



PRIME MINISTER

PRIME MINISTER: TABLING STATEMENT ON GOVERNMENT POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION - 5 JUNE 1984

Mr Speaker,

For the information of Honourable Members I present the Government Policy Discussion Paper on Affirmative Action for Women and seek leave to make a statement.

With this release of its Policy Discussion Paper on affirmative action in employment, the Government has moved to implement one of its major commitments to raising the status of women in Australian society.

This is a commitment on which many in our community expect fearless, clear and effective leadership from the Government.

As I said in the Boyer lectures,

"in the area of the status of women, ...
the formal process of accepting their
equality as human beings has not been
matched by the hard political and
administrative decisions necessary to
give effect to that acceptance."

The Australian Labor Government is determined to rectify this situation by making those decisions. The Government has already taken such major steps as the enactment of sex discrimination legislation, the appointment of more than 70 women to Government boards and authorities and, now, the introduction of an affirmative action program.

We are committed to the development of policies which will give women the opportunity to participate fully in employment. We are committed to policies to ensure that women are given the opportunity to improve their labour market prospects, to compete for a wider range of jobs and to be able to apply on an equal footing with men for those jobs that are available.

The approach we now propose should ensure that women are no longer excluded from many occupations and concentrated at the bottom of the labour market. Women should now assume the place of their choice in our society. I should emphasise that this, we appreciate and recognise, will see many choosing a traditional role in the home.

Affirmative action of the kind now proposed by the Government is a means of improving women's position in the workforce by ensuring that discriminatory practices or traditions are reviewed and removed. We aim to see that women are enabled to compete equally with men for jobs at all levels.

Our approach is not one which relies on the experience of other countries. We have explicitly rejected the American model with its system of court-imposed employment quotas. Rather we have developed a set of proposals which are appropriate for the Australian environment. They are the product of our unique industrial relations and business practice traditions.

Put quite simply, equal employment opportunity is our objective, and affirmative action is the way to achieve it. We must shake ourselves from the inertia and complacency which for too long has characterised Australian policy on matters such as this. What I said in the Boyer lectures in 1979 remains true today - namely that:

" We luxuriate in the comfortable assertion that women enjoy equality. We have salved our consciences by eliminating the more obvious discriminations like unequal rates of pay for work of equal value. But we have not eliminated the inheritance of the millenia that women are lesser beings, an inheritance which still manifests itself in a whole range of prejudice and other forms of discrimination. We are, as a society, more aware of this dichotomy, between principle and practice, but the very awareness is a source of guilt and conflict between women and women, between women and men, and within women and men themselves."

I see it as crucial that we confront this dichotomy head on. It is not enough simply to say that there should be equal employment opportunities for women or that all employers should treat men and women equally. What we need is concerted action - affirmative action - to ensure its achievement.

Special measures and programs are needed to ensure that women acquire the skills, experience and training to compete on an equal basis with men for jobs and for promotions.

Such special measures include making it explicit in job advertisements that women and girls can apply, companies advising their employees that all positions are open to women, companies analysing their workforce to identify areas where women are not employed and designing strategies to attract them to these areas, and companies consulting with female employees on their perceptions of where barriers to full equality of opportunity might exist.

Some companies will already have adopted such measures. These are, after all, what many would see as being integral to good management practice. Successful companies will not ignore the talents and skills of all their employees. Such practices should become the rule rather than the exception.

Women are now 37% of the Australian workforce. Two and a half million women, 60 per cent of them married, are in the workforce. The economy and standards of living we know today would collapse if women were to withdraw to their pre-war rate of labour market participation.

Women today do not have the same diversity of occupational choices available to men. Sixty four per cent of women workers are employed in only three occupational groups: clerical; sales and service; sport and recreation. Women in these occupations work largely as stenographers, typists, sales assistants, waitresses and cleaners.

Women are under-represented in administrative, executive and managerial positions, in agricultural work and in the transport and communication occupations. They are notably under-represented in the trades, production-process and labouring occupational groupings.

Even within occupations where women predominate, men tend to have the higher-level, decision-making positions.

Indeed, among OECD countries, Australia has the highest level of occupational segregation of women and one of the highest levels of industrial segregation.

There is no evidence of this segregation diminishing. Rather, as I observed in the 1979 lectures,

"The range of employment readily open to women is restricted because of discrimination built into our education system and the attitudes of some employers and trade unions. There is still the unstated but operative assumption that women are not entitled to equal opportunity because their place is, or ultimately should be, in the home."

In the final analysis, what we have to recognise is that - while there is an inevitable imbalance in circumstances where a significant number of women chose not to enter the workforce - there is still, as I observed in the Boyer Lectures, a gross lack of proportion. We have a situation where women comprise half the population and yet still occupy so few positions of authority in government, business, trade unions, and other organisations of significance within the community.

The Government's affirmative action proposals aim to redress this situation. We aim to open up a greater and more satisfying range of job opportunities for women.

The union movement has a very important role to play in securing these objectives. The ACTU Congress' decision to hold a seminar for all affiliates should help see the unions make their essential contribution.

But it is the co-operation of Australian employers which will be absolutely vital for the long-term success of an affirmative action program. In this regard the Government has sought and received the cooperation of many Australian companies and of the higher education institutions. This co-operation augurs well for the prospects of the approach we are now proposing and we are particularly grateful to all those concerned for their co-operation.

Following my invitation, the following companies and tertiary institutions have agreed to join a pilot program establishing affirmative action for women in employment:

Australian Mutual Provident Society
 Ansett Transport Industries Ltd.
 ANZ Banking Group Limited
 Boral Ltd.
 Borg-Warner (Australia) Limited
 The Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited
 Castlemaine Tooheys Limited
 G.J. Coles & Coy. Limited
 Argyle Diamond Mines Pty Limited and Sulphide
 Corporation Pty Limited divisions of CRA Limited
 CSR Limited
 Dunlop Olympic Limited
 Esso Australia Limited
 John Fairfax & Sons Limited
 Ford Motor Company of Australia Limited
 Grace Bros. Department Stores
 IBM Australia Limited
 ICI Australia Limited
 Mitsubishi Motors Australia Ltd.
 Reckitt & Colman Australia Limited
 Santos Ltd.
 Simpson Ltd.
 South Pacific Hotel Corporation Limited

Thomas Nationwide Transport Limited
Unilever Australia Limited
Westpac Banking Corporation
Woolworths Limited
Wormald International Limited
J.B. Young Limited
The Australian National University
Griffith University
South Australian College of Advanced Education

The pilot program is a unique and historic challenge. The participation by such a representative cross section of our business and education communities gives me confidence not only of the likely success of the program, but of the seminal influence it will have on community attitudes in this vital area.

Between them, the participants in the pilot program employ almost a quarter of a million Australians. 16 of the 28 companies which are participating in the program are listed by Business Review Weekly as being amongst Australia's top 150 companies in terms of their market capitalisation. Six of the participating companies are amongst Australia's top ten companies. Quite deliberately, however, the pilot program is not confined to such companies; it necessarily encompasses a wide range of sectors and regions and a variety of company sizes. On this basis the demonstration effect of the pilot program should be both considerable and, above all, credible.

I am very confident that the practical attainment of improved employment opportunities for women through the pilot program will dispel any lingering misapprehensions about the appropriateness of affirmative action as a strategy for improving women's job opportunities.

A special Affirmative Action Resource Unit has been established in the Office of the Status of Women to assist participants in the pilot program. It will help employers design Affirmative Action Programs and will provide advice when problems arise. It will also assist employers in monitoring the progress of their programs.

In this regard I should like to pay tribute to the clarity and sensitivity of approach adopted by many in Australian business and industry to the challenge involved in mounting affirmative action programs.

This is reflected, for example, in the attitude of the Confederation of Australian Industry which has acknowledged that:

"Industry, as a part of society, cannot escape the fact that it has a role to play.... In the main, real and positive advances will only be made in this area through coordinated and cooperative action by industry, the trade union movement and governments... Affirmative action programmes carried out on (this) basis have the full support of CAI."

The Business Council of Australia, to which most of the companies participating in the pilot program belong, is also holding a series of working sessions throughout the year for participating companies. This initiative is a practical approach which should be of particular value to all the companies concerned.

That so many in business are both receptive to the purpose of affirmative action and prepared to give it practical effect in their own enterprises, gives me real confidence that we have found a most effective means of securing real progress in this vitally important area.

Mr Speaker,

The Paper before us defines affirmative action as a systematic means, determined by employers in consultation with employees and unions, of achieving equal employment opportunity for women. It is not a means of generating increased employment - other policies are directed to this end.

Affirmative action is aimed at promoting improved job choice for women in the work force. In this regard the Government strongly believes that all jobs should be awarded on merit. We reject the use of employment quotas for women or any disadvantaged group. What is needed is a self-determined, industry-specific approach. Such an approach would be one which would adopt goals or targets rather than binding, operational quotas.

Affirmative action Programs will only achieve long-term benefits, for women and for the economy, if they are regarded as employment policies designed to improve the skill, efficiency and mobility of the workforce. They should be designed to redress discrimination where it occurs within organisations, to identify obstacles to women's employment or promotion, and to take systematic steps to remove these.

Affirmative action does not threaten the jobs of men. Rather it ensures equitable treatment for individual employees, and urges employers to make optimal use of all skills and talents available both inside and outside the organisation.

We cannot afford the situation any longer situations where women remain concentrated at the bottom on the labour market; where women continue to receive a disproportionately low share of wages and salaries; and where their access to non-traditional occupations will not improve.

Only if we utilise all available skills and resources will we have any hope of enhancing, indeed maintaining, our relative standard of living.

Australia needs to establish a more efficient, more productive and, ultimately, more competitive industrial base. Our labour market, industrial relations and education policies should contribute to the process. A labour force which is low-skilled, immobile and occupationally stultified will only impede our progress. The Affirmative Action proposals now before the House will have an important place in achieving the necessary conditions for progress.

They are part of a wider effort by the Government to improve the educational, training and employment prospects for women and girls.

We are giving particular attention to the achievement of equal access to jobs for women and men under the Community Employment Program Job Creation Scheme; we have introduced special rebates under the CRAFT scheme for employers who take on female apprentices in trades other than hairdressing; we have commenced information campaigns to encourage young women to train for non-traditional occupations; we have also introduced the Participation and Equity Program and the Computer Education Program within the educational system both of which should be a particular assistance to girls in their later quest for jobs.

While each employer is now being asked to design affirmative action programs suitable for the conditions and traditions of the industry concerned, most affirmative action programs should, nevertheless, have certain common features. These include: the appointment within each organisation of a senior executive responsible for the implementation of the program; an analysis of their workforce to identify areas where women are concentrated or under-represented; a review of the organisation's employment policies and practices; the formulation of specific goals or targets to remedy any shortcomings disclosed by this analysis and review; and an evaluation and monitoring component to enable the organisation to assess whether it is making demonstrable progress to equal employment opportunity for women.

There is nothing particularly difficult or costly about any of these steps. I would urge all employers to consider the benefits involved most carefully.

Mr Speaker,

The Government proposes that legislation should ultimately be introduced covering the introduction of affirmative action programs for women employees in private sector organisations.

Such legislation needs to be carefully evolved for the Australian context. It needs to be implemented in a way which is not disruptive to business and the other organisations it will affect. It should also be such as not to prejudice women's long-term employment prospects.

In order to make sure that affirmative action legislation achieves these goals and has broad business, union and community support, the Government proposes to follow the successful consultation mechanism developed to consider the legislation for the Prices Surveillance Authority.

With this in mind, I am also pleased to announce today that a Working Party is to be established to advise the Government on the most appropriate form of legislation in respect of affirmative action. This Working Party will be a direct and formal link between the Government and the parties affected by the Affirmative Action proposals. It will be kept informed of progress of the pilot program and will draw on its experience in framing the options for legislation.

The Working Party is to be chaired by Senator Ryan representing me in her capacity as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women.

The Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations, Mr Willis, and the Attorney-General, Senator Evans, will also participate in the Working Party as will representatives of the ACTU, the Business Council of Australia, the Confederation of Australian Industry, the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, the Australian Committee of Directors and Principals of Colleges of Advanced Education and women's organisations.

Mr Speaker,

The Government hopes that all large employers - not only those taking part in the pilot program - will start to move towards adopting affirmative action programs for their women employees prior to the report of the Working Party. I am most heartened by the interest shown already by a number of organisations, educational institutions and statutory authorities and applaud them for their initiative in this important area.

The Government will, of course, also provide as much assistance as possible to these organisations through the Affirmative Action Resource Unit.

The Government, it will be appreciated, is not applying one standard to the private sector and another to its own employees in the public sector.

The Public Service Reform Bill introduced into this House on 10 May 1984 by John Dawkins as Minister Assisting me on Public Service Matters, contains provisions requiring Commonwealth Departments to introduce affirmative action programs for women and disadvantaged minority groups. This legislation will also apply to Commonwealth Statutory authorities on a case by case basis. I would hope the example set by the Government will provide an incentive for many others to follow suit.

Mr Speaker,

The proposals in this paper have been widely discussed between the Government, business, and unions. I repeat how grateful my Government is for the very substantial support we have already received from these quarters. This demonstrates, I believe that all parties affected by the Government's proposals will see them as realistic and practical, and in their interests to implement.

For far too long, women have been denied their right to compete on equal terms with men for jobs or to have reasonable prospects within those jobs. The Government's objective is to redress this situation so that women's position and status in the labour market markedly improves. We are, in this important area, I believe, on the threshold of a major transformation of the place of women in our society.

Australia will be a better and more prosperous place for it.
