

IWD 2008

Thanks for inviting me. And how could I say no. But then of course there was the moment of crisis – what on earth should I talk about? (AND GETTING BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR FOOD – and ME AND MY FOOD)

Not that there is any shortage of possible topics – but I haven't really had time to get used to the post-Howard world of gender relations. What I have on my computer and in my head is all the thinking that developed over 12 years of Coalition governments – and almost all of this was increasingly despairing criticism. But while the world seems to have moved under our feet, I think we still need to face squarely the legacy of the Howard era.

What is this situation?

1. Women everywhere are in the labour force. It no longer makes sense to ask whether this is because they are bored, have to help make the family budget work, love their careers or whatever – they are really working for all the same reasons that men work. And this includes women with children under 5.
2. But for all the change in women's employment patterns, nothing has changed in family work (even in Sweden). Which greatly compromises women's ability to fit into traditional working patterns such as the 8 hour day. So they work what are seen as 'abnormal' hours (overwhelmingly these are short hours), and they also generally have to organise their own maternity leave and child care. Mothers, unlike men, have never been able to establish a norm of working hours that suits them.
3. As a result most women are not working the hours they'd like to - either too few if part-time or too many if full-time.

Alongside these problems for mothers, there are a number of other pressures that have emerged as we move from an industrial to a service based economy:

- The growth of very long working hours for many full-time employees
- The appearance of job rich but time poor households where parents are not poor but they feel they are battling
- The growth of very short and irregular working hours culture – especially in hospitality – work on demand as in the famous ACTU advertisement against work choices
- The increasing demand from us all as consumers to have 24/7 trading hours (except in WA where they continue to vote solidly against Sunday trading!)
- The Realisation that it is not just babies that make it hard for mothers to work traditional hours, but equally or even more it is teenage children and husbands
- Higher rates of Divorce
- Growing inequality

And the election of a Labour Govt can't change a lot of this – indeed the emerging problem of inflation means that even more women will feel the need to work longer hours to pay the mortgage

There can be little doubt that John Howard does not personally care for many of the social changes that the de-regulated economy he wants has unleashed

Given his performance yesterday in the US, and his swipe against 70s and 80s feminism, and his continued moralising about the superiority of his own family form (wife at home and 3 children) we should acknowledge his legacy because it will continue to have an impact on us all for a while yet.

What has he bequeathed us in 2008?

- Howard's personal sympathies lie with the single income family, and he sent a great deal of money their way (particularly through the Family Tax Benefit

scheme¹). Indeed it's not just a model he prefers but he thinks it is morally superior.

- Work-family benefits are attached to full-time continuing jobs, so mothers with young children are least likely to be entitled to them. The group of women with the highest eligibility for family friendly work arrangements is women who do not have children².
- Howard prevented the introduction of a modest scheme of statutory paid maternity leave despite the fact that every other advanced economy in the world except for the US has such a thing³. This refusal means that about 40% of women in the workforce have no access to paid maternity leave⁴.
- Single mothers receiving parenting support are to be required to get a job because being dependent on the state is bad for your character, while partnered mothers are to be encouraged to stay at home because being dependent on your husband is good for your character.
- He gave us what is widely acknowledged as probably the worst piece of social policy ever - the short lived Baby Bonus. As a result of all this, Peter McDonald describes Australian policy as 'one of the worst work-family policies in the world'. 'Our system of eligibility for family-friendly work benefits is highest for those who need them least and lowest for those who need them most'⁵.
- Not only do better-off mothers find it easier to work, but they are also the only ones who can afford to stay at home. Some of them really do have a choice.

Meanwhile...

In many ways the biggest changes to the way women manage work have been the result not of any family oriented policy, but of the much larger changes to Australia's industrial relations framework which would have been Howard's real legacy. Let us just look at the key elements of WorkChoices.

¹ Bettina Cass 'The contested politics of paid maternity leave in Australia in a transforming family policy regime' in *Double Shift: Working Mothers and Social Change in Australia* eds Patricia Grimshaw, John Murphy and Belinda Probert, Circa, Melbourne 2005.

² E. Gray, 'Colliding spheres: work and family initiatives and parental realities', *People and Place*, 2002.

³ For a fascinating account of the campaign for such a scheme see Pru Goward 'Reforming the policy framework', in *Double Shift* eds Grimshaw et al.

⁴ Marian Baird and Patricia Todd 'Government Policy, Women and the New Workplace Regime: A Contradiction in Terms and Policies', Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee, October 2005.

⁵ Peter McDonald, 'Work-family policies are the right approach to the prevention of very low fertility', unpublished paper.

- **Weakening of award protection.** Awards have been reduced in their scope yet again, and employers are encouraged not to use them. Yet Awards have been critical to the working conditions of the lowest paid women, and have historically been central to the regulation of working hours.
- **Abolition of the Industrial Relations Commission** – the institution through which every significant reform in support of women’s working conditions has been achieved – from unpaid maternity leave to protection against unreasonable hours.
- **The promotion of AWAs.** There have been many examples of the loss of conditions faced by vulnerable workers as a result of AWAs – in particular the impact on employees ability to control their working hours. But since AWA’s are dead in the water, I won’t go on about them any more. (Hard to stop after so much campaigning...)

But in the middle of all this there have been real benefits for some women – and some women have far better choices than ever before. And I would include women working in Australian universities in this group.

Women who do have choices.

I use this example because I happen to have researched it, but there are others. In Australian universities women in general and professional occupations are really beginning to make a mark – in many universities there are now more women at the upper levels (for example HEW 7-10) than men. For academic staff, there are still far fewer women professors, but there is strong change at the lower levels. And I can’t remember the last count, but there have been around 12 women Vice Chancellors in recent years – almost a third, which is better than most sectors and even good by international comparison. And, in particular, the conditions of employment have improved significantly for women through recent rounds of enterprise bargaining.

At many universities for example, women have access to:

- Flexible working arrangements – including access to 48 week year scheme, part time work, job-sharing, and home based work, and the right to request longer periods of leave with salary averaged over the year
- Planned career breaks – funded through reduced salary for an agreed longer period
- Relatively generous Parental leave (though not generous by European standards).

How did this happen? Through enterprise bargaining; through concern over looming labour shortages and the need to keep valued staff; and in some institutions through a genuine recognition that ‘it is the right thing to do’. I haven’t been here long enough to say anything about La Trobe’s position on all this – but I can say that I will be arguing for the need to take gender equality seriously with our staff.

In universities good practice does not owe anything to successive Howard governments. On the contrary, it has developed despite federal policies. (eg by ignoring AWAs)

BUT WE ARE NOW LIVING IN A POST HOWARD ERA - and I think we should celebrate some of the changes that are already occurring.

But things have changed quite dramatically: And it is nice to be able to celebrate the appointment of 4 women to the Rudd Cabinet, - sitting not in minor portfolios, but in the most important apart from Treasurer. We have:

- Nicola Roxon – Minister for Health and Ageing
- Jenny Macklin Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.
- Penny Wong Minister for climate change and water
- Julia Gillard - Deputy Prime Minister; Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations; Minister for Education; Minister for Social Inclusion

And apart from Treasurer, it is hard to think of 4 more important portfolios.

And in addition we have Maxine McKew is Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care.

We have had announcements on:

1. Abolition of Work Choices, return to collective bargaining – good for women and university employment
2. Discussion about paid maternity and parental leave (though very short in sector – universities leading the way on this) and we should be thinking far more ambitiously – get mobilised
3. Subsidies for child care
4. And Julia Gillard has talked about growing pay inequity – which is a first.

To these I would add the issue of WORKING HOURS which I think remains central to the political agenda for improving the experience of work for women (and many men).

Will it be rosy in Rudd's garden?

I don't think we are living in a post feminist world where women's issues are passé, where girl power reigns and girls can do anything – though many of us may have daughters who think this way!

We should enjoy this moment I think. But we should also be thinking about those things that are still in the too hard basket – or which have been seen as secondary or minority issues.

And I think that in Australia we must start with Indigenous Women – who have begun to emerge as such important voices in the current debate about the intervention in the Northern Territory as well as the issues generated by the stolen generation.

I don't have simple things to say about this. On the contrary I think I need to reach the stage that Sir Ronald Wilson, author of the Stolen Generation report reached as he undertook that extraordinary project. He set off on this project thinking he would be able to complete the report in a few months - but ended up spending a week just on his first visit to Tasmania because he had to learn to listen – to slow right down and listen properly. And it is for this that he is most warmly remembered by many indigenous leaders.

For us at La Trobe we need to find new ways to support Indigenous women in higher education – not just competing for the declining numbers – yes declining numbers - who make it through high school, but working with schools and indigenous communities to encourage and support indigenous students earlier on in their studies so that they finish school and have the opportunity to go to university.

And we also need to find new ways of working in a multicultural and global environment – – of being part of a wider debate about women’s rights which is less mono -cultural – but which still insists on women’s rights to equality with men.

And in this context it must be acknowledged that violence against women is not something that is now clearly seen as unacceptable in Australian society – be this in the context of violence and rape in indigenous communities, the increased trafficking of women in this region, or the ongoing attitudes among many Ozzie blokes that women are ‘asking for it’.

In this new and exciting time I think we have to be particularly ready to move beyond the atmosphere of mutual fear and division cultivated by the previous govt – setting women against each other (ie women who stay at home versus women who work), fanning fear of otherness and particularly of muslim communities. And we have to try and get a greater public commitment to gender equality – make it something that it is OK to talk about, just as it is in Sweden and Norway.

These are going to be interesting times.