



PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE, 5 JUNE 1984, ON THE TABLING
STATEMENT ON GOVERNMENT POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER ON AFFIRMATIVE
ACTION

PM: I only want to make a very brief statement. Firstly, I want to express the gratitude of the Government to Susan Ryan, who has been the Minister assisting me, Dr Summers and the other people in the Office of the Status of Women who have put so much work into this. And the second expression of gratitude of course is to the business community and their organisations for the whole hearted support which they have given to the Government in its approach on this matter, and to the trade unions. Without the support of all those people and all the hard work of those people we would not be able to be in a position now where together with the support of the Opposition indicated to me today that we can go to the people of Australia with a widely agreed basis for remedying what has been for too long a very substantial deficiency in our society.

As I said in my speech, we have luxuriated as a society I think for too long in saying that yes women have equal rights, they are not second class citizens but we haven't matched in practice that assertion of principle. And this has been particularly clear in the area of employment. And the fact that so many women are concentrated into relatively few occupations and to be denied the opportunity of access to positions of responsibility in all the ranges of occupations, both horizontally and vertically if you like, in the labour market, has been I think a stigma in society and a contradiction of our assertion of principle about equality.

Ultimately, the rectification of these inequities is going to require more than just a program of affirmative action. It is going to require a gradual reform of our education system so that from the time young boys and girls go into the education stream there is not going to be any differentiation on a basis of sex between the opportunities that will be available to them to go into the occupations of their choice. That sort of thing in the education field will take longer.

In the immediate term we believe that under the program of affirmative action there are things that can be done. I have indicated that we are not rushing this and this approach is one that is going to enable a wider base of community support. You are aware that we are going to have a pilot program and I particularly thank those 28 companies and

institutions in the educational field who have given us their support. They are obviously significant institutions and the fact that they are cooperating in this pilot program will be of importance in us getting the concept effectively into action.

I also thank those who are going to work with us on the working party to monitor the pilot program and to advise us as we move later on towards a legislative program which will be directed towards those enterprises with more than one hundred employees.

And I am certain that given the basis of approach that we have adopted, with the cooperation through the business, industrial and political communities, that it will mean that we will be able to come up with legislation which will have equally substantial support and will mean that there will be effective results.

And so I repeat the gratitude of the Government to all those concerned and I believe that we have today initiated a major reform which is going to be of enduring importance to creating a better, more prosperous, and more equitable society in this country.

Susan, perhaps you'd like to make some comments and then we'll be available for questions.

SENATOR RYAN: Yes, well thank you Bob. I'd just like to say that it is immensely satisfying to be able to deliver on such a major commitment to women and the fact that we'll be able to deliver in way that will be effective and practical makes it even more satisfying.

The way in which the program will be implemented, that is with a pilot program and a working party to develop the legislation, means that we will avoid the kind of mistakes and major problems that other attempts to provide equal employment opportunity in other economies have run into. This will really be an Australian development, a home-grown affirmative action plan, which will take account of our unique industrial history and our unique business situation.

I'm very gratified that there has been such a degree of cooperation from major employers because without the cooperation of major employers legislation doesn't really work.

We wanted to avoid a tokenistic approach or a confrontationist approach because we really want to change and improve employment opportunities for women and I believe that the approach we have taken will do that. And of course in terms of timing our approach really offers something better than an earlier approach which I had foreshadowed when we were in Opposition. This way we a quarter of a million workers covered by the pilot program immediately with the prospects of a very large proportion of the work force being covered after about 18 months of discussion and development. The earlier proposal that we had in Opposition would have taken

over 2 years to come into effect. So this is on the one hand a very immediate approach, because the pilot program will cover a quarter of a million workers, but it has the benefits of being a gradual evolutionary approach which will ensure that when we do get legislation it will be legislation that works for the benefit of all parties concerned and that the pilot program will give us the opportunity to change and develop our concepts to make sure that they are practical and that they benefit everybody and not just some parties to it. So I think it's a really extraordinarily progressive step and one that I have total confidence will be a real improvement in women's employment opportunities in this country.

JOURNALIST: Senator Ryan, what does it mean on the ground to people employed in these 28 companies, for instance, John Fairfax and Sons

SENATOR RYAN: Well, the merit principle will continue to apply, but I'm sure Amanda that you have no worries about that. And I think it is important to say that the whole program is based on giving women the opportunities to be judged for a job on their skills and experience and not on irrelevant criteria such as whether you're likely to get married or have children. So, it will involve Fairfax appointing a senior person to coordinate the operation, analysing the workforce in Fairfax, seeing where women are, what obstacles there are to women advancing, and then what kind of training programs or extra experience women would need in order to be in a position to apply on the basis of merit with a fair chance of success.

JOURNALIST: Senator Ryan, how confident are you that the business community sees the economic climate now as being right for a program which at least in the short run might involve some inefficiencies.

SENATOR RYAN: Well, I think the Prime Minister has in his hand a number of press releases put out by business organisations welcoming the step. And because there has been such lengthy consultation with individual companies and with umbrella organisations, we are confident that there will not be any dislocation at a time of economic pressure for the companies. The costs involved are not great of course. They really involve mainly the appointment of a particular person to be responsible and then the process of data collection. The Office of Status of Women will have an affirmative action resources unit which will assist all the participant companies and institutions advise them and we have this affirmative action implementation manual, which sets out in a very practical and sensible way the steps a company would go through, certainly concise. So that it's a management approach and major corporations are interested in improved management. They are interested in improved productivity. They are interested in getting better out of their workers and having better staff morale and this is just a way of doing all of those things.

PM: Could I just refer to the statements that have been released today. Susan mentioned, just referring very briefly to extracts from them, which make the point. From the Australian Chamber of Commerce, Mr Alexander Downer, "We welcome the constructive and cooperative way in which the Government has approached the issue of broadening opportunities for women in the private sector. Most business people will support the goal of eliminating anachronistic discrimination against women, will be satisfied with many if not all aspects of the Government's Green Paper". From the Business Council of Australia, is a statement by the Chairman of their business law committee Mr John Wilkes, "The Business Council welcome the release of the policy discussion paper Affirmative Action for Women. The Council is prepared to cooperate fully with the study program". From the Confederation of Australian Industry, "The Green Paper released today by the Prime Minister is a welcome contribution to the debate on equality of opportunity in employment. The Government can be assured of CAI commitment to work constructively with the proposals canvassed in the Green Paper". You can take that as a pretty broad spectrum of the free market business organisations.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, isn't that so because business would assume that it wasn't discriminating against one section of its work force, and the problem for you is to get beyond their assumptions as to what they're really thinking and the way they really see ...

PM: No, I think the discussions that have taken place, in which I haven't been directly involved but I have reports back on them, there is an acknowledgement on the part of the business community that discrimination if not conscious has in fact operated. They are not coming into this on the basis that they are perfect in this respect. Quite the contrary. And they recognise that there is a lot of work to be done. And may I make this point in regard to the business community, that I think they approach it very sensibly on two grounds. One, I think they believe that it's the right thing to do. Secondly, I think they can also see the benefits in it because it's a simple matter of, it seems to me, of proper utilisation of resources and if you approach the fact that a significant proportion of work force, getting on for forty per cent, is female, then it just makes sense, it makes economic sense, that you should try and maximise the talent that is there.

JOURNALIST: What was wrong with the American system, according to those quotas?

PM: Well, let me make an observation and Susan may like to add to it. There are at least two observations that I would make about it. Firstly, it goes against the basic merit principle which is foundational to our approach and which women themselves and their organisations insist upon. They do not want a situation which is not based upon merit and I think the second point flows from it that the concept of imposition goes against the merit concept and imposes unreal consideration and means that you don't get the constructive co-operation from firms and enterprises that we believe is necessary to make the system more fair. So, they were the two points I would make. I don't know if Susan wants to add to that.

RYAN: They are the main points. The quotas have been counterproductive in some areas. And of course the United States has such a different industrial and legal set-up from us anyway. They like to legislate for everything. They are legislation happy compared with us. I think we are a society where we prefer to do things by negotiation, discussion and particularly with the trade union movement which is, of course, much more integral to the development of the economy here than it is in the United States. So the whole thing didn't seem to be an appropriate operation to transfer here. But the basic problem is the one that the Prime Minister pointed out that it set aside the principle of employing someone and their skills and qualifications ... an artificial quota.

JOURNALIST: Senator Ryan, there are some appalling figures in this discussion paper relating to migrant women. In August last year they were 25% of the total female workforce, 30% of unemployed women were migrants, 40% of the unemployed married women. Do you think within this nation the concept of affirmative action there exists a case for sort of affirmative action for migrant women in isolation?

RYAN: I don't think they need to be dealt with in isolation because I think their circumstances are so disadvantaged and you have just read out some statistics to demonstrate that, but they would automatically receive a pension as any major company looks at the people or the women at the bottom of the work heap - they will find many migrant women there and so they will automatically be incorporated into the program. One of the things about migrant women is that many of them start in a very unskilled job because they don't speak English, they don't know the situation and that is all they can get, but they may have many other skills and other expertise from their home country that they can't manifest while they have the language problem. Now in a stultified occupational situation they always stay at the bottom of the heap. Because affirmative action means that the company will be reviewing the abilities and the circumstances of all of its workers, it will give migrant women with other talents the opportunity, once they have

learned English and become familiar with the workforce to have any other skills and experience they might have acquired in their home land countries the chance to have those skills and experiences recognised by their employers. So I expect and hope that migrant women will be a very large beneficiary group of the whole program.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, what sort of checks does the Government propose to have to see that people are working towards affirmative action in the workforce?

PM: Under the pilot program and the establishment of a working party I think the concept is a two way interchange - that the companies operating the pilot program will themselves be reporting to both the working party and secondly there will be the provision of assistance from the unit to be established, so that they can work back in and see how the programs are going. It is obviously a voluntary monitoring program and I think the 28 companies and institutions have entered into it on that basis. I understand it and again Susan may add to this, but I understand from the discussions that have taken place that there is an expectation that companies won't simply be left to their own resources, but will get the benefit of the experience of others and the opportunity to learn from how others have coped so that they may be able to make their own operation more effective, so it is basically a co-operative two-way process rather than by definition anything more than that. We are not some time down the track into a legislative situation.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, does business support for the affirmative action of the Government extend to the longer term goal of introducing legislation for companies with over 100 employees.

PM: Yes, let me make it clear that they will be represented on the working party which is both going to review the operation of the pilot program and prepare options for consideration by the Government. Now, obviously in that process of preparing options for the Government there may come to be some differences of emphasis into what they would regard as the most appropriate legislation, but I express the hope now that as a result of the experience of co-operation we will be able to reach a position of consensus on the legislation.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, were any companies or tertiary institutions approached which declined to join the pilot program and do you think that tertiary institutions are under-represented with only three of them on it?

PM: I understand that there were some who declined and it is a matter of confidential relationship that we gave an undertaking that there be no disclosure of names of those who declined. As far as the question of the educational institutions being under-represented, I don't think that is the case and at any rate you will see on the working party that the Vice Chancellors and the committee which covers all the universities

plus the association of the principles of the other advanced education institutions are represented on the working party so I think that there will be, if you like, an enmeshing of the institutions - of the educational institutions - in this process.

RYAN: Yes, and it is important to have a whole range of companies and, as you can see from the 28 companies that we have got - we have got some of the largest and most acceptable companies. We have got some of the smaller companies. We have got companies that operate in remote areas such as mining. We have got urban companies. We have really covered the workforce as extensively as possible because there are so many different circumstances in different parts of industry. But with tertiary institutions the kinds of problems that affirmative action is going to address wouldn't be as diverse as they are in industry. Most universities are run along similar lines although we have a very large established university - the ANU - and a smaller newer university - Griffith in Queensland - but generally the kinds of problems that affirmative action is going to address in higher education wouldn't vary a great deal from institution to institution, so three seemed to us to be a sensible number.

JOURNALIST: Were any of those companies that declined opposed to affirmative action or were there other reasons?

PM: I wasn't involved in those discussions.

RYAN: I think there were a few companies that didn't feel able to participate at this stage. Some of them felt that they already had some programs and they would rather just pursue their own for the time being. Others felt that they were engaged in other kinds of restructuring. It wasn't a good time for them to take on a new program, but they all requested to be kept in touch. They were all interested in the program and will monitor the pilot.

JOURNALIST: Senator Ryan, will there be tax incentives for companies who take part in the scheme, now or further down the track?

RYAN: There won't be any new tax incentives for the scheme, but as you will notice in the paper, I think it is on page 49, there is a letter - there is correspondence between me and the Treasurer where I enquire as to whether existing tax incentives for training schemes and so on will be able to apply to any schemes that companies put in for affirmative action and in general the answer was yes and that they would apply in the way that companies apply to have tax incentives for any other training scheme so it seems as though a lot of those kinds of expenses would fit into and be covered by already existing tax incentives.

JOURNALIST: Senator, how long do you estimate it would take for changes being instituted at a management level to flow down to basic attitudes in the community. You have said it is a gradual evolution, what sort of timetable would you put on it?

RYAN: I think that there have been basic changes in community attitudes, hence the degree of co-operation we have got in the whole thing and the volunteering of companies to participate in the pilot program. So I think attitude change is well under way. This will, I think, reinforce the movement towards attitude change because it seems to me that people change their attitudes when they see things being different, rather than when they hear that things are going to be different. When they see women working in a wider range of occupations, when they see women undertaking new responsibilities successfully, then attitude change will be reinforced and I think that that will be as soon as women get into the newer jobs. But we are looking at the pilot program as taking all in all about 18 months - about 12 months to report back and then some months to feed that into the legislative process, but I think attitude change is with us now and we are really just seeking to reinforce it.

JOURNALIST: Senator Ryan, will the working party, or anybody else be examining the need for penalties for companies who choose to ignore the Government's approach to action?

RYAN: That will be a part of what the working party will look at, yes.

JOURNALIST: Would that be in the form of fines?

RYAN: Well that is all open to discussion. They can look at other examples that exist in other areas of company law and just - that is really the kind of thing we are having a working party set up to advise us and to discuss with us. That is all open.

JOURNALIST: In the public service area isn't it true that there will be legislation enforced - I think it is Mr. Dawkins

RYAN: Yes it is and it is before the Senate now.

JOURNALIST: DO they include penalties for people who don't comply?

PM: Well when you are the Government they don't disobey you - they had better not.

JOURNALIST: Just on a separate topic. Did you get a chance to read the Soutter Report?

PM: I Haven't. I was just going to say I haven't had one sent to me. That may not be accurate. There may have been one come into the process, but it hasn't come to my desk yet, but when it does, I will read it.
