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PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP -
OPENING OF THE WOMEN, POWER AND POLITICS INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE FOR THE CENTENARY OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE -
ADELAIDE, 8 OCTOBER 1994

Thank you very much for the invitation to open this International Conference, the centre-piece of the celebration of the Centenary of Women's Suffrage in Australia.

Australia was a pioneer in women's rights. It is surprising, really, that among the facts of Australian history, this one is less well known than Ned Kelly, who was a horse-thief, and Phar Lap, who was a horse.

I am all for icons like these. But I do think that it would be at least as salutary and uplifting if all Australians knew that their country had pioneered the rights of women.

It would remind us that one of the defining characteristics of Australia is social progress.

It would signal that our attachment to democracy and fairness is as deep as any attachment, as a nation, we feel.

It might demonstrate to the unknowing and the unconverted that the Australian character, which is said to have been born in the 1890s, was not quite so chauvinistically male as generally believed.

And it would reassure the doubters that the decisions we in the Labor Party have taken in recent years - and recent weeks - maintain an Australian tradition.

All but obscured for long periods - grown over with prejudice and myopia, and with events like two World Wars which tended to create or re-assert male national stereotypes - the thread is there.

I hope this conference will uncover more of the thread.

I hope it will be seen as a step along the way to an Australia where the rights of woman are uncontested, unambiguous, inalienable.

Here in South Australia in 1894, women fought for and won two fundamental rights - the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament.

When most Australian women were granted the right to vote by the new Federal Government in 1902, it was in no small way attributable to the victory in South Australia eight years before.

I say "most Australian women" advisedly. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were denied the rights they had earlier gained in South Australia - and they didn't get these rights back until 1962.

That is one of the more notorious facts of Australian history - and it should not be forgotten.

About nine months ago, I opened the Women Power and the 21st Century Conference in Melbourne: many of you here today may have participated in this Conference. I said then that the fact that our national parliament was still overwhelmingly male was the great flaw in Australian democracy.

I went on to say that in a country renowned for its democratic spirit, it was a sad fact that the party which has always seen itself as embodying that spirit has a record which is only marginally better than the rest.

Last year, I called on the Labor Party to begin to reinvigorate itself: to widen its membership, to open its forums, to find a better process for selecting candidates and, most importantly of all to ensure a much more active participation by many more women.

We knew there were barriers to this, and you all know how strong those barriers can be.

I said nine months ago that getting the barriers down required political power and political will.

It is a matter of great pride to me that the ALP has taken up the challenge - not just in word, but in deed.

The ALP has agreed that women will be Labor candidates for at least 35 per cent of winnable seats by 2002.

And I'm pleased to add that yesterday Federal Cabinet reaffirmed its commitment to have equal representation of men and women as Government appointments on Commonwealth boards by the year 2000.

To meet this target, Cabinet backed a strong and comprehensive strategy. All Ministers will be looking at the situation in their own portfolios and taking practical steps to boost women's representation.

We will also be encouraging the other agencies who nominate people to these boards - the states, unions, businesses and so on - to nominate an equal representation of women.

It is worth looking at the reasons for the changes we are making.

First, it is about leadership and talent.

As a nation and as a democracy, we simply cannot afford to lose the skills, experience, energy and outright talent of half our population. We need women like Carmen Lawrence, Joan Kirner and Rosemary Pollett, and many more like them, in our parliaments.

We need them in our businesses, too. I hope corporate Australia has taken note of what is happening. It has been happening in the community for a very long time. It has been happening in families, schools and universities, farms, factories and offices. Women have been making an equal - very often much more than equal - contribution to the economy and society for a very long time. It is now happening in our parliaments.

It really ought to be happening in board-rooms.

We need women to be full participants in the great national debates and in national decision-making.

We need their contribution to economic, social and cultural policy; to information policy, human rights, foreign affairs, to finding a just reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, to an Australian Republic.

We need women to bring to these forums not simply their experience as women, we need them to bring their judgements about Australia; their feelings about Australia.

I was struck by what Poppy King had to say in Sydney recently at the seminar "The Australian Republican Movement - A Women's Perspective".

She said:

Women should not become involved in the debate with the one agenda of "women's issues". Women should become involved because we are living, breathing, thinking individuals, an integral part of the population that makes up this country. We have opinions, ideas and solutions that are worthwhile when deciding on issues that affect all Australians and, after all, the republic is not a gender issue - it's an Australian one.

We need women as full participants in decision-making, simply because we need to make the right decisions.

We adopted affirmative action in the Labor Party because we believe it is just and right and because we believe in merit and ability.

I think it is time that we challenged the platitude that the existing system, whatever it is and however discriminatory its outcomes might be, somehow represents decision-making on merit.

I don't believe it. And I'm sure many of you don't believe it either.

I don't believe that, on any real assessment of ability, only 10 percent of women have the qualities necessary to be a member of our House of Representatives.

I don't believe that only 22 percent of women have the ability to be Members of the Senate.

And I don't believe that only 3 percent of women have the capacity to be members of this country's private sector boards either.

I think that ability is important. And that is why I called for the affirmative action rule changes in the Australian Labor Party.

We moved to affirmative action for the other good reason that we must demonstrate to young women - to those who will come after us - that they have a real opportunity to contribute to decision-making.

This country is changing.

By our own efforts and imagination and confidence we are reshaping Australia.

The deepest cynic could not deny that we have made enormous strides in recent times.

We are building a tolerant, cohesive, culturally diverse society.

We are establishing a dynamic role in the region, a creative and rewarding role in the global community.

We are more comfortable with our role in the world and, I sincerely believe, more confident and assured about our future.

I would like to think that a lot of Australians are beginning to share a sense of excitement.

We have dramatically expanded our secondary and higher education systems. The increased participation of women and girls in education is just as dramatic.

We are reforming our labour market programs and our vocational training systems.

We are strengthening our health and social security systems and reforming our aged care services.

We are making child care more affordable and more available.

We are making the Sex Discrimination Act even stronger, by tackling such issues as indirect discrimination.

I have absolutely no doubt that these changes in Australia are due in significant ways to the ideas and energy flowing from the increasingly prominent role and status of women.

Nor do I have any doubt that the changes will be more profound and the future more exciting as their role grows.

Women have been a major driving force for these changes. And part of the reason for this is that Australia has been able to bring a genuine commitment to women's equality into our practical policy and program development.

I am very proud that Australia is internationally recognised as a world leader in integrating status of women issues into the practical business of government.

But we realise that this means continuing to work for positive change.

For example, this year we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Sex Discrimination Act with a range of amendments to expand it and strengthen its impact.

The Act was a major milestone for the status of Australian women. But for younger women it is already rather like the vote - an everyday fact of life.

Survey research shows that young women think very differently from their mothers and grandmothers.

Ninety-five percent of young women surveyed expect equal pay. Only 6 percent thought their lives were less satisfying than young men of the same age.

Around 83 percent want to have a family of their own AND a paying job - interestingly, the younger age groups held this view much more strongly. And 93 percent thought men and women ought to do an equal share of the housework.

But there was another side to the young women's responses.

Just over 50 percent thought they had been treated unfairly because of their gender.

The younger age groups (the 18 to 24 year olds) generally thought that women got a fair go at work, but in the 25 to 30 age group, just under 50 percent thought women at work did not get treated fairly.

It seems that more experience in the workforce can include some sad surprises. Clearly, there is some way to go in ensuring women do not experience discrimination in the workplace.

Most fundamentally, nearly 70 percent thought that their own lives were more satisfying than their mothers' lives - and this squares with other research findings.

If the notion of equality is something that young women now take as a given in their lives, we have come a long way.

And it is exactly the reason why governments cannot sit on their hands. We have a responsibility to respond to this generation and to recognise the place of the next.

We celebrate our history, and we build for the future.

We recognise that women's gains over the last 100 years have been of profound benefit to all Australians, to the quality of society, to the life of the nation.

The story of the struggle to win those reforms is a rich part of our history.

The first chapter was written here 100 years ago. It is my hope that in the next few years we can write some big chapters of our own and, if the story is still not complete, that at least we will enter the next century agreed on what the ending should be.

I hope that not just the struggle but the reality of women's rights, women's role and women's status are part of our democratic consciousness - a part of our identity.

Your Conference, and the celebrations of the centenary of women's suffrage in Australia, is a step towards that end - and I thank you for inviting me to speak.

It is now my privilege to declare this International Conference open.