



PRIME MINISTER

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TALK BY THE PRIME MINISTER
TO NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL

CANBERRA - 8 NOVEMBER 1984

I am very pleased to be here today to meet you. Senator Ryan has spoken to me about your enthusiasm and energy in tackling the work set for the new Council. Let me assure you that your efforts are appreciated - the Government will always pay very close attention to your views on matters of importance to women.

A key feature of the Government's efforts to improve the status of women has been our policy on increasing the number of women involved in decision-making.

The reason we attach such importance to this goal should be clearly understood.

The Government starts from the premise that merit and fairness should be the basis upon which appointments to Government decision-making bodies are made. Accordingly, women with appropriate experience and specialist skills are considered for appointment alongside their male counterparts. When women are appointed it is because of their expertise or because they provide skilled representation of the interests of a particular group.

Guided by these principles, the Government has sought to ensure that, wherever possible, women are represented on important decision-making bodies.

We have had considerable success. More than 100 women have been appointed to Government Boards and Authorities since we took office.

Some women are the first ever to be appointed to the particular Board - Judith Yates on the Board of the Commonwealth Banking Corporation and Rhonda McIver on the Board of the Meat and Livestock Corporation are two women who share that distinction.

Hylde Rolfe was chosen to head the Prices Surveillance Authority. Di Yerbury has been appointed Manager of the Australia Council.

Other women have been appointed to Boards or Councils to represent the interests of a particular group. For example, on EPAC, the Economic Planning Advisory Council, Lois Cutts represents Local Government and Jan Marsh, the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

What all these women have in common is their recognised expertise and suitability for their particular appointments.

Women of talent in the Public Service have benefitted, too, from our policy of involving more women in positions of executive responsibility. Again their appointments and promotions are based on merit and fairness and again the policy is achieving results.

When we came into office there were just thirty-two women in the Second Division. Today that number has more than doubled. There are 68 women in what is now the Senior Executive Service and more are in very senior posts. You probably know of Deputy Secretaries Ann Kern in the Health Department and Helen Williams in the Department of Education and Youth Affairs. There is also Deputy Commissioner Jocelyn McGirr in Veterans' Affairs. The recent appointment of Jocelyn Chey as Senior Trade Commissioner in Beijing adds yet another woman to the ranks of those in top Government jobs.

The Government has also judged that, at times, there is a need to appoint women to Government bodies in order to ensure women's views are taken into account in decision-making. I strongly believe that there should be women representing women's interests when significant national issues are debated.

The National Women's Consultative Council is a body whose members have been appointed to do this. Through you, the Government has the benefit of women's views on significant issues and take those views into consideration in our decision-making. The diverse and representative nature of your Council means that it is particularly suited to this task.

The appointment of two members of your Council to the Working Party on Affirmative Action legislation is another example of the Government's wish to have women's position in employment improved.

I intend to follow this precedent in deciding who will attend the Taxation Summit which I announced last week: at least one of your members should be there with a brief to represent women's interests.

Involving more women in Government and consulting with women and women's organisations are integral to my Government's consensus approach to decision-making. So, too, is consultation with groups such as business and the trade union movement on issues of importance to women. The Government's Affirmative Action pilot program is a classic example of co-operation between Government and the major economic partners.

I take the view, and it is shared by my Ministers, that we will be able to have more progressive government and a better society if long-lasting social reform is implemented on the basis of genuine consultation and co-operation in the development of policy.

I have already mentioned the Government's Affirmative Action program. We recognised that women suffer many disadvantages in the labour market. We realised that special measures and programs were needed to ensure that women acquire the skills, experience and training to compete on an equal basis with men for jobs and promotions. We consulted with some of the largest and most important companies in the country about implementing affirmative action. As a result, 28 companies have agreed to assist the Government by joining the pilot program. The program is comprehensive, voluntary and it will steer us towards the best way of permanently ensuring that women are given equal job opportunities with men in our society. It will also make it possible for more women to be involved in making decisions in the private sector.

Our interest in these matters is more than just rhetorical. I am happy to announce today a program of grants totalling \$472,000 to assist women.

The first part of the program will provide an annual increase of \$122,000 in funds for grants to national women's organisations to be administered by my Department. The Government has recognised that national women's organisations receive very little funding and support in comparison with other equivalent bodies. We believe that financial assistance through these grants will improve the capacity of women's organisations to take part in community decision-making generally and in particular will equip them with the means to research, consult and debate on issues of particular significance to women. In addition it will provide resources to assist women improve services, such as mailing and newsletter production, within their own organisations.

The second part of the program will be of particular benefit to you as Council Members. My Government accepts that the brief we have given you is a very broad one and that it may be difficult - and expensive - for member organisations to carry out the consultation with women we require of you. The Government has therefore approved a special one-off payment of \$10,000 for each non-Government member organisation for its two year term on Council. This would provide Council

members with the resources required to research the considered views of women in their organisations on the various topics on which the Council is consulted by my colleague, Senator Ryan. I expect that the funds will be well spent on conferences and meeting costs, postage, printing and photostating of materials and other expenses associated with conferring with members.

In the third part of this package, funds totalling \$200,000 will be allocated annually for grants to approved organisations for projects to assist women. Such organisations could include trade unions, churches, ethnic or aboriginal groups as well as the traditional women's organisations. Organisations will be able to apply for financial assistance to implement projects which increase women's participation in decision-making or to develop programs for their organisation of particular benefit to women. The grant could conceivably fund, or partially fund, the employment of a project officer whose task it was to produce material for women members and bring about a more active role for women in the organisation.

The Government will stipulate that there should normally be a limit of \$15,000 for any one grant. It has agreed, though, that where the project was of national significance, an exception to this rule might be made.

The whole program is designed to increase the input of women into decisions made for and about them. I would appreciate your assistance in publicising this new program. I am sure you will agree that it is important to get the best possible field from which to select projects of most benefit to women.

Now it is my turn in the limited time available to listen to you and, through you, to hear the views of women in the community. Afterwards I look forward to receiving a full report on the outcome of your two-day meeting. I trust that the Council's deliberations will be useful to you, to your organisations and to Australian women. I know that they will be of value to the Government.

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