



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE ON WOMEN, POWER AND THE
21ST CENTURY

MELBOURNE, 3 DECEMBER 1993

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this very important conference.

It is really a conference about the great anomaly of Australian democracy - the great flaw in Australian democracy.

This is a country which pioneered women's rights - which delivered to women the vote and the right to stand for parliament in 1902, yet whose national parliament in 1993 is overwhelmingly male.

This is a country which prides itself on its democratic institutions - yet in the most important of those democratic institutions, the nation's parliaments, men outnumber women 7 to 1, in the House of Representatives more than 10 to one.

This is a country renowned for its pervasive democratic spirit and the dictum of the fair go - yet, when it comes to women's parliamentary representation, the record and the contemporary reality of the party which has always believed itself the embodiment of these traditions, the Australian Labor Party, is only marginally better than the rest.

No doubt the aberration can be explained: but it can't be justified. There are reasons but we shouldn't call them excuses.

The ruling body of the nation should be representative of the people it serves. At present it is not.

Parliaments make laws for all the people and its composition should as far as possible reflect that. At present it does not.

In fact it has been calculated, by Kay Setches I think, that at the present rate of increase it would take

another 60 years to achieve equal representation of men and women in the Commonwealth Parliament.

In the meantime Australian democracy is the loser. This is the fundamental point, I believe - we all lose.

It is less that women have a right to be there than we have a need for them to be there. It is less an argument for women than an argument for the country.

Equal representation of women and men strengthens the legitimacy of our decision making process. More than that, it strengthens our capacity to make the right decisions.

At present we are losing a vast pool of talent and wisdom. We are losing leadership.

We need look no further than Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence for proof of that.

We need Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence - and many more like them - in the national parliament. We need them in the debates on economic and social policy, on unemployment, the workplace, trade, foreign affairs, arts, Mabo.

We need women involved in the debate about an Australian republic. We need them in a leading role.

Australia is changing at a quite remarkable rate. It is being re-fashioned - to some extent by economic and cultural forces beyond our control; but more substantially, it is being re-shaped by our own efforts and our own vision. The direction of policy and the shape of our relationships are changing fundamentally and very rapidly.

Our relationship with the region has changed dramatically in the space of a couple of years and that in turn will change Australia. It will create extraordinary new opportunities. The implications go well beyond trade - they go to employment, business, education, culture.

There is a generational shift occurring. The experience of multiculturalism, the fact of global communications, new technologies, new economic and social imperatives, and indeed the new status and increasingly prominent role of women, is shaping a new national identity - one, I hope, which will continue our best traditions while embracing the new reality of Australia.

Women must be there in all these momentous debates, asking the questions and helping to find the answers. And the more they work from the centre of the debate and the less from the margins, the more their voices are heard in the nation's parliaments, the more they will be heard in

the wider society - and, I have little doubt, the more parliament will be heard as well.

Now of course if it were enough to just say these things we could all go home now. It is necessary to say them, but saying them will not get the barriers down.

Getting the barriers down requires political power and political will - and let me hasten to say that they are by no means the same thing. There have been plenty in our history who have been attracted to power and plenty have gained it - but relatively few I believe have exercised it as they might have.

Relatively few have actively pursued the necessary reforms, or seized the opportunities which are presented to each generation - and so some of our old deficiencies have been passed on.

Now I take some comfort - and even some pride - from the fact that in the past ten years we have removed some of the anomalies relating to women.

If it is true that choice is the prerequisite to the exercise of power, and the prerequisite to choice is economic independence, then this Labor Government can take some pride in its record.

For we have taken not a few major steps in the direction of economic independence.

Family payments paid directly to women caring for children was one of them.

The extension of superannuation so that now most women workers are entitled to coverage is another; and coverage and benefits will increase substantially over this decade.

The past ten years has seen very significant improvements in women's access to education.

- . The number of young women completing year 12 nearly doubled to 80 per cent.
- . Enrolments of women in higher education grew by 77 per cent and women now make up more than 50 per cent of higher education students.
- . Women are still under-represented in courses such as engineering and in most apprenticeships and their employment opportunities are accordingly restricted; but the Government's reform of vocational education and training will open up some of these pathways for women.

We have greatly expanded child-care. As of 1993 child care in Australia is recognised as a mainstream economic issue.

Child care is an integral part of the drive to become a more competitive country.

It is now a commonplace that successful countries are those with flexible and skilled workforces: it is therefore common sense that women with skills and work experience be kept in the workforce.

Our economic growth and our living standards will benefit from women's participation.

For countless Australian women child care can make participation possible - it can make the choice between participating and not participating a real one.

As part of its commitment to meet demand for work-related child care by 2001, by 1996-97 the Government will fund nearly 300,000 child care places.

From next July we will provide a 30 per cent cash rebate on the cost of work-related child care, a long overdue recognition of the costs involved for women earning an income.

These employment, education and child care programs are all designed to increase life choices for Australian women, and in doing that they open that much wider the way to positions of power.

I might also say today that I have advised the Office for the Status of Women to monitor the implementation of election commitments of specific relevance to women, in particular the new child care program.

For all the improvements in women's opportunity, status and influence, for all the widening of equality and freedom, there remains the fact of violence against women - violence which strips them of the most fundamental freedom and denies them power over their lives.

Violence which degrades Australian society and mocks our belief in democracy and justice.

As a government we know that we cannot expect women denied freedom from fear to share our faith in this society: or to believe us when we say we are serious in our pursuit of social justice if we are not seriously attempting to eliminate violence against women.

We have acknowledged this in a recent review of our women's policy advising mechanisms which identified as priorities women's economic security and the law, with a particular emphasis on the elimination of violence.

The same review identified as a priority the subject of today's conference - women and public life and their involvement in decision-making.

This is an issue whose time has well and truly come. The time has come for companies, businesses, unions, the bureaucracy, churches, schools and universities, the courts. And it has come for the Australian Labor Party.

It has come for the Labor Party for all the reasons I have mentioned - because the Labor Party is the party of social justice, and the party with a vision of Australia as a great social democracy, and we cannot have these things unless women are receiving equal justice and participating equally in the democracy.

In fact the time came long ago: as long ago as the turn of the century when a campaigner for women's suffrage wrote, "to sum up all reasons in one - it is just."

The numbers speak for themselves. Of the 837 Members of Parliament in Australia, only 118, or 14 per cent are women. Of the total number of ALP Members of Parliament 17 per cent are women. In the House of Representatives there are 13 women - or 9 per cent. Of the ALP Members, 11 per cent are women.

The Labor Party should not claim that the under-representation of women is someone else's problem.

Nor can anyone claim, of course, that it is a result of chance or the merit principle in action.

There is no question that we have to tackle discrimination - both direct and indirect.

Indirect discrimination is likely to be the hardest to shift because very often it is coming from entrenched cultural habits and perspectives.

Cultural change is difficult but not impossible. It seems to me that the starting point is recognition of necessity. That is what, for instance, drove the change in our industrial culture in the last decade.

In the ALP we now have to take on the business of equal representation as a necessity. It has to become part of Labor Party culture.

We have to take up the battle for hearts and minds on this, and at the same time pursue the necessary structural change.

The campaign in the Party under the heading "Half by 2000" is one way of doing this. And I support it.

I support increasing the number of women in all federal and state caucuses. Whether we reach that goal of 50 per

cent depends on many things, not least of which is our continuing to win elections.

But the goal is important to indicate what we stand for and to measure our progress.

If you will permit me to return to a theme of mine - I have always believed that when Labor stops reforming, Labor will lose power.

It is the old bicycle principle - if you lose the strength or the will to pedal you'll fall over. If we stop pursuing our social democratic ambitions and our national ambitions - we will stop being the government of the Commonwealth.

In a speech to the NSW Labor Party earlier this year, I said to keep up the momentum of reform we had to look at ourselves. That we had to reform the Party.

The Organisation Review process of discussion and debate on the future structure of the Party has begun.

And as part of this process, I have asked the National Secretary, Gary Gray, to report to me before next year's national conference with specific recommendations on what changes are necessary to increase the number of women in state and federal caucuses.

Early next year, I will also be meeting with the state Labor leaders to pursue the issue.

This is a Government of reform, you can be sure of that.

We are determined to confront those changing realities of contemporary life - at home, in our region and in the world - and create a country which can share in the best the future has to offer.

I mean more and better jobs, more opportunities for Australians of this and future generations, more security for all Australians.

At the same time, as we take up the challenge of contemporary change we are determined to do all we can to solve those problems which governments have neglected for generations.

We do these things because it is consistent with the Labor Party's commitment to social justice. We also do them because it makes sense.

It makes sense, for instance, to deliver justice to indigenous Australians because this country will gain in respect and self-esteem, and in time it will gain from bringing into the mainstream people whose talents and energy have until now been wasted on the margins.

Equally, it makes sense to ensure that the half of the population who are women are in no sense left on the margins - the margins of society, the margins of justice, or the margins of our representative institutions.

Every time we expand Australian democracy, every time we extend the limits of freedom and justice, every time we include in all the reaches of our national life all the people of Australia, we make it stronger.

When we talk about women sharing power in Australia it is a sufficient argument to say that it is "just" - but it is an irrefutable argument to say that it is both just and, because it is in the interests of Australia, also very wise.

Thank you for having me here. It is now my pleasure and privilege to declare this conference open.