

EMILY's List Inaugural Oration - 13 September 2011

I'm Australia's first female Prime Minister.

And I didn't get here alone.

Today I think of all the women who made my journey possible, all the women who made our journey possible:

- A lifetime of support from colleagues and family, mentors and friends like Joan Kirner.
- A century of activism by women of matchless courage and resolve.

Some have an honoured place in history like Edith Cowan and Catherine Helen Spence, but there are also the unknown, unnamed women who through countless acts of defiance affirmed the right of every woman to a life of opportunity, freedom and choice.

They did these things inspired by faith in women they would never know and a future they would never see.

We are those women. We are that future.

Today we speak for the women of a thousand generations.

We owe them a debt of gratitude, and we owe to them a responsibility: a responsibility to build on their foundations; to do more, to be more, and to make life better for the women who will come after us; to say and do in our own time the things that were once held to be unthinkable and unachievable.

Friends,

April 25th has a sacred place in the Australian imagination.

But 19 years before Gallipoli, it was already a significant day in our nation's story.

It was the day Australian women first cast their vote.

The place was South Australia, a laboratory of progressive social change in the late Victorian era.

The Adelaide Advertiser expressed its faith that women would not "leave their electoral privileges unexercised for fear of losing the bloom of their delicate and retiring femininity."

While the Adelaide Observer pointed out the "air of responsibility" on the faces of the newly enfranchised voters.

That was how our journey in Australian political life began.

Those women are long gone now, and it easy to think of them as quaint figures in their bonnets and elaborate petticoats.

But remember this was the age of Mary MacKillop and Louisa Lawson - strong women in a harsh land.

And whether they knew it or not, they were doing more than just casting a ballot.

They were taking the remarkable and rendering it unremarkable, opening the way to a transformative century that would forever change the way human beings live, govern and think. The 20th century was a century of big political movements and ideologies such as fascism, socialism and modernism.

And yet the movement that outlasted them all, and surpassed them all in what it has achieved for humanity, is feminism - the struggle for women's emancipation and equality.

Pioneer Australian feminist Rose Scott observed that the vote itself was only a "piece of machinery" in "battling for the liberty, for the freedom of women".

It was the key that unlocked the door to everything else:

- The right to learn, to work and demand a fair day's pay;
- To choose our partners and our family structures, and manage our own health;
- To strive to live free of coercion and violence;
- And to shape the destiny of the nations in which we live.

Friends,

It was not enough for women to have the right to vote.

Our system of government must reflect the community it serves.

A political system without adequate representation of women is profoundly incomplete, and it is surprising that Australia, with our robust history of pragmatic social reform, and our early heritage of women's rights, didn't get there earlier.

Many countries - including places more traditional than our own - had a woman serve as prime minister long before we did, like India in 1966, Israel in 1969 and Britain in 1979.

But we've done it now, and I'm not so much proud that it was me as I am proud that it finally happened.

Proud that decades of waiting came to an end.

Proud that having a second, third and fourth female Prime Minister will not have to be anything unusual.

Taking the remarkable and rendering it unremarkable.

Friends,

I didn't set out to be the first female Prime Minister.

If it came from anywhere, it started with two hard-working Welsh migrants who'd been denied opportunity in their own lives and who didn't want the same for their own children.

That those children were both girls only reinforced their determination.

My sister and I were taught by our parents from childhood to think big and imagine we could do anything.

I acted on that belief all my life, whether as a school student resenting the fact that the girls were forced to study home economics while the boys did woodwork and metal work.

As a lawyer standing up for low-paid migrant women in the clothing industry.

Or as a candidate who took three attempts, against a wall of ingrained factional hostility, to enter federal politics.

I was supported by people close to me who told me to believe in myself, but I was lucky that I was never taught my gender would hold me back.

Perhaps it also had something to do with coming from a family where there were no boys, a family where mum worked, and where neither parent ever suggested that our lives or aspirations should be limited by our gender.

Whatever the reasons, I never conceptualise my Prime Ministership around being the first woman to do this job.

I conceptualise my job as being about delivering the things that make a difference for the nation.

But if visibly having a woman to do this job means even one woman or one girl sees a more expansive future, then it is worth it.

I've become so used to high-achieving blokes approaching me somewhat sheepishly, and I know straight away what they're going to ask: they want an autograph for their daughters.

Because dads like that know the future has to be different for their daughters' generation than it was for their mothers' generation.

No longer can girls and young women be told, as our predecessors were, that politics and the other professions are "no fit place for a woman".

The first female MP in NSW, Millicent Preston-Stanley, had the perfect riposte when she said: "Parliament clearly is a fit place for a woman provided she is fit for Parliament."

Then and now, women must come to politics with few illusions and sleeves rolled up.

I believe with all my heart that women, as well as men, can thrive in the adversarial atmosphere of politics.

As women, we must never allow ourselves be held to a separate, lower standard because that is just a cruel delusion.

When I look at a Parliament that contains people as diverse as Jenny Macklin, Julie Bishop and Christine Milne, these are not women who received special treatment - nor would they accept it.

They are tough women, resilient women.

They are necessarily tough because politics is tough, and politics is tough because politics is important.

It shouldn't be easy, and it's not.

Not for the women - not for the blokes.

The late Virginia Chadwick told a great story about how she mentioned her political aspirations to a senior male MP and was promptly told that she was "the wrong age, the wrong sex and from the wrong place."

Chadwick proved him wrong in the only possible way - by entering politics and becoming a successful and distinguished NSW Cabinet Minister.

It is our best and only response.

Friends,

The women's movement did not free us from every problem.

It simply gave us the means - and the opportunity - to solve them.

The key to a room of one's own.

Now that so much of the work has been done, let's not allow a myth to develop that women's rights were somehow inevitable.

Or that they are somehow embarrassing or out of date.

We should never allow the gains of the gender revolution to be reversed, whether in health, education, employment, law reform, or politics.

They are too precious.

Too many women gave up too much to achieve them.

Our female pioneers weren't detached intellectuals.

They were practical women with practical goals - goals deeply grounded in principle and informed by centuries of lived experience.

Those have been our goals, too, in the Labor Party and Emily's List.

We sought to bring issues like child care and domestic violence to public attention, not just as women's issues but as issues affecting the whole community.

And we sought to create an embracing range of policies that would bring opportunity to the lives of women every day.

Modern choices for modern women.

Not just those women who are seen as high fliers, but women who work hard every day in the so-called "pink collar" industries such as child care, retail, executive support and the community services:

- The women with young children juggling work and family responsibilities;
- The women are the sandwich generation - looking after growing children and older parents and relatives;
- The migrant women struggling to find their way in a new land and new culture;
- The senior women who have spent their lives looking after others but find themselves lacking the resources for a dignified old age.
- These women trust Labor to deliver the policies that will bring security and opportunity to their lives.

That's why I'm proud to be part of the government that introduced Paid Parental Leave, increased the Child Care Rebate and put Work Choices in the dustbin of history.

I'm proud to lead a government that has introduced the National Carer Recognition Strategy and has committed to a National Disability Insurance Scheme.

I'm proud to lead the Government that is lifting universal superannuation to 12 per cent, and I'm proud to lead a government that is recognising the value of community sector work through the Equal Pay Case.

These are great reforms. They will touch every Australian woman in some way, and they are enduring proof that good government really can change lives.

But our empathy mustn't stop at Australia's own borders.

Women's rights, being human rights, are universal and indivisible.

The suffering of millions of women diminishes us all and obligates us.

As one of the world's top 20 economies, we have a responsibility to contribute to women's equality globally.

That's why we're making new investments in gender equality through the aid program directed towards reducing violence against women.

Indeed, Australia's National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women is being used by the UN as a template for countries around the world.

We've got a chance to show real global leadership.

Just as in the past we've shown global leadership on issues like landmines, nuclear disarmament and free agricultural trade, so too we can be a leader on women's rights.

That's why I was very proud to announce the appointment of an Ambassador for Global Women's Issues this morning.

Australia has a great story to tell, and we should tell it to the women of the world who need our help.

Friends,

When we look at these achievements at home and abroad we see a nation that's come a long way.

We've done great things, especially since the time of the Whitlam government.

Today, 30 per cent of our nation's parliamentarians are women; four of our nine First Ministers; our Governor-General and two State Governors.

We've got more than 30 per cent of board positions across Federal Government agencies held by women, on track to our target of 40 per cent by 2015, and we're changing the regulations so that women can participate in all aspects of military life.

In the words of General Peter Cosgrove, men and women will now have an equal right to fight and die for their country.

But the journey of securing women's rights is far from done.

We best honour our achievements by never taking them for granted, and by ensuring they are passed on - intact and augmented - to our daughters and our nieces.

This is no time for the momentum to stop.

Friends, there are still too many barriers to women's participation in "last bastion" fields like engineering, mining or the military.

Very few of those roles have essential physical requirements that necessarily exclude women, and many of them are jobs in expanding sectors where the opportunities are abundant and the wages are high.

There is no reason why women can't have their full share of the mining boom.

But perhaps understandably, most attention goes to the corporate sector because it is the most connected and educated leadership elite in the nation.

Yes, we have seen some welcome progress in recent times.

But 115 years since women first cast a vote in this nation, there are still some public companies with not a single woman on their boards, and many more with only one female board member. Just 13 per cent of corporate board members are female.

Only 3 per cent of ASX 200 companies have female CEOs.

Less than 9 per cent of key executive management positions in ASX 200 companies are women.

This is simply unacceptable and I say to those companies: this is 2011, not 1911 - just get on with it.

There is overwhelming evidence that gender equality is a strong driver of corporate profit and success, but the impact of women's participation is much wider than individual firms. It affects the health of our whole economy.

Australia's participation rate of almost 60 per cent for women is extremely low by international standards.

The World Economic Forum places us 44th in the world for labour-force participation.

That's too many women missing out on the dignity and benefits of work, especially those like single mums and older women who want to work but don't always have the chance.

As the economy grows, our country will need even more skilled workers if we are going to take advantage of the minerals boom and manage the challenges of our ageing population.

In fact, research by Goldman Sachs released demonstrates just what a difference women's participation can make.

The study showed that lifting female workforce participation has boosted economic activity in Australia by 22 per cent since 1974, and if we move to European levels of participation, it would boost economic growth by a further 13 per cent - or \$180 billion a year.

That's bigger than the size of the whole mining industry combined, which comprises 10 per cent of Australia's GDP.

The source of that productivity is right here amongst us, in the suburbs and towns of our nation just waiting to be included, waiting for the skills and the incentives to connect them with the workforce and make them part of Australia's opportunity story.

And that's exactly what I'm determined to do, because women's political emancipation is not complete unless we also enjoy economic emancipation.

Friends,

Nowhere is the message of women's participation more important than in our political system, because it is our political system which embodies the way the nation sees itself, and women have the right to see themselves in the public face of our nation.

It's all well and good to have a woman in the top job, but that is no substitute for widespread and lasting change across our system of government.

We have 15 houses of parliament in this nation, along with 565 local councils.

The time is coming, if it hasn't already arrived, when anything less than 50 per cent representation will be unacceptable.

That's where Emily's List retains every part of its original urgency and relevance.

I worked on the constitution of this organisation. I was there at the start, and I can say our job is not done yet.

I know it's been a long haul.

I think of stalwarts like Joan Child, Labor's first female MP in the House of Representatives, who turned 90 this year.

Joan has walked a long road and set a wonderful example, and I'd like to tell her that the journey is complete - but it isn't.

This is no time to fold up the banners or put away the cheque book.

There's plenty more to do - and we do it in the same spirit as the women who went before us: with optimism and with pride.

On the historic day that women won the vote in NSW, Louisa Lawson recorded in her scrapbook: "I have always loved my countrywomen, always admired them, and believed in them."

Louisa Lawson believed that Australian women were the most capable women in the world, that they belonged to a nation capable of truly great things.

This is my belief too.

A belief that abides.

A belief that grows stronger every day.

A belief I will hold as long as I live.