



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

16 NOVEMBER 1981

PRESENTATION OF THE 1981 BULLETIN/QANTAS
AWARD FOR AUSTRALIAN BUSINESSWOMAN OF THE YEAR

I am pleased indeed to be here to present the fourth Businesswoman of the Year Award because it is an award which highlights the contribution which women are making in business and so it helps to reflect the social transformation in Australia in terms of opening up and diversifying opportunities for women.

Virginia Woolf was once asked to speak about her experiences as a working woman and she seemed to think that she had cheated because she felt that she had not really made any sort of conscious decision to write for money. As she put it, she became a journalist simply as a result of posting off to a magazine editor, without really having any serious hopes of success, a few pages of her own writing. She was amazed when she got back a cheque, even though it was only for one pound ten and sixpence, and she says that what she bought with the proceeds was a persian cat.

But then, as she said, "I grew ambitious. A persian cat is all very well, but a persian cat is not enough. I must have a motor car. And thus it was that I became a novelist - for it is a very strange thing that people will give you a motor car if you will tell them a story".

I don't know whether there is any moral in this story but I have no doubt that her story underestimates the hard work and determination that she and other women - including many applicants for this award - have had to put into winning 'rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men.'

There is obviously a great deal that can be said on the subject of equality of employment opportunity in our community but one matter on which there is surely no doubt is that every future history of our times will give a significant place to the subject of women in the workforce. In some respects, it would have to be said that substantial strides have been taken towards equality of opportunity and greater freedom in the employment system.

Let me mention a few figures. The number of women in administrative, executive and managerial positions has increased by 40% to over 53,000 in the 10 years to 1980 and the number of women in professional and technical positions has increased by almost 90%, to more than 420,000 in the same period. Overall female employment grew by 29% over the same 10 year period compared to 12% growth in male employment.

But there are other figures which paint a more disappointing picture of progress towards the objective of equality of opportunity. Despite the 40% increase that I have mentioned women now fill only 14% of administrative, executive and managerial positions and although women comprise almost 40% of the workforce, there is an unnatural concentration of women in a narrow range of jobs. For example 62% are in clerical, sales and service occupations and last year, women made up less than half of 1% of those in apprenticeship training in Australia if hairdressing is excluded. Still there are surprises even in the Public Service.

I am told that one of the suburban offices of the Department of Social Security has only one man among its fifteen staff members and he is a social worker. Real attempts are being made to open up a greater diversity of occupational opportunities. The National Labour Consultative Council's Guidelines for Employers on equal opportunities for women was launched earlier this year and Australia is a signatory to the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The Commonwealth will launch a major promotion campaign next month designed to encourage young women to consider apprenticeships in traditionally non-female occupations, and there is little doubt that quite simple initiatives such as this can have a significant impact on future employment patterns. It is obvious that no matter what may be done to widen opportunities, the consequences of earlier practices will continue to have an impact on the pattern of employment for many years.

But in addition to that, there are persisting barriers to equality and diversity in employment opportunities. There is in some places a continuing bias in education towards traditionally female occupations. There is in some places a continuing bias of one kind or another in recruitment procedures and without doubt, there are still various forms of discrimination.

In a historical perspective, however, the remarkable thing is not so much that barriers still exist but that a real notion of equality of employment opportunity has achieved such widespread acceptance in community attitudes in a comparatively few years. While the very existence of an award such as this is in a sense a commentary, if you think about it, on the fact that equality of opportunity is not yet fully a reality, the fact that we find it hard, from the vantage point of 1981, to believe that married women were barred from permanent positions in the Public Service as recently as 1966 is a commentary on how far community attitudes have shifted.

The full significance of the changes that have been taking place is not easy to assess and while it is not easy to find an historical benchmark from which to start, I find some interest in the fact that in the original Liberal Party platform of 1946 there is a section entitled "status of women" which contains the following simple but comprehensive statement "Equality of opportunities, liberties and status for men and women".

These words were farsighted in several ways, and they are eloquent of the key point which is sometimes forgotten - that while equality of opportunity is plainly a fundamental aim, the freedom of women to choose whether to work in employment or to stay at home to look after their family is also fundamental.

In addition to those two choices, there is also the possible option which a number of people seek - and which a number of employers may be able to develop successfully - of flexibility and a variety of part-time employment arrangements.

This possibility raises a number of questions which have not been fully answered. But if significant development of this option should prove to be widely successful in terms of satisfactory and effective employment from the point of view of both employer and employee, it could have consequences not only in relation to equality of employment opportunity but also in terms of enlarging the scope for diversity of lifestyles throughout our community.

Such a development really would contain some challenging possibilities because it could provide a framework for placing the freedom to choose into its proper relationship with equality-of-opportunity for all in a responsible society.

But the purpose of this gathering is not so much to look at future developments but rather to offer congratulations on present achievements. There is no question about the value to Australian business of the contribution that businesswomen are making and the nominations for this particular award are indicative of the very wide range of business activities in which women are engaged. I am advised that the panel of judges in this particular year had a considerable field from which to make their decision and I am pleased to announce that the winner of the 1981 Bulletin/Qantas Award for the Australian Businesswoman of the Year is Mrs Eve Mahlab.

Eve is widely known in the community as a person with a very considerable capacity to communicate the cause and the special needs of women in the workforce. I understand that it was in 1968 that Eve started up her consultancy business, using her legal qualifications in the recruitment of lawyers for law firms and corporations. This business has grown and extended in several directions. The firm of which Eve Mahlab is now the Chief Executive has become involved in the production of a number of specialized business diaries. It has extended its consultancy and recruitment services beyond the law to the construction industry and indeed beyond Australia to South East Asia.

Eve, I don't know whether you would want to extend the employment side of your business further and take on a contract to deal with the problem of unemployment as a whole but anyway, I do want to take the opportunity of congratulating you for your energy and initiative in building up this business in a field that is very important indeed.