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PRIME MINISTER

25 September 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT THE RE-LAUNCH OF DAME ENID LYONS'
BOOK, "AMONG THE CARRION CROWS"
MAIN COMMITTEE ROOM, PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

E&OE.....

Thank you Senator Newman, Pru Goward - Head of the Office of Status of Women, Parliamentary colleagues and most particularly it is a pleasure to welcome Dame Enid's son, Brendan, her daughter Kathleen and daughter in law Janet. And we are delighted that the three of you are with us on a very direct link with Dame Enid and one of the most famous political families in Australian history.

Dame Enid Lyons was by any measure, a great Australian. Initially as a wife to Joe Lyons and mother to their 12 children, she actively supported her Prime Minister husband. Dame Enid said of her late husband, that to him, the problems of government were not the problems of statistics but of human values and human hearts and human feelings and they are ageless invariably, regarding the responsibilities of those in public life.

After his death her role dramatically changed, she rose above sickness and depression to begin, perhaps not a new life, but certainly a very different one of direct personal public service.

As Jocelyn has said, 1997 marks the centenary of her birth. She was elected to Federal Parliament 54 years ago. In the election of 1943 she was the only new member of a very diminished United Australia Party, which was one of the forerunners to the Liberal Party of Australia.

Dame Enid's own account of her Maiden Speech revealed much of her considerable character. This was a profound and special occasion because it was the first time that a woman had ever addressed the House of Representatives. She recalled how, even though she intended to speak not as a woman but as a representative citizen, she could not wholly divest herself from the qualities of her sex. She applied these qualities and their effect upon her home and family life to all kinds of policy measures. This was because she regarded the foundation of a nation's greatness as the home to the people. She dwelt on the need for extended social services and the need in providing social security to guard against the diminution of the qualities of self-dependence and self-respect that sustained Australians.

Five years later she was to become, as we have just seen on that marvellous Cinesound newsreel, the first woman member of a Federal Cabinet when Robert Menzies returned to power in the election of 1949. And theirs was a partnership in Government, despite the acknowledged differences of view very strongly, compassionately held differences of views between her late husband and the Prime Minister she then served.

It is, of course, part of the folklore of the Liberal side of politics that Menzies resigned from the Ministry led by Joe Lyons over, I think, national insurance. If you look at some of the original correspondence between Dame Enid and Menzies which is on display here today, you have some indication of the temper of that relationship.

This book is an account of Dame Enid's seven and a half years as a Member of Parliament. The title came from Billy Hughes and something he said to her during her first days in Parliament. According to Dame Enid Hughes called her aside and said "Let there be no talk of the equality of the sexes! There you sat, like a bird of paradise among carrion crows!"

Despite their differing views, Robert Menzies realised her capacity to make a contribution. She was no token and no man, let alone Sir Robert would have dared to say 'we had to have a woman'.

Just as it was then, it is now, and that is that merit - may I proudly say as Leader of the Liberal Party - motivates our decisions on these issues in this area. It is no accident that Dame Enid Lyons became of my Party and it is no accident that the Liberal Party is today represented by 25 women in the Federal Parliament, including 17 in the House of Representatives.

Women have always played a prominent part in the Liberal Party. The Australian Women's National League was a powerful influence in the formation of the Liberal Party of Australia. Again it was no accident that ours was the first political party in the country to have equal numbers of men and women in senior party positions, particularly in the Victorian Division. Following the election of the Coalition to Government 18 months ago Australia has now achieved the highest percentage of women in Federal Parliament ever, over 20 per cent, and that is about twice the world average.

And I must say, a few months ago, when I was in the United States in Washington and accorded the distinct privilege of being invited onto the floor of the United States

Senate. One of the overwhelming impression I had was firstly, the average age of the various Senators was significantly older than that of Australian Senators. I don't make that as a point of criticism, I just report it as an observation.

The other impression was the almost total lack of any female representation in the American Senate. And that is a very stark contrast to the number of women who represent both sides of politics in the Australian Senate. When I say both sides, I say all segments of politics, when one thinks of the Senate, because there are not just Labor members and Coalition members, there are also representatives of other parties.

The progress of women in Australian society has been marked by many achievements of Liberal Government. The Menzies Government delivered:

- child endowment;
- national divorce laws;
- the medical benefits scheme and a national health scheme;
- tax concessions for married pensioners;

In the Holt, Gorton and McMahon era the Liberal Party delivered assistance to deserted wives, lifted the Commonwealth Public Service marriage ban, introduced equal pay legislation and the first Child Care Act in 1972.

The Fraser Government introduced the new family allowance system which involves payments made directly to carers, principally then and still generally the case, directly to mothers.

It established the Office of Child Care, the National Women's Advisory Council and the Institute of Family Studies.

In 1979 pension health benefits were extended to single parents and dependents and before losing office in 1983 the Fraser Government developed the family income supplement scheme to help low income families. And I might add, it was the Fraser Government that signed the convention on the elimination of discrimination against women, which later led to the establishment of the sex discrimination office under the Hawke Government, in 1984.

In the book, Dame Enid expressed concern for many working women, expressed no less forthrightly these days. She was properly concerned for her children, the effect of her long absences from them and the need to balance their needs with her responsibilities as a working person, whose job often kept her distant from them.

Some, may I say ladies and gentlemen, have wrongly attempted to stereotype my Government as possessing, as what is described as, an old fashioned attitude towards women. Not only is that wrong but I think it is in part borne of a resentment that the Coalition has chosen to pursue new and different paths towards achieving greater respect and choice for women within the Australian community, although it is no less vigorous in its commitment to moving down that path.

The world has changed forever since Dame Enid Lyons' time. The choices available to many women in Australian society are now virtually limitless, compared with a

generation ago. Australian society is more diverse and better for that fact. Its social structures have changed significantly and will continue to do so. The role of women has changed and we are a richer community as a consequence. Dame Enid contributed significantly to those evolutions and just as she met the challenges of her time, it is our response and ability to meet the challenges of our time.

The single principle which guides the Government's approach to women is the principle of respect in the broader sense. Respect for their wish for safety, for industrial relations conditions which meet their needs as parents and carers, for their ambitions to succeed and for income security in their retirement years. Above all, my Government respects a woman's need to make choices that are perhaps more complicated than the choices which face men.

Whilst many women have made it clear that they wish to be part of the paid workforce, that they value the independence and rewards that this provides, must also make it clear that they want to combine this with their family needs and family responsibilities. I respect both of those wishes and have set out to allow both of them to be fully realised.

The right to choose and have those choices properly recognised by Government was not always evident in earlier years. Laws were often passed with an intention to punish rather than prevent injustice. The approach was divisive, destructive, inevitably against business and against men so that large sections of the community, including women actually rejected their purpose.

In contrast, our approach has been to work with business, not against it to improve the circumstances of women in the workforce. We have ensured that women and men can now make work place arrangements to suit their individual family needs.

The Workplace Relations Act, for example, removes restrictions on permanent part time work which previously forced some workers into casual employment. Permanent, part time work with pro rata conditions is an enormous step forward for Australian women. For the first time work and family can be combined with security, certainty and full entitlements. This is a far cry, for example, from two years ago, when 28 per cent of women in the workforce were casuals, with little or no access to government subsidised child care. We have also further broadened employment and training opportunities for women.

And I am often irked by the criticism of our childcare policy, when the reality is, we have increased expenditure on childcare by some \$44 million to \$1.2 billion annually and over the next four years the Government will fund an additional 83,000 new childcare places.

Our family tax initiative has provided significant assistance to all Australian families within a reasonable income band who have children. And also whatever the debate about what health benefits may be our health insurance rebate makes families \$450 a year better off.

The Department of Social Security estimates that there are 30,000 transfers annually between Parenting Allowance and the Sole Parent Pension. A Common Parenting Payment will be introduced by my Government to ease the transition for people with children moving from single to couple households and vice-versa.

The enshrining of pension entitlements at 25 per cent of male weekly earnings is an important safeguard for women retirees and the Government is treating the income security needs of older women in Australian society as a special priority.

Our goal, ladies and gentlemen, is to provide women with the maximum achievable degree of choice in Australian society. We do not believe and we will never believe, in patronising quotas although we do believe in an effective anti-discrimination laws. That is why we have retained and we will enhance the role of the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner. The message that this sends is self-evident, that we respect the rights of women to be treated equally and fairly, whether it be in the workplace or elsewhere.

We are making it safer, fairer and freer for women. The decisive ban on semi-automatic weapons enhances the quality of safety for the entire Australian community and most particularly the safety of Australian women.

And later in the year I will host a Domestic Violence Summit, where my determination that our country take a united stand against this abhorrent crime will be accompanied by a national four year plan of action established in conjunction with the States and Territories.

I want to take the opportunity of saying my commitment to that is a very strong, personal one and is one which I intend to devote not only some additional finance from the Commonwealth but also a strong personal commitment because I think it is something that unites Australians across the political and other divides in our community. And there is much that can be done both in terms of protecting victims of domestic violence and also, hopefully, education and a greater understanding amongst the perpetrators of domestic violence in our society and what it involves.

This government does have an overwhelming commitment to the women of Australia to provide a greater range of choices than ever before. Today has been an opportunity for me to say something to you about our commitment in that area and it seemed to me appropriate to do it against a background of the re-launching of this remarkable book, written by a remarkable Australian woman.

She came from a family that contributed enormously to Australian society through three or four decades. She displayed in her own life a level of loyalty and love and support towards her family that was a great example to hundreds of thousands of Australians.

She was a reminder to all of us that the infinite capacity of committed able people, not only to provide a secure family focus, but also in her own right when she adopted and embraced her own political career, after the death of her husband.

It was a rare first in Australia's political experience, somebody whose husband had been the Prime Minister of Australia, then herself to enter Australian politics and become a Federal Cabinet Minister.

I have often thought over the years as I have watched other countries, where the wives or husbands of deceased political leaders succeeded them in politics. I often thought to myself, that Australia did it so many years earlier in the person of Dame Enid Lyons.

So to the members of the Lyons family, I particularly welcome you here today, in this building, which I guess, in an architectural sense, a sort of lineal descendent of the building, which your parents functioned at different times with great distinction.

But it does carry with it the spirit of the old building and I should say to all of you that I have been reminiscing with the family before the ceremony started here this morning, about where all of them managed to sleep at the Lodge, because there were quite a large number of them. And I often think as I wander around the Lodge. I often think of the different families that have lived in it before my time as Prime Minister and its a very vivid reminder of the great history of Australia.

And I want to thank you for what you represent to us here today, as family members of a very great Australian family. I commend this book. I congratulate the Office of the Status of Women for their initiative in having it printed. I want to thank Landsdowne, the Publisher.

We should take every opportunity we can, before we reach the Centenary of Federation, to reflect on the history of Australia. And what we have had the opportunity of doing is rediscovering a lot of its richness and looking at it in different ways and from different vantage points. I hope the reprinting of this very interesting piece of work will help us along the way.

[Ends]