that women's issues were best served by remaining outside of party politics and those who insisted on the necessity of working from within the political parties. The first stance has been best articulated, perhaps, by Rose Scott, whose retirement message was: "Have friends in all parties, that is the only way to win anything ... Once women go into party politics they become the catspaws of men. The women's and children's cause should stand alone until absolute equality is obtained."

As, however, the women around Rose Scott increasingly involved themselves in issues relating to women and children they became more and more caught up in party politics. The Women's Labour Leagues and the Women's Liberal Leagues were formed. The same thing happened to Vida Goldstein in Victoria when, in 1903, Lilian Locke and many other women withdrew from the Women's Political Association to organise the women's vote for the Labour Party.

Once pre-selected or elected there still remains a host of problems which women face and which they no doubt will continue to face until a woman politician is as everyday a phenomenon as a man politician.

Women campaigning for election in Australia have often found their male opponents only too willing to use slogans such as, "Do we have to suffer another term of ineffectual prattle, or do you want a strong man in Parliament?", or "I am just your man, and will answer you man to man." These examples are not drawn from the 1900's but from the 1960's.

In 1959 when the first women were nominated for the South Australian Legislative Council, a writ was taken out to restrain the returning officer from accepting their nominations on the ground that the South Australian Constitution Act used male pronouns. Of course, it's only in 1975 that that particular legislative body has accepted "one man, one vote".

Another insight can be gained from Dame Enid Lyons' autobiography:

"Two months before the new baby was born I was asked to speak at the opening of the Federal election campaign. At five o'clock on the day of the meeting I was totally unprepared. I had had a particularly trying day, with no time to make a note or even to collect my thoughts.

"And now, it was nearly the children's bedtime. I felt desperate. With the bath water running and the milk for the children's tea heating on the stove I sat down at the dining table with pencil and paper.

"I was tired to death. The baby on my knee was crying with fatigue, the other children were quarrelling noisily. Suddenly I burst into tears. This was not fair. No man was expected to endure such things. When Joe prepared a speech I silenced the whole house so that he could concentrate on his task."

It cannot be said, however, that women in politics have no sense of humour. In 1943 Mrs Jessie Street stood for the Labor Party against Mr Eric Harrison and Mr William Charles Wentworth IV. She decided to take advantage of her name: strips of paper were printed and pasted on the walls, coping stones and street signs throughout the electorate. Soon the most prestigious roads, avenues, lanes and cul-de-sacs in Australia all bore the name Jessie Street.

But from the lessons and the fascination of the past we must turn to the present.

My government has long recognised that discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and the well-being of society.

Our policies and programs in this area have, to date, been based on two basic principles: justice and humaneness. The aim of these policies and programs has been to give women the pre-conditions necessary for them to be able freely to choose the lives they want to lead. To do this women must have the possibility of a little peace of mind as well as the possibility of financial and emotional independence.

It is only just and fair that women enjoy equal pay for work of equal value, access to training and retraining schemes, equal opportunities in recruitment and promotion and decent working places. It is also only just that women should not be expected to bear full responsibility for the rearing and care of our future generations. Many women will, of course, choose to accept the brunt of this responsibility but for these women, as well as for those women who cannot or who are contributing to our society in other ways, there still remains the need for access to a wide range of services for their children.

In order to correct these past injustices, to respond to the demand for equality, the government's actions have included the establishment of anti-discrimination committees in each State as well as at the national level, ratification of the 1953 United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women and the I.L.O. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951, and Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958, submissions to the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission for equal pay for work of equal value and an adult minimum wage and the establishment of a sub-committee of the Schools Commission to investigate and make recommendations on the education of girls and women. We have introduced a program of childhood services designed to respond to the needs of young children and their parents whether these needs are for occasional care, regular care, education, counselling, creative development, emergency care, before or after school care or holiday care. For this financial year \$74 million has been allocated to this program.

In Australia more than in most countries decisions and advice on political matters have been made and given by statutory bodies and royal commissions. In 1948 the last Labor government amended the Broadcasting Act to require that at least one of the Australian Broadcasting Commissioners shall be a woman. My government has deliberately sought talented and qualified women for appointment to such entities. For the first time, for example, women have been appointed to the Arbitration Commission, the Industries Assistance Commission (formerly the Tariff Board), the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Wool Corporation, and women have been appointed from the outset to the new education commissions, Hospitals and Health Services Commission, Children's Commission and Australia Council. Justice Elizabeth Evatt, who has been chairman of the Royal Commission into Human Relations, was last week appointed Chief Judge of the new Family Court of Australia. A woman is expected to be appointed as chairman of the Consumer Protection Authority which is about to be

established. In the 1940's the Foreign Minister, Dr Evatt, ordained that one third of the diplomatic cadets should be recruited from women but that requirement was revoked by his successors. My government appointed the first career diplomatist as an ambassador and has permitted women diplomatists who marry to pursue their careers .

These posts are within the gift of the government. The government, however, cannot appoint public servants other than heads of departments. Accordingly, the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration, which includes a woman, is inquiring into the opportunities which must be given to women in the Public Service.

It has also been of deep concern to us that we lessen the distress and suffering that women face and respond sensitively to social problems affecting them. We are concerned about the problems facing all women in Australia, be they young or old, Aboriginal or newcomers, married or unmarried, English speaking or non-English speaking.

It is the second principle, that of humaneness, that has prompted us to fund women's refuges, women's health centres, rape crisis counselling centres, family planning centres and multi-purpose centres where the health, welfare, educational, training, workforce, legal, recreational and child-care needs of women can be met. We have removed the sales tax from the pill and for the first time in the history of Australia have recognised that supporting mothers form one of the largest groups below the poverty line and introduced a supporting mothers' benefit.

The Royal Commission into Human Relationships has the task of informing and educating us about the extent and the effects of these social problems. It is an overwhelming task for ours is a society which is loath to admit that problems such as these even exist. Marriages do break up; women do die at the hands of back-yard abortionists; children are battered; people; particularly women, do live in extreme poverty; unwanted children are born; men and women do commit suicide; women are raped; children are homeless. Before we can act in this area we must know why all this is so and what can be done to change it.

We have removed many areas of discrimination and injustice, but we feel very deeply that governments must take some responsibility in removing the cause of this discrimination, of these injustices. the Cause lies invariably in the deeply ingrained cultural assumption that every woman's primary role is that of daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law, or grandmother; nurse, secretary, teacher or shop assistant: the deeply ingrained assumption that women are here to serve or assist. The wellbeing of men and children within our society must not be at the expense of the wellbeing of their wives and mothers. For this is too high a price to pay.

Women are as diverse, as different from each other, as are men. We must create a society which acknowledges this. This is not to say that within that society women may not freely choose to be wives and mothers and teachers. It is impossible for us to foresee what such a society would look like. But it is to say that women must be allowed to develop their diverse and multi-faceted potential.

International Women's Year has given us an opportunity to focus on this aspect of our society. It is an opportunity to make explicit the attitudes which our society has about women, an opportunity to question and re-think the assumptions, beliefs, prejudices and opinions about women, their so-called "proper" roles and their capacities. Each woman and man in our society must become aware of these attitudes and myths, for it is these that are the root cause of so much of the distress and suffering experienced by women in our society today. To change these attitudes, to offer women new possibilities and new life patterns is our task for International Women's Year and beyond.

To take just one area of concern to this conference there is a wealth of cliches oft repeated by politicians and researchers as to why women vote the way they do. Women, they say, are personality voters, that is they vote for the candidate with the sexy smile or the fatherly air. Women, they say, vote as their men tell them. Women, they say, are mindless voters. Women, they say, do not vote for women. Women, they say, are innately conservative voters. It is obvious that these "truisms" cannot all be true, and it may well be that none are. But it certainly is true that it is time that these assumptions and myths were questioned.

The claim, for example, that women are conservative voters is often interpreted to mean that they are more likely than men to be conservative on policy issues. But Gallup polls taken in Australia over the last couple of decades show that this is not true. Women hold much less conservative views on, for example, capital punishment or conscription, though they often hold more conservative views on issues such as legal reform, prostitution and the permissive society. Hence women's voting patterns cannot be the result of a general conservatism.

It could rather be seen as a reaction to the sort of life that women lead, to their day to day experiences. The permissive society has not benefited women at all. Women are all too often exploited in sexual relationships, women all too often find themselves taking second place to their husband's mates. If women are conservative voters, this could well be a response to a society that they do not particularly like and within which they all too often come off second best.

Women lack a sense of political efficacy. Playing the role of voter does not in itself give rise to political awareness. It hardly suffices to bring politics to the centre of the voter's consciousness. More voters are influenced or changed by personal discussion than any other means, and women lack such opportunities.

It is often said, and truly, that the home limits women's exposure to political experience and information. But one of the most enlightening changes that has recently occurred is that women are insisting more and more that concerns of the home be the concerns of politics, that the personal be the political. Child care, family planning, housework and so on are now becoming issues for the political arena. To this extent women are in the process of trying to re-define and to re-describe, the political.

I am not here however to lecture women about the responsibilities of citizenship or the need to join political movements or to be politically active. Women are in politics. They know how to organise. They recognise their needs. But now is the time to define and formulate their demands and to seek a full share in political power and leadership. It is my deep belief that what is good for women will in turn be good for the entire society.