



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OPENING OF THE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AGENCY
NORTH SYDNEY - 3 APRIL 1987

Earlier this week, I tabled in Parliament a report which is I think unique among all the documents that have come before the House of Representatives.

The report was titled "Setting the Agenda" and its contents revealed with great clarity the true concerns and interests of Australian women as the nation prepares itself for the 1990's and beyond.

"Setting the Agenda" is based on the expressed opinions of more than 25,000 Australian women who participated in an unprecedented process of consultation as part of the preparation of a National Agenda for Women.

The concerns they expressed in questionnaires, submissions and meetings throughout the nation covered an enormous range of issues. These included opportunities in education, the availability of child care, concerns about health and the proper valuing of the work done by women in the home.

As I told the Parliament, we will be looking closely at these expressions of views as we prepare the National Agenda which will be the foundation for Government policy making as it affects women up to the year 2000.

One of the central priorities the women raised is of course, employment. Many women are concerned that their employment opportunities are limited, that the rewards they receive from employment are less than those received by male employees, that work structures do not sufficiently recognise family responsibilities, and that women are concentrated in too narrow a range of occupations and industries.

Today we are celebrating the launching of an office which is designed to help alleviate those problems and remove some of the obstacles and prejudices which lie in the path of women seeking to enhance their participation in the work force.

This Affirmative Action Agency has been established to implement the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act.

My Government regards this Act, along with the Sex Discrimination Act, as among its most important legislative achievements. It attempts, on the basis of careful consultation and gradual implementation, to overcome some of the very deep seated obstacles lying in the way of women who seek to enhance their employment prospects.

There are two closely related motivations behind this quest for affirmative action. First, affirmative action makes good economic sense.

Australia is a small economy which has for many decades ignored the necessity to diversify our manufacturing base and to compete on international markets. No country - particularly a country in Australia's current position - can afford to be complacent about the skills and working patterns of its workforce. No country can afford to disregard or neglect half its human resources - half the total number of people whose creativity and dedication and vigour are needed to improve our economic performance.

If affirmative action can, by its emphasis on promotion and employment through merit, improve our national productivity and competitiveness, then it deserves our full support. That is as important to our economy as our other measures to improve productivity, such as encouraging students to complete their schooling and eliminating, in co-operation with unions and business, outdated work practices.

The second underlying motivation for our commitment to affirmative action goes to the heart of what the Labor Government has sought to achieve for Australian society after decades of conservative neglect.

That is, simply, fairness among the members of our community and, therefore, equality of opportunity.

Given the serious economic problems we are going through, particularly the collapse in commodity markets which has meant a fall in our national income of more than \$6 billion, my Government has been faced with the twin tasks not just of coping with those declining living standards but of doing so in a fair and compassionate manner.

The achievements we have made in legislating on sex discrimination and affirmative action demonstrate our commitment to that goal of fairness and our success in reaching it.

Let me briefly review some of the concrete aspects of the operation of the new Act and the new Agency.

Perhaps the over-riding message which has come through from the pilot program which preceded the Affirmative Action Act, and from the early work of this Agency, is that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action are synonymous with good human resources management.

It makes eminently good business sense to use all available human resources. Management schools throughout Australia underline the strategic importance of good management of Australia's human resources.

The legislation and the work of this Agency, will we believe, substantially improve personnel practice in Australia, whether the personnel function rests in specialist areas or with line management.

The Act requires private sector organisations over the next three years to commence development of affirmative action programs to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for women employees. Unlike other anti-discrimination legislation, it does not depend on complaints brought after discrimination has occurred.

Thus this Agency is charged under the legislation with a number of responsibilities, of which the most important is advising and assisting employers and higher education institutions to develop and implement their Affirmative Action programs.

The staff being appointed to the Agency are not only closely attuned to the needs of women, but also have experience in the private and higher education sectors. They are thus well poised to understand many of the difficult issues facing employers when undertaking structural, attitudinal and behavioural change.

In particular, the agency's director, Valerie Pratt, brings a wealth of experience to her position, not least from her work as a consultant for the Affirmative Action pilot program and as a former manager of personnel and administration in CSR's Oil and Gas Division.

The success of the new Agency, and its related legislation, should see real changes taking place in all aspects of women's employment.

A successful Agency should mean greater weight will be given to the views of women employees; progress will be achieved in dismantling the barriers to women in all categories of work; there will be a fairer share of the funds spent on training programs and more equitable practices in recruitment, selection and promotion; and acceptance that greater flexibility in work structures is required to accommodate the child bearing role of women and the parental responsibilities of both women and men.

While we require companies and institutions to work towards elimination of discrimination against women in employment, the Government will also provide ways to assist women to move towards economic independence and make the most of the opportunities that will now be opened up by the Affirmative Action initiative.

The Government is taking action on a number of supportive measures recommended by the Working Party on Affirmative Action Legislation. A conference was held in October last year to reach agreement on reforming provisions in legislation and awards which restrict women's employment, while not jeopardising the safety or health of any worker.

In July last year the Minister assisting me on the Status of Women, Senator Susan Ryan, presented to the Australian Education Council an interim National Policy and Plan of Action for the Education of Girls and Women. This was subsequently endorsed by all States and Territories, except - of course - Queensland.

A further measure recommended by the Working Party on Affirmative Action legislation is the development of a Girls into Engineering Project. Three tertiary institutions - Queensland Institute of Technology, New South Wales Institute of Technology and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology - are implementing programs which involve recruitment and publicity campaigns, and the establishment of special support arrangements for women entering engineering.

Our commitment to the provision of child care also acknowledges a very real need experienced by women in many working situations. When we came to office, there were just 46,000 child care places - by around June of next year we will be funding 106,000 of them. We have provided more child care places than any other Government since federation. My Government has also taken steps to facilitate the provision by employers of work related child care.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The question of the status of women has traditionally attracted broad bipartisan support.

Last week in Parliament however, the Opposition parties voted against the Equal Employment Opportunity Bill and revealed thereby that their commitment to this key policy area is faltering.

That vote stands as a stark reminder of the tenacity of reactionary attitudes in issues of the status of women.

This is all the more reason for me to pay tribute to the invaluable work of Senator Ryan. Without her energy, commitment and support, backed by the Office of the Status of Women in my Department, the affirmative action initiatives I have outlined today could not have progressed so rapidly. The launch of the Agency is a fitting tribute to her endeavours. I am pleased now officially to launch the Agency.
