



PRIME MINISTER

RECEPTION FOR THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OFFICE OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN - MURAL HALL PARLIAMENT HOUSE 9 SEPTEMBER 1994

Every so often we come across an opportunity to celebrate an important national achievement - one that has played a defining role in our national life.

The 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the Status of Women marks one such achievement.

I think it's important that we celebrate it for two reasons.

First, it's important to celebrate what has been, without doubt, a fundamental shift in the way that Governments, the community at large, and women themselves regard their role in society.

In that way, we celebrate a profound shift for the better.

Second, I think it's important to take stock of what we've done and to draw strength from what we've achieved.

And we do that, not to congratulate ourselves, but to remind us of what we are capable of doing, to give us more confidence on which to build the better, fairer Australia we, on this side of politics, are always pursuing.

Twenty years ago, Australia was a very different place.

Women's lives were very different.

But change was in the air.

Women were breaking down barriers and demanding equality in their lives.

Gough Whitlam had already appointed Elizabeth Reid as a special adviser on matters relating to women, the first such position in the world.

The Federal Government had just begun its involvement in child care, but there were virtually no child care centres for working parents.

It was still legal to discriminate on the grounds of sex and marital status - the Sex Discrimination Act was ten years away.

Equal pay for work of equal value remained a contentious issue.

And those seeking to escape violence in the home had almost nowhere to go - in Sydney, Anne Summers, Katrina Harrison and Jen Levy had just set up Elsie, the first Women's Refuge in Australia.

No woman had ever headed a Commonwealth Department or an Australian political party or a State or Territory Government.

Deborah Wardley, Helen Williams, Janine Haines, Rosemary Follett, Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner were unknown along with countless others I could name.

We've come a long way since then.

It's a tribute to all the women and men who have worked for equality for women.

And it's also a tribute to the work of those associated with the Office of the Status of Women.

I think the progress we've made in elevating the status of women over the last twenty years is a hallmark of our political development.

There is scarcely a better measure of how far we have come.

The changes are here to stay.

And, as a nation, we're all the better for it.

A firm and practical Government commitment to women's equality now lies at the heart of our policy and program development.

Australia is now recognised as an international leader in integrating status of women issues into the ongoing business of government.

I rank these achievements with those with which the Labor Government is more generally associated.

I mean the processes by which we have now an economy that is one of the most open and competitive in the world, an economy that leads the world in economic growth and low inflation, and an economy that offers a great deal of hope for future generations of Australians.

I also mean our dramatically expanded secondary and higher education systems.

And, with the Employment White Paper, we will do the same with vocational training.

The fact is Australia is in the vanguard of progressive social policy with our health system, aged care services, child care provisions and social security system.

We are at ease with multiculturalism.

We are a nation mature enough to find a just reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

And confident enough to want an Australian Head of State for an Australian Republic.

Among the many threads which together make up the great tapestry that is Australia today, none has been more critical to the overall picture than the contribution of women.

This country could not have advanced to where we are today, could not have achieved so much, nor hold so much promise for the future, if women had not been in there driving the debate and shaping the change.

From its beginning, as a five person group in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Office of the Status of Women had great ambitions.

It set its sights on two things: making sure that Commonwealth policies and programs took account of over fifty percent of the population; and giving women a powerful voice in government decision-making.

Over the years, OSW has been central to making real change and delivering real reform: whether it was bringing the 1984 Sex Discrimination Act and the 1986 Affirmative Action Act to fruition; or taking up the national challenge to end violence against women; or making child care more affordable and accessible; or pushing for a national strategic approach to fighting breast cancer.

OSW has brought real change to women's lives.

I hope you will allow me to single out Ann Sherry, who leaves OSW today.

Ann has been the force behind a major shift in the focus and direction of the Office over the last twelve months.

Thank you, Ann, for your contribution, and we all wish you well.

But I also want to say that the Office is not, and never has been, a one-woman show.

It is a team of talented people - and the momentum of their work will continue.

And it will continue because this Government is committed to achieving equality for women.

This Labor Government has already made great advances in women's employment, in women's education and in women's health.

We've also made great advances in assisting women caring for children.

But, of course, women's equality is not yet a reality.

And one of our greatest challenges is to ensure that women become full participants in making the government and private sector decisions that affect us all.

For a country with such democratic traditions as ours, I think it is incongruous that we have a national house of parliament with ten times as many men as women.

It's an unacceptable waste of talent.

For the same good reasons that we require affirmative action of the bureaucracy and corporate Australia, it should be required of the Labor Party.

And I'm delighted that, in future, it will be.

Last year, I called on the Labor Party to begin a process of reinvigoration.

We needed to broaden the base of our membership, open our forums to more ideas, make sure we selected the best candidates for office, and make the changes "necessary to increase the number of women in State and Federal caucuses."

Last Friday, we took a significant step in that process when the National Executive recommended to National Conference the adoption of mechanisms which will substantially increase the number of Labor women in our Parliaments.

It was a just and wise decision.

It will be passed by National Conference at the end of this month - and we will have more women in our Parliaments.

We need women shaping and sharing our future.

As someone who relishes the challenge of policy making and making real change stick, I am delighted to celebrate this twentieth birthday with you today.

I look forward to the next twenty years of OSW - though, who knows, twenty years from now, we might have got it right.

Twenty years from now, the need for an Office of the Status of Women might have passed.

In the meantime, congratulations to everyone associated with OSW for twenty years of leading the way.

Thank you.