

'Fishes on Bicycles'

The Hon. Susan Ryan AO

A WOMAN WITHOUT A MAN IS LIKE A FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE. Did the slogan that adorned many of the doors and walls of women's liberationists in the 1970s imply anything about women and politics? Women in Parliament are not women without men, they are women surrounded by them. But in making their way through the congestion of legislation, policy, scrutiny, representation, electioneering and leadership, are women as unnatural and unlikely as fishes on bicycles? Do a few fishes on bicycles change our perception of fish?

According to which social commentator you favour, social change is either excruciatingly slow or frighteningly rapid. It depends on your viewpoint and the issues. In the history of the human race, or even the history of the Australian Parliament, seventeen years is not a long time. It will be seventeen years this December since I was elected to the Senate. The changes to the parliamentary program, to policies and legislation, to the media's expectation of what happens in Parliament and to the community's expectations about who their political leaders will be and what they should look like, have changed in that time.

When I went into Parliament women parliamentarians were not quite as rare a sight as a fish on a bicycle : they actually did exist.

After being elected in 1975, I joined four women who had already been in the Senate for a short period, Liberal Senators Guilfoyle and Martin, and Labor Senators Coleman and Melzer. Senator Walters from Tasmania was also elected in 1975. So there were six: a small but noticeable number. Across Kings Hall in the House of Representatives there were no women. Four women had been elected to sit in the House of Representatives since Enid Lyons broke that barrier in 1943, but in 1975 there was none. There was no woman leader or minister in any state parliament. The memory of Enid Lyons had faded. Margaret Guilfoyle became the first, and sole, female cabinet minister in the Fraser Government.

I was the first Labor Senator for the Australian Capital Territory, along with John Knight who was the first Liberal Senator for the Australian Capital Territory. My election was greeted with many media comments and profiles emphasising my gender, age, hair colour, marital status, physical size and motherhood. About my political agenda they were less informative. Being female evoked comment, but even more remarkable than my female presence in the Senate, I was a feminist. Most people, including Senators and members of my own caucus room, did not quite know what that meant. I did. I had formed my political aspirations and drawn my political energy from feminism, that movement for gender equality beginning at the end of the 1960s, called, in retrospect, Second Wave Feminism and at the time, Women's Liberation. It was my first political involvement and I did not linger very long. I was interested in the questions being explored within Women's Liberation: the nature of the female; the operation of oppression; defining the patriarchy; the possibility of a 'women's culture'. But there were more urgent and important questions for me. Along with other activists I moved straight from the basic assumption of feminism, that women were unfairly treated by society (all societies), to the conclusion that the

remedy for this unfairness was in the hands of women themselves. This was a political solution - one that required the exercise of political power.

As I conducted my analysis of the obstacles to equality and fairness for women, I was drawn again and again to the political system. External obstacles to equality for women abounded. Many of them were rooted in legislation and public policy created in the parliaments of Australia: practices such as denying permanency of employment to married women; limiting women's education; restricting them to a narrow range of training and employment; wages policies that refused to accept the reality of female economic independence and failed to note that many women supported dependents; refusal to acknowledge the consequences for women of women's fertility.

Considering these policy failures, and examining the way in which Parliament made laws and budgets, I came to believe that not only was a woman's place in the House and in the Senate, as my first campaign slogan proclaimed, but a feminist's place was in politics.

In our kind of democracy, particular groups seek to impact on political decision makers through the formation of lobbies. This method had traditionally been pursued with success in Australia by farmers and miners. More recently, the ethnic and green lobbies have achieved many victories. It occurred to some of us very early on that a women's lobby should be established to influence the content of laws and the performance of politicians. We formed the Women's Electoral Lobby in the year leading up to the election of the Whitlam Government in December 1972. WEL utilised shock tactics, the media, persuasion, and a bit of psychological terrorism, to get issues like child care, equal pay, reproductive control, and access to education and training, on to the agenda of the newly elected Whitlam Government.

From my feminist perspective, this lobbying was necessary but not sufficient. It left women on the outside of political power, waiting, persuading, threatening, but not acting directly to achieve change.

That short and intense period where the Women's Electoral Lobby became an effective part of the 1972 election campaign determined my parliamentary career. How much more efficient, I thought, how much more effective, if we were in there making the decisions, instead of knocking on the doors trying to attract support. Debate on the ill fated Lamb-McKenzie Abortion Reform Bill in 1973 exemplified the problem: the debate was conducted in an all male chamber; the women were outside rallying, organising, shouting through loud hailers, preparing for disappointment. I decided that next time we should be in there making the laws.

I set about organising a preselection base throughout the Labor Party branches in the ACT. I worked with other Labor Party feminists and progressive male members to try to ensure that the branches reflected this new and dynamic commitment to gender equality. This strategy, to the amazement and annoyance of seasoned political commentators, succeeded: I was endorsed and won a Senate seat in 1975.

I was often asked at the time, and subsequently, what I expected, what misgivings I had. It is hard to say whether my expectations were too modest or totally extravagant. I did expect that I would be able to make changes. It was both better and worse than I anticipated. I found many supporters, but so much that seemed to me to be logical, sensible, fair, and of general benefit to the community, seemed to others to be radical, eccentric and impractical.

My central objective in Parliament was economic independence for all, including women. Economic independence means the capacity to provide for your own needs and for the needs of those for whom you are directly responsible. Although the Whitlam Government had persuaded the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to accept the principle of equal pay, it would be decades before that principle became reality for all workers. How were women to achieve economic independence? The answer involved a logical series of policy initiatives. Women needed to be able to compete on merit for permanent and rewarding jobs. I never believed that such jobs should simply be handed out according to some numerical concept of fairness, nor that others, in this case men, should be deprived of their economic independence in order to make way for women.

So, the next logical step involved education and training. If women were to compete on merit for good jobs, then they had to have access to the fullest and widest range of education. That meant reforming schools, changing the universities, and giving women access to apprenticeship and technical training. Further, I never expected that as a result of the reforms I was advocating, women as a group would lose interest in bearing children. While I respected individual choice in these matters I thought it likely that the majority of women would, like myself, have children and seek employment. The logical consequence of that prediction was better provision by society for support and assistance in the rearing of children, particularly very young children, hence the policy of child care.

In developing a logical policy framework, it had to be acknowledged that contraception and family planning techniques were, to sum up in one word, unreliable. That is they did not work for all of the people all of the time. While the unplanned pregnancy often became the wanted and much loved child, there were cases in which it could be a personal catastrophe. The choice of termination should be available to women.

This was the policy framework that provided the direction for my parliamentary career and explains to a large extent its successes and failures.

I still find it hard to believe that the objectives that I had at that time -equal opportunity in employment; access to education and training; child care services; fertility control - were radical enough to upset and destabilise the parliamentary system and the community it represented. But enormous resistance was organised to these objectives. There was resistance within the Labor Party and inside the federal caucus. My advocacy for child care, reproductive control, or equal pay, was often met by my own colleagues expressing fear at the electoral danger I was creating with such views. Some notable Labor figures complained that I was taking up the cause of a tiny majority of over-educated women, a cause that would be unsettling and unwelcome to the vast majority of Australian women who (I could only infer from the comments of my colleagues) were totally satisfied with their lot.

That resistance was overcome. The Labor Party, despite being in many respects a reflection of the conservative society it inhabits, does have a central core of commitment to equality, and therefore to change that will create better opportunities. Slowly the Labor Party started to build policies to address the inequalities suffered by women.

I must also acknowledge the support of somewhat unlikely figures: Bob Hawke, as Prime Minister, fully comprehended the issue of structural discrimination in the workforce and put his weight behind the package of equal opportunity measures. The present Prime Minister, Paul Keating, when Treasurer, never dismissed my budgetary

proposals aimed at assisting disadvantaged women, particularly single mothers and older women. I had powerful opponents in cabinet as well as outside and the extensive program of reform for women I was able to secure would not have succeeded without the support of the most powerful figures of the government.

Outside, things were harder. Administrators in TAFE and universities, employer organisations and even unions, produced reason after reason why women could not, without disaster, be admitted to apprenticeships, managerial jobs, professorships or crane driving. Misrepresentation of the objectives and procedures of the Affirmative Action Act flourished in universities and I suspect continue to this day.

I also met resistance in Parliament on the other side, as one would expect. We have a highly adversarial parliamentary system: governments are there to govern and the opposition is there to oppose. Many of my earlier contributions to parliamentary debates were greeted with groans of scorn and derision by Senators on the opposite side. But to be fair, the groaning was not universal and, as time passed, I realised that there were Liberal Senators particularly, but not exclusively Margaret Guilfoyle and Kathy Martin, who were prepared to acknowledge female disadvantage and use the powers and processes of the Parliament to make some improvements.

I did however have some fairly torrid times in my early years in Parliament, none more so than during the debate on the motion that I brought into the Senate to disallow the termination of pregnancy ordinance introduced into the Australian Capital Territory by the Fraser Government. During that debate I realised that even when some agree with you in conscience, they will not always stand shoulder to shoulder with you after the division bells are called. The opposition to my 1978 abortion initiative reverberated several years later during the debate on the Sex Discrimination Bill. Again it is fair to acknowledge that the obstructionist tactics on the other side of the chamber, the red herrings, the misrepresentation, the filibustering, were tempered by the quiet support of Margaret Guilfoyle and the active participation of Senator Peter Baume. Two years later, Ian McPhee crossed the floor to vote for the Affirmative Action Bill in the House Representatives, a principled act which hastened his political demise.

In my early attempts at women's policy there were times when I felt like a fish on a bicycle. But the work of a parliamentarian, even one with special commitments, can never relate to one set of issues only. I had two broad objectives when I entered Parliament. One was to bring into consideration matters of vital importance to women which had been neglected; the other was to establish, through my work and by supporting the work of other women in the Parliament, recognition that women were capable parliamentary performers. I wanted to demonstrate that the neglect of female candidates by the major political parties had been an error, and had deprived the nation of a great deal of capacity.

A summary of my early speeches, questions, Senate committee work, reveals an extraordinary array of topics from ASIO to environmentalism to aboriginal issues to telecommunications, media monopoly, taxation reform and urban planning. This diversity characterises the work of many energetic backbenchers. In my case, it reflected a concern to ensure that no one could justly accuse me of being a single issue politician.

I spent seven years in opposition and five and a half years as a cabinet minister. We have heard of the double burden of the working mother. I suggest the double burden concept also applies to the woman member of parliament, the female minister, because she has two jobs. The jobs have synergy and reinforce each other, but there

are two jobs nonetheless. You need to respond to, take up, defend and advocate the special interests of women; and you need to demonstrate that in fulfilling this role you are not taking away from your capacity to contribute to other vital areas of policy; you are not engaging in special pleading, and you are not asking someone else to shoulder your burden. This is a complicated message and media and other commentators often get it wrong.

I have been concerned in the four years since I resigned from Parliament, to detect a theme emerging in what is written and said by some journalists, women parliamentarians and feminist academics, about the burdens. The comments are often too negative, and do not reflect the reality as I saw and experienced it. This negativism has a discouraging effect on women who are contemplating a parliamentary career. When one runs into difficulties, loses crucial support of a faction, or fails to persuade the expenditure review committee of a budgetary submission, it is too easy to say 'the boys stopped me; I experienced this failure because I am a woman'. I am not decrying the personal experience of women who say that is how they felt; I am not saying that I have never been the victim of sexism or the double standard. But I am loath to support the thesis that life in Parliament is really too hard for women. It must be remembered that men have their policy failures, experience factional treacheries, and lose cabinet debates. When I and my colleagues who had worked hard to rebuild Labor's electoral fortunes after the terrible defeats of 1975 and 1977 came into office in 1983, each and every one of us in cabinet was sometimes overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. I was not the only minister who felt torn between the ideals in our platform and the reality of government, who felt miserable at failing to persuade my colleagues to a particular policy. These were experiences we shared. Look at prime ministers and opposition leaders. At the pinnacle of parliamentary power, there is no ivory tower, no shelter from the storm, and ultimately no buffer against ambition, disaffection, treachery or failure. Everyone in Parliament has to endure such experiences, women included. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties that are universal in order to deal with those that do arise from discriminatory attitudes to women.

It is worth noting also that some initiatives that are initially greeted with hostility are subsequently integrated into the mainstream of public policy. A good example of this is the practice of analysing budgets in terms of their specific impact on women. This is an initiative for which I think I can take credit. In 1981 as an opposition front bencher I made a detailed analysis of the effect of the budget on women in various circumstances throughout the community, and published that document. I continued this practice until, as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women in 1984, I authorised the preparation within the Office of Status of Women of a detailed Women's Budget document. On the night of the budget speech when I announced this initiative, several opposition Senators exploded in derisory mirth. Some political correspondents similarly dismissed this step as trivial. I note now that the Women's Budget paper is a standard in several state governments as well as the federal Parliament in Australia. When the current Leader of the Opposition, Dr Hewson, made a public statement on International Women's Day this year, he attached to that statement a detailed comparative analysis of the effects on women of the Fightback package and the Prime Minister's One Nation statement. From this I assume that in the event of a change of government, the practice of issuing a Women's Budget statement will continue.

As more women achieve positions of power in parliamentary democracies throughout the world, discussion has developed as to whether cabinet posts can be divided into 'soft' (social policy) and 'hard' (economic policy and defence), and whether women escape stereotyping by avoiding the social policy portfolios and seeking the 'hard' jobs.

I am a sceptic about such analysis. From my experience, large portfolios with complex administrative and financial arrangements, huge budgets and high visibility in the electorate are tough to manage. This is true, whether it is social security or defence. In fact, because defence is not an issue that touches on the daily lives of the electorate, social policy can be a tougher area to manage than defence, finance or resources. Also it is worth noting that the woman who has achieved the longest and most influential period as a world leader, Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the UK, cut her teeth on the education portfolio.

I have not made a statistical analysis of the numbers of questions asked of ministers in the period that I was in cabinet, nor of the number of censure motions, urgency motions, matters of public importance nor the relative number of press conferences and other public and media appearances made by ministers over that period. My informed guess would be that education received at least as much attention as treasury or finance, and certainly more than defence, foreign affairs or trade. It may also be worth noting that since the reorganisation of Commonwealth administrative arrangements in 1987, the portfolio that I once held, which covered the Commonwealth's involvement in schools, the ACT education system, TAFE, higher education, research and for a period incorporated youth affairs, is now administered by a cabinet minister and two junior ministers. Ministerial responsibility for the ACT education system has since become the responsibility of the ACT governing body.

During my period as Education Minister I pursued initiatives such as peace education, arts education, special measures for girls and women in maths, science, engineering, physical education, and TAFE. These interests could be stereotyped as appropriate for a woman politician. I should point out however that I spent a large amount of my time setting up the initial formal links between education and industry; in restructuring and rationalising higher education; in expanding the Commonwealth's role in technical education and training; and in planning a series of high level, rigorous reviews of various disciplines in Australian universities.

I instance these activities because they are perceived as 'hard' rather than 'soft', and not stereotyped as women's interests. I can assure you, I was very interested.

A major concern during my first years as Education Minister was the vexed, century old, question of state aid to private schools. In political life a problem solved is a problem forgotten. An examination of my parliamentary and extra parliamentary activities during the first period of the Hawke administration, would show how vigorously the state aid debate was pursued at that time. My parliamentary career contained many periods when I was in the eye of a storm, be it abortion, university fees or the Australia Card. Only the Australia Card debate prompted rallies of more thousands and controversy of greater heat than our decision to reorganise schools funding to ensure more assistance to schools with fewer resources. The Australia Card debate was like a bushfire: it came from nowhere, raged hot, and burnt out when the particular legislative program was withdrawn, but the organised campaigns around state aid continued over a long period and necessitated sustained and detailed negotiations by me with virtually all sectors of the education community in every state and territory of Australia. The matter was settled with the agreement of all parties. A new formula for the funding of schools was embodied in legislation in 1984. Each year since then the government has allocated the funds to maintain that formula and the matter arouses no comment.

I believe that the personal hostility I endured during the difficult and turbulent period prior to the new formula was exacerbated by my gender, but this was not significant.

What was significant was that this episode demonstrated that a woman parliamentarian could resolve even the most contentious of problems.

Looking back on my time in Parliament, I can identify issues and actions that typify the parliamentarian anxious to achieve social change. All who have embarked on such a course, the many men and the few women, have had turbulent times. My involvement with reforms for women made my parliamentary work even more turbulent and controversial. The presence of a newcomer in the citadels of power is always a challenge, whether the novelty is to do with a person's gender or as in the case of Senator Neville Bonner, the person's race. There is no avoiding that extra dimension of controversy. Only when a critical mass of women parliamentarians is achieved, will gender cease to be an issue.

I would like to conclude this lecture with two main points. First, I will answer the questions I am most often asked - what were your greatest achievements and what was your greatest failure?

The achievements which give me greatest satisfaction come from the two areas with which I was most closely associated in government.

In terms of policy, I was pleased to be able to maintain an extensive commitment to public education from the beginning of school through to the funding of universities for undergraduate and post graduate studies and research. Even more rewarding is the fact that the objective I advanced at the Economic Summit in 1983 of lifting the school retention rate from one third to two thirds before 1990 has been easily achieved, thus improving opportunities for an entire generation.

In terms of the legislative role of the Parliament, I am enduringly grateful that I had the opportunity to initiate and implement laws against discrimination against women in the workplace and other areas. I monitor, with continuing pride, the success of the Affirmative Action legislation with its careful, evolutionary strategy to desegregate the Australian workforce and increase both the range of job opportunities available to women, and the pool of talent available to industry and higher education.

The failure that continues to distress me is the failure of aboriginal policy. In the three years I spent as shadow minister for aboriginal affairs I worked closely with aboriginal people in cities, towns and tiny communities in remote areas. I pursued their concerns in parliament on a daily basis. The two ministers I shadowed, Fred Chaney and Peter Baume, were capable and committed. Our collective efforts at that time have not been productive. Good intentions abound, resources are increasing, new administrative and representative structures have been put in place, but the injustices experienced by Aboriginal Australians continue. I failed to make significant change

My second concluding point involves the diminishing credibility of parliaments throughout Australia. Failures of economic policy and administration have resulted in a deepening cynicism about the parliamentary system and those who work in it. This is a problem for all of us but perhaps women parliamentarians, especially those with feminist values, can make a special contribution. It seems to have been the case that women parliamentarians, both federally and at the state level, have been able to establish more credibility with the electorate than their male colleagues. In the case of our two women premiers, reflecting their feminist values they have deliberately sought to be more consultative, more flexible, more cooperative and more reasonable in their demeanour inside and outside of Parliament. At the same time, they have demonstrated decision making capacities at the highest level. Perhaps this is a signal

pointing the way to reform of parliamentary conventions and procedures. If women parliamentarians can make a contribution to regenerating the authority of Parliament, then for that reason as for many others, I hope in the next decade we see many more fishes on bicycles.

Dr LAING - On behalf of the Department of the Senate, I would like to thank you very much, Susan, for that terrific insight into your time as a parliamentarian; they were certainly times of change. I know that people in the audience will have some questions to ask of you and I understand you are happy to field those questions.

QUESTIONER - My question has nothing to do with our parliamentarians in the state governments, but is a general question about sexual harassment of female parliamentarians within the debate. Is there a difference because of gender? You talked about the derision that comes from the other side. Is there a gender aspect to that? If there is, what is one of the ways to assist potential parliamentarians as well as ones who are already there?

Ms RYAN - I think some of the rubbishing that we experienced during debates on bills like the Sex Discrimination Bill had a sexist overtone, but I do not think that is a set of problems which should deter women from entering a parliamentary career. My view about sexual harassment is that it is a problem which is worse where women have the least power: the more power you have, the more you are able to deal with it. The best way of dealing with any sexual harassment that might arise for a woman parliamentarian is by using the forums of the Parliament to expose it.

QUESTIONER - As a non-Australian, I have been interested in the Westminster system. It seems that it proposes a lot of obstacles to women getting ahead in the sense that you cannot put bright, dynamic women into ministerial positions unless they have already been members of the Parliament. In the same way, it is very hard for a woman to ever be considered for Prime Minister because she does not have that power base. Is it realistic to think that the Westminster system will ever be reformed in some manner that would help women move up in a better way?

Ms RYAN - I do not think that we will move as far away from the Westminster system as, say, the American system which brings in outsiders as ministers. I do not think I would support that reform. For all the frustration of working your way through the parliamentary system as we know it in Australia, I think it is good training and a good school and by the time you do get to be a minister (and that has happened all too rarely up till now) you have a very good grasp of what you are dealing with in the electorate, in the parliamentary system and in the bureaucracy.

My address today was focused on women parliamentarians and my own experience. I did not have time to embark on other very important ways of achieving social change, such as the appointment of key women to key bureaucratic positions. It seems to me that through that mechanism (and it was certainly one that I was very pleased to be able to utilise very effectively and I know there are some beneficiaries of that system here) and by being prepared to appoint women to key positions within the bureaucracy, statutory bodies and so forth you can bring in a whole lot of competence and energy for the business of creating better government. You do not have to be in the Parliament to be a part of making better government; you can be in the bureaucracy and in the statutory bodies.

I was very pleased to implement a policy in our cabinet of always examining the possibilities of appointing a woman for such positions. We did make some good appointments and they do continue. I would like to see more of them, by the way; I

think the numbers might have slipped back a bit. But in answer to your question, I think the Westminster system is a good system for Australia, with modifications. I do think that we should seek out and find other means of bringing competent women into the business of government, as I have said.

QUESTIONER - I was very interested in coming to this lecture today to get your thoughts on whether you think there are signs of a new phase of change and how we should proceed down that path if, indeed, there is one.

Ms RYAN - I would like to say 'yes' and I think that I can almost say 'yes'. A year ago I would have said no. I felt then that a lot of the gains that we, including many people in this forum today, had made had started to be taken for granted and that, in a way, the opportunities presented to women by those changes, particularly the legislative changes, were not being pursued as energetically as we had hoped. But I think that there has been a shift, even by the Senate and may I congratulate the Senate staff, and Ann Millar in particular, for organising the exhibition on women in parliament and setting up this public lecture series. Even an action like that actually starts to stimulate a lot of discussion and debate around not only the question of women in Parliament but also the question of women in the community, women in government, women in industry and so forth.

Also, we seem to like decades and landmarks of ten years, twenty years and so forth. In December this year it will be the twentieth year since the election of the Whitlam Government. That was the first government elected, if you like, under the influence of feminists or with some sort of response to the agenda that we had put through WEL. I think that when people look back at the past twenty years and see what was achieved and what has happened we will get a welling up of debate and argument and a consciousness that women are, in many circumstances, still far from equality but that the vehicles to advance the cause are there. I would like to see more women driving those vehicles over the next decade and I think that there are some hopeful signs.

QUESTIONER - There are times when I try to keep quiet but this is a bright and dynamic challenge to me. It is very hard to maintain a position in any of the structures, seats of power, et cetera, large or small, if you are bright and dynamic. I think that the important thing today is that we throw away this power game by working constructively, by helping more and more people to be bright and dynamic. I find that even a bureaucrat becomes human when, across the counter, you allow your humanity to sparkle.

Ms RYAN - I have no argument with that.

QUESTIONER - There seems to be two main obstacles to women getting further ahead. One is the male backlash, which we have seen a lot of examples of recently, and the other is the perceived breakdown of feminism and the move towards post-feminism. Could you give your comment on whether you feel the male backlash is a permanent and rising force or a passing fad and also your definition of post-feminism and whether you think that might last.

Ms RYAN - The male backlash had started before we had even got anywhere for them to lash against. We heard about the male backlash in 1972 when we had got almost nowhere. The male backlash will be permanent and successful if women let it be. I can only repeat the kind of thing that some people here have been hearing me say for many years and which my role model, Edna Ryan (who, unfortunately, is not with us today because she is not feeling very well) instructed me and many of my generation

in, which is that women have to take control of the agenda and make these reforms happen.

If we sit back and say 'Oh, the backlash is terrible,' and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by all of the awful things which still do happen - sexual harassment included - then the male backlash will succeed. If we say, 'We are not accepting this; we live in a democracy and we can influence what governments do; we can influence what corporations do; we can influence what happens in the workplace; we can even influence the media', although that is probably the hardest but it is not impossible, then the backlash will be - what was your phrase - a temporary phenomenon. So it is really up to us - and I hope, of course, that we make sure that it is a very short-lived phenomenon and thus very temporary.

In relation to post-feminism, I struggle with post-modernism in architecture, literature and literary criticism and I think that post-feminism is uncalled for. I use the term myself with irony, which is not always appreciated in Australia. Wearing short skirts is post-feminist, if you are allowed to do it. But I think that we have not got to the stage where we should be allowing the movement of feminism to be replaced by another movement - that is not to say that the movement does not have to change; it certainly does.

The movement certainly has to attract that support of women - very young women, and I am pleased to see that there are some here today who will take it forward in their own way and whose agenda will not be the same as the seventies agenda. So, change certainly - new blood, new ideas, new directions, certainly - but not a stop and not a fragmentation of the programs which would be the analogous thing to post-feminist literary criticism or post-feminist architecture. So let us have contemporary feminism or feminism for the year two thousand.

QUESTIONER - I would like to ask you specifically about the abortion issue - like the state aid issue, it does not ever seem to go away and the worrying upsurge in debate about it at the moment which has significant implications whether we are old-time or contemporary feminists. Do you have any advice for other members of the contemporary women's movement about effective political ways of combating moves to do away with the current abortion legislation?

Ms RYAN - I do not think that we need any new strategies. I think that we need to revive the ones that were effective in the seventies, but we need to revive them very fast and very systematically. I think that the state aid debate is settled - I hope it is - but I do not think that the abortion issue is settled and I suppose that you could say that that is the clearest sign of the male backlash.

It is not unique to Australia. Obviously, we have seen what has happened in the United States. It has a much worse legislative and policy position and a much worse real situation for women because of their lack of proper health insurance and facilities. We have also seen the abortion issue come to a head in the most unlikely of places, Ireland, and perhaps some progress, even in Ireland, will be achieved on this issue.

I think that it is not just an issue for feminists or for those of us who were trying to get a more humane approach in the seventies; it is an issue for all women and I think that it is an issue for all men. It is time to get another broad-based coalition together to make sure that legislators in every Parliament of Australia - and it is essentially a matter that will be changed in a legislative way in the state Parliaments, not in the Commonwealth Parliament - are very well aware that over 80 per cent of Australians

- the last time I ever saw a poll on this issue was a few years ago - support choice and all of the policy infrastructure that goes there. They have to be reminded.

People get nervous when these controversial issues come onto the agenda again and parliamentarians - who are in some ways a nervous breed - get nervous. Those special interest groups which have a reactionary program in mind are very well organised. They will use all of the latest pseudo-medical data to support their case and so forth, and the general populace can be left out of the debate. That must not happen. It is a debate that needs to involve everybody. Everybody should make sure that legislators know what the majority of Australians want on this very important fundamental issue.

QUESTIONER - I would like to congratulate you on what you have achieved in your time here. I have been extremely impressed to hear what you have been doing. Especially in light of the backlash that we have been talking about, it would seem that the feminist agenda has taken a back seat in both government and opposition policy, particularly when you look at the One Nation and Fightback packages. Do you think this is so and, if so, why?

Ms RYAN - I cannot pretend that issues to do with the Australian women - be they feminist or not - are as high on the agenda of either major political party as I would like to see them. Without saying they have taken 'a back seat', I think there is reason to examine both political agendas and to make sure that women's issues get a higher priority. I suppose the reason why that has happened comes from the recession. In one sense, it is understandable that the dreadful consequences of the recession - namely, unemployment and what that is doing to individual people and families - become the dominant preoccupation.

However, we all know that disadvantaged groups fare even worse in times of economic hardship. Therefore, it is not really the time to say, 'Look, we are so worried about unemployment, we cannot look at matters affecting women'. I think both things have to happen. Again, the reason is that women generally have not been as focused in their political activity as they were and it is time to focus again.

There is a signal that such activity would be fruitful. I hope people have taken note of that signal. As I said in my address, I was pleased to notice that, firstly, Dr Hewson made a statement on International Women's Day - I suspect that is the first time a conservative leader has done that - and, secondly, he chose to do the impact analysis of the two statements on women. That suggests to me that the Liberal Party is polling the electorate and is finding out that women are very dissatisfied with the state of the nation - as well they might be - and that they are open to policies that offer some remedy. Obviously the government will note that also and will take action. But we seem to have a situation where, for the first time in some years, we might get the Government and the Opposition vying for the women's vote again. That is a very fertile opportunity; please take advantage of it.

QUESTIONER - You said that the Sex Discrimination Act was one of the big successes and I think so too. But one of the exemptions given by that Act is to religious educational bodies. You also talked about the issue of State funding to private schools. I wondered whether you had ever been tempted to tie in those two issues. Did you ever think that you could remove those exemptions for religious educational institutions, given that the states fund them?

Ms RYAN - We certainly did look at it. When I was drawing up the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Bill I was very ambitious. In looking at the scope of the legislation,

we had the benefit of my private member's bill from a couple of years before. At the time when the bill was passed in the Senate it would not have been possible to pass it without those exemptions. My judgment was that it was important to get the major provisions of the bill - major in the sense of affecting the majority of people - in place and that there would be opportunities to look at exemptions later on. Indeed, there has been a very good and constructive review which has led to the dropping of the exemptions for superannuation provisions. So that has been very important.

In terms of religious bodies, that is a very vexed issue in a nation where the Constitution specifically prohibits, under section 116, the funding of religious bodies. I really think it is probably the topic for a whole lecture and discussion in itself. I do not see that anything is lost by looking again at the implications of those exemptions, but I would suspect that unless a case can be made that the dropping of those exemptions would have broad benefit they probably would not succeed.

QUESTIONER - I am Christabel Chamarette, Senator for the Greens, Western Australia. I have been interested in hearing what you had to say. More than the backlash, I am concerned that part of the failure of increasing the gains in terms of women's interests has been the cooption of women into patriarchal processes and a failure to address gender inequalities within our society. Would you like to comment on anything, particularly in the parliamentary area, that can be done to challenge that?

Ms RYAN - A lot has been done. The debate about cooption as against staying outside is a debate which I am sure will continue to be pursued within feminist circles. As I indicated in my address, I resolved that very early on and decided to seek to exercise political power to achieve certain ends. A lot of feminists did not support that course of action; a lot were active supporters of it. Within the parliamentary system, which is such an old system with entrenched practices, change of any kind - even quite minor changes such as what time you break for dinner - seems almost impossible to achieve. It is not a system that lends itself easily to change.

I would like to see a lot of changes in the parliamentary process. As I suggested in my concluding remarks, I think the kinds of reforms that Premiers Kirner and Lawrence announced when they became premiers - that is, to try to achieve within Parliament more reasonable debate, more serious addressing of the issues, less buffoonery and less school playground stuff - were important. They are not the most important things that they are doing, but they are important. Polling indicates that the community supports both of them. In fact, their own personal standing in the community has benefited because they have adopted a more reasonable and dignified way of conducting parliamentary business.

So I would like to see an all-party review committee of parliamentary procedures in this place, with a brief aimed at removing some of the behaviour which is not only obnoxious to many of the women in the place but also is certainly obnoxious to many people in the electorate, and which is behaviour that seems to stem from the previous male dominance. Perhaps you might like to take that up as part of your parliamentary work and I wish you success. Thank you.