



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING MP

HEWSON'S HOLLOW PLEDGE TO AUSTRALIA'S WOMEN

I welcome Dr Hewson's belated discovery that Australian women have special needs deserving appropriate and sometimes special policies, but it is a shame that he still does not really understand what those needs are.

Even worse, today he has demonstrated he is not interested in learning by refusing an invitation to meet with Australia's leading women's organisation.

Last July when Dr Hewson addressed the Fifth National Women's Conference of the Liberal Party he repudiated the need to have special policies: "Treating women as women - almost by definition - implies that women are different. ... We can say, for instance, that women have different health needs, different work requirements and different educational difficulties. And in doing so, we run the risk of unfavourably tagging women and labelling all individuals with problems that only apply to some".

He's come a long way since then. Earlier this week in Brisbane, when he released his Pledge to the Women of Australia at a private girls school, he acknowledged what Labor has always known and acted upon: "... the needs are different of women and it's important when you put a policy package together to actually recognise those different circumstances and those different needs and make sure that public policy is directed to dealing with those".

The Labor Government has always done this - and will continue to do so. Labor does not need to resort to flimsy one-page pledges hastily cobbled together at the last minute. We have a proud track record: the New National Agenda for Women, which I will outline next week, is a comprehensive blueprint setting out the government's plans for achieving gender equality by 2000. It has been drawn up after extensive consultations and research with a large number of Australian women.

Today I met Sue Walpole, Australia's new Sex Discrimination Commissioner, and want to take this opportunity to express my confidence in her determination to fight hard for working women, particularly her plans to make use of the recent amendments to the Act relating to industrial awards and workplace agreements.

Dr Hewson is vague about how a coalition government would treat the policy and advisory bodies that are so important to ensuring we have sound and appropriate advice on women. His Fightback Strategy for Women document says the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission will be maintained but that "alternative dispute resolution procedures will be encouraged". What does this mean? Will the Sex Discrimination Commissioner be able to take on discriminatory employers, or will she be forced to turn a blind eye to exploitative practices?

Similarly, Dr Hewson says he will maintain the National Women's Consultative Council but only today he refused an invitation to attend the Council's next meeting later this month. I attended two Council meetings last year and found them to be an invaluable source of information and advice.

Obviously Dr Hewson is not interested in listening to the views of Australia's pre-eminent representative body of women. He thinks he already knows all the answers. Australian women are not that easily fooled.

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