



**Kate
Ellis**



Proud past, but future a challenge for women

HAPPY International Women's Day to you all for yesterday. This annual day has a long and proud history of holding events all over the world to celebrate the achievements of women as well as highlight the challenges which remain before us.

From a small beginning in Copenhagen in 1911, International Women's Day has grown to be a significant global event.

Yet it now also appears to be a day when some once again question the relevance of the women's movement in today's day and age.

Is it still really necessary, given our past accomplishments? Are the younger generation rejecting the path paved by the sisterhood before them? And, most shockingly, has feminism become unfashionable and irrelevant?

In my job I have the opportunity to visit many schools and speak to young Australians about a range of different topics. One conversation that sticks with me took place with a group of senior schoolgirls and was about their views on the women's movement.

One stated to me without a hint of irony: "I am not a feminist or anything but I do think we need to keep demanding equal rights and opportunities."

Another said: "I appreciate the battles that others had in the past but I just don't see what burning my bra could possibly achieve these days."

The majority appeared to agree entirely with all of the principles which lie behind feminism; they just didn't identify with the stereotypical image or acts. They certainly were not complacent about the need for further striving or apathetic about the past achievements, just unclear about how they fit into the picture.

And if we are going to be totally honest, stereotypes are not the only things excluding some from participating in the great sisterhood: there is a tiny extreme element who seek total control over the movement.

Some years ago I attended a conference on future directions for the women's movement. I was shocked when told I could not be a speaker, only feminists could, and as I did not support the need for a revolution (against capitalism, democracy and a range of other "evils"), I couldn't possibly be a

feminist. We mustn't allow feminism to become captive of any one narrow view of the world but rather an umbrella for all of us who seek to increase women's rights and opportunities.

I don't really care whether you are old, young, lesbian, heterosexual, big, small, have long hair or short or what your race or religion is - while women have made great leaps forward in our quest for equality we have many battles which remain ahead and the more hands on deck the better.

While the Howard Government downgraded the women's portfolio, we now have a government that is committed to improving the lives of and empowering Australian women.

Led by the passionate, inspiring and intelligent Tanya Plibersek as Minister for the Status of Women, we are determined to further progress women's opportunities and life experiences.

There is much left to be done.

Our grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters and wives need to be safe and supported. The battles for equal pay, representation, anti-discrimination, freedom from sexual assault, safety and security, an end to the disturbing levels of domestic violence and homicide, the unfair distribution of domestic duties etc, all lie before us.

We are restoring fairness to our workplaces, recognising that women were among the hardest hit by WorkChoices.

In the area of women's safety, the Rudd Government is introducing a national plan to reduce violence against women and children which will be led by an expert council.

We're developing respectful relationship programs in high schools and boosting programs to investigate domestic violence-related homicides and homelessness. We are creating better quality and more affordable and accessible child care; more family-friendly workplaces, including the right to request extra parental leave and flexible working conditions and looking for best models of support for parents with newborn children.

With a rapidly ageing population, it's important we work to improve women's economic security and independence. According to data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, women still receive just 84 per cent of male full-time adult ordinary earnings.

While there has been much hype about the chairs for the 2020 Summit, women in the Rudd Government hold down some of the most challenging roles in Australian politics.

Australia's first female Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, is entrusted with delivering the education revolution and restoring balance in the workplace.

SA Senator Penny Wong led the charge as Australia signed the Kyoto protocol and Jenny Macklin's leadership secured the apology the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal people have waited too long to hear.

Nicola Roxon has hit the ground running to reform our health sector and fix the problems left by the former government. This is to name but a few.

International Women's Day is an opportune time to reflect on the remarkable women and remarkable achievements that have come before us. With an inclusive women's movement there is little doubt we will have many more great achievements to celebrate on March 8 well into the future.

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