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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
NATIONAL AGENDA FOR WOMEN
BANKSTOWN TOWN HALL, SYDNEY
10 FEBRUARY 1993**

Distinguished Guests
including the Mayor of Bankstown
Ministerial and Parliamentary Colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased to have an opportunity to address a great gathering of women so early in the election campaign.

Of course, when this event to launch the New National Agenda for Women was first planned, none of us knew it would take place during a campaign. Even I didn't know!

But in fact it makes very little difference.

The thoughts I want to share with you today are not campaign-driven.

I would have delivered the same speech had this launch been held two weeks ago.

But I nevertheless appreciate having the chance to address the women of Australia in this election context because I suspect my remarks will get greater media coverage than they otherwise might.

And I'm pleased about that.

There are things I want to talk about today which I know are very important to women in this country, and it is important to me that as many women as possible get to hear about them.

What brings us together today is the New National Agenda for Women – the government's approach to striving for true equality between the sexes by year 2000.

It is a document that sets parameters rather than laying down a step-by-step approach.

It identifies the issues Australian women care most deeply about and thus provides all Australians with guidance about how we should proceed in order that women may participate fully in all areas of our society.

The framing of the document says a lot about how we in the Labor Party approach important issues such as these.

The document is truly a democratic one.

In order to find out what women thought about the issues and problems facing women today we listened, naturally enough, to the National Women's Consultative Council and the many other women's organisations which last year participated in a day-long "Renewal Forum" on the Agenda.

But we did more than that. We also listen to women who do not belong to organisations and do not have a voice when documents such as National Agendas are drawn up.

We commissioned research which sought the opinions of ordinary Australian women.

We talked with waitresses, cleaners, primary school teachers, shop assistants, mothers at home, office workers.

We asked them how they felt about their lives and we also asked them what they thought of government programs meant to benefit them.

What they told us was not exactly what we hoped to hear.

Many of them felt that governments, state and federal, were not responsive to their problems and needs.

We learned a lot about what women today are thinking and feeling and we took it very seriously.

We already knew how concerned women (and men) were about unemployment.

How they feel for those without jobs, and how they worry about maybe losing their own.

We already knew this, but we had it reinforced for us.

We are doing what we can to confront the realities of unemployment.

We are providing a social net to ease the hardship.

We are providing as many training opportunities as we can.

Above all, as I outlined yesterday in my statement "Investing in the Nation", we are doing all we can to create growth.

We learned something else from listening to Australian women.

We learned that women are very likely to make distinctions between the issues that are important to them as Australians – as citizens, if you like – and those that are important to them as women.

And it is on those latter issues that I would like to spend some time this morning.

There were three areas women unanimously nominated as being of pressing concern to them; these were child-care, violence against women and women's health.

Before I set out how we intend to respond to these three subjects, I think it is worth reflecting on changes that have occurred in the lives of women and men – but especially women – over recent decades.

In fact if we look back over the past hundred years, we can take enormous pride in a record of progress and achievement in the area of women's rights (as they used to be called) which very early on earned Australia a reputation as a world leader.

Next year all Australians will join South Australians in celebrating their women's suffrage centenary.

South Australia was the first state to give Australian women the vote – at a time when New Zealand and two of the United States were the only places in the world to do so.

Australia continues to set the pace for other democracies when it comes to status of women issues.

Recently the International Labour Organisation singled out Australia's achievement in reducing the gap between women's and men's wages.

Under our centralised wage fixing system, and with the protection of awards, women's earnings are now 93 per cent of men's.

In countries like the US and Japan, without such protection, women still earn only around 70 cents for every dollar men take home.

And the important point is, that contrary to the dire predictions when equal pay was first put into awards, even though women in Australia are paid relatively more in relation to men than women in most countries, their employment prospects have not suffered.

On the contrary, growth in female employment has been exceptionally fast in Australia.

In the past ten years the number of women in the labour force has increased by almost 40 per cent.

What has happened in Australia over the past decade has been a unique partnership between the women's movement and the Labor Government, a partnership that has achieved much of which we both can be proud.

Without it, we would not have our pioneering record of legislative achievements like the Sex Discrimination Act and the Affirmative Action law.

Nor would 77 per cent of girls stay at school until Year 12. In 1982 only 40 per cent did.

We can be proud that more than 52 per cent of enrolments in higher education now are women, up from 46 per cent in 1982.

And that more women are being elected to public office – and I see many of Labor's federal and state parliamentarians here today, as well as quite a few who I hope will be joining us in Canberra after March 13!

Indeed, when we talk about the dramatic changes in women's lives over the past century, we must not overlook the even more rapid pace of change just over the past decade.

Indeed the 1980s may well turn out to be the time when the revolution in women's lives passed that point of no return, that point at which women decided they liked their new found freedom and opportunities and had no intention whatsoever of giving them up.

This certainly was the virtually unanimous view of the women who participated in the research I described earlier.

These women, no matter what their age, their education, their marital or maternal status or their present circumstances, were totally agreed on one thing: they were better off than their mothers had been.

They valued the choices women have today, including the greater economic independence more and more women have.

Even though many women felt they paid a price in terms of the stresses involved in trying to juggle their various roles and responsibilities, they wouldn't turn back the clock for anything.

I sense that many women today have an enthusiasm for their lives and the opportunities that are available to them that earlier generations lacked.

An event like today's is a case in point.

A day to think about the issues that as women you care about.

I'm not overlooking the men in the audience – and I thank them for coming so that I'm not the only male here today! – but today is a day for women to take particular pride in.

And a day to remember as the one when we decided to do something about many of those issues.

Yesterday I released a major economic statement which contained, among other things, a number of important initiatives on child care.

I included those initiatives in that statement, rather than the very tempting option of "saving them up" for today, because I think it is time that child-care was included amongst our mainstream economic issues.

Child care should be treated with the same seriousness as education or aged care.

The time is long past, as far as I am concerned, where child care was tagged as "a women's issue" or a "welfare issue" and only attracted the crumbs from the table where the budget banquet was enjoyed.

I know how paramount an issue child-care is for women.

Without it, mothers have little choice about employment or study or training.

It really is the gate-way to choice, and to independence.

That is why I have decided to give child-care such a big budget boost, to ensure it is never again starved for funds.

For the first time in the history of child care policy we have addressed both the big picture – and the smaller details.

We have addressed the three big questions of supply, affordability and quality.

We have also dealt with the smaller but no less important issues of arrangements for sick kids, playgroups, and wholesale sales tax and Fringe Benefits Tax exemptions for child care.

As I said yesterday at the National Press Club: these measures move child care into the 21st century.

We as a nation can afford good child-care and the time has come to provide it.

At the same time, we need to recognise that women's child-care needs are neither uniform nor identical.

There are new choices and new patterns in women's lives today.

Many women are choosing to stay home while their children are young, although most will return to the labour market at some time in the future.

The point is, though, that policy needs to recognise and respond to these patterns.

It is no longer good enough, if ever it was, to say that any given woman is either in the workforce or in the home.

Chances are these days, over the course of her lifetime, she will spend periods of time doing both.

But during her period at home she is entitled to an acknowledgment and respect that perhaps was not always forthcoming in the past.

At the same time, women at home often can do with some practical assistance.

The increased funds we have allocated to playgroups, and the occasional care places will help provide a break for women at home while they shop or go to the doctor.

In time, I hope we might be able to take other measures to assist women caring for children at home.

Perhaps the most sobering message to have come from our consultations and our research was the level of fear felt by women in Australia as a result of violence on the streets and in the home.

I find such violence appalling and intolerable.

As a society we must do all that we can to eradicate it, but we also need to be realistic and to recognise that we need to provide safe havens for women and children while we work through ways to make this country less violent.

Today I announce several measures to this end.

Upon re-election, we will establish a referral program in each state for women escaping domestic violence in rural and remote areas.

This special program would provide practical help to women and children in remote areas in the form of a 008 phone number to call for help, and payment of transport to escape violent situations.

We will also extend the life of the National Committee on Violence Against Women.

Late last year the Committee produced a highly praised report, the National Strategy on Violence Against Women, and I believe that the work of this Committee in maintaining a national focus on this issue is too important for it to be disbanded.

Like many others, I was recently shocked to read that a judge, during a sexual assault trial, had explicitly condoned the use of violence by a man against his wife.

I do not believe that reflects current community attitudes.

It is intolerable that women should continue to suffer prejudice or injustice of this kind in our courts - or anywhere else.

I am pleased to inform you that earlier this week, just before the Parliament was prorogued, my colleague Michael Duffy the Attorney-General, took an initiative which I trust will be the first step in ending such unfair and archaic attitudes .

We are committed to ensuring Australia's laws and legal practices reflect changing community attitudes and, to this end, the Attorney has asked the Australian Law Reform Commission to report to him on ways of ensuring equality before the law.

Justice Elizabeth Evatt will head this inquiry.

Her widespread legal experience within Australia and internationally makes her a most appropriate person to conduct this report.

I look forward to her Interim Report later this year.

I am also able to inform you that the government has provided funds to the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration to develop courses for magistrates

and judges to help them identify prejudices that might impact on their judicial conduct towards women.

This program is to be developed by a Committee headed by Justice Deidre O'Connor, President of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

The third issue singled out as being of greatest concern to women was their health.

The Labor Government has had a good record in initiatives in women's health.

Overall, we have allocated \$123 million to health services specifically for women, especially in the area of prevention of breast and cervical cancer.

Today Brian Howe, the Minister for Health, informed me that the National Women's Health Program will continue for a further 12 months at the current level of resourcing.

He has also developed a National Osteoporosis Policy to meet the concerns of women whose family history suggests they might be at risk of osteoporosis by providing a Medicare rebate for a bone density test.

In an important, and unprecedented, step Mr Howe has also decided to institute a major longitudinal study into women's health.

For too long, we have assumed that health studies did not need to be gender specific.

The result has been that we know very little about the medium and long term effects on women's health of, for instance, the contraceptive pill or Hormone Replacement Therapy.

Special studies of women of different ages will teach us a great deal and, in time, give us a far greater understanding of the health needs of women at various stages of biological development than we presently possess.

Finally, two measures to increase women's political and economic participation in our society.

I know that some of the major women's organisations are concerned that women workers might be disadvantaged by the enterprise agreements and workplace bargains that are the new prototype for industrial relations.

Let me take a moment to state here that I am categorically opposed to the reduction in women's wages that the Coalition's abolition of penalty rates would cause.

And of course it is mostly the lowest paid women who would suffer, the waitresses and shop assistants and hospital cleaners who are dependent on penalties to boost their earnings.

But professionals like nurses would also have their earnings savaged.

I have seen figures that suggest that a RN Level I with one year's experience working two ten-hour weekend shifts would lose \$155.13 of her current total wage of \$403.33 if penalties were abolished.

This is unconscionable.

Making hard working and low paid women bear the brunt of Dr Hewson's IR experiments.

We will do everything in our power to ensure such women are protected.

We will spend \$1 million to establish Working Women's Centres, initially in four states, to provide advice and assistance to women on workplace issues, especially on enterprise bargaining and access to training.

I hope these centres can be up and running soon after we are re-elected because, with the Liberals gaining power in several states, women are going to need them.

I want to conclude by making one final announcement, one that I hope will be well received by today's audience.

For too long the major women's organisations in Australia have had to struggle along on paltry amounts of funding.

It is time to enable women's organisations to operate with the same professionalism and expertise afforded to conservation, ethnic and other organisations by dint of their receiving more realistic levels of funding.

I propose to increase the program of operational grants for women's organisations to \$1 million a year, a more appropriate amount in view of the important work your organisations undertake on behalf of women.

The new National Agenda is an achievement of which we can all be proud.

It is a non-partisan document, one that sets out to articulate the various aspirations of Australian women today.

Perhaps the overriding aspiration is the one that is expressed by the document's title: Shaping and Sharing the Future.

This title came to us from the women we talked to. It was their expression of their desire to be part of the nation we are forging together.

While they – and we – recognise that often special programs are required to meet special needs, at the same time all of us, women and men, want to join together making a richer and fairer future for us all.