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Title:

Newcastle lecture, 'Women's Rights: the challenge of Social Democracy'

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Women's Rights
(also made into booklet) 3183

NEWCASTLE LECTURE, FRIDAY 17th NOVEMBER, 1978, BY THE PREMIER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA,
MR. DON DUNSTAN. "WOMEN'S RIGHTS : THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY".

Tonight I have chosen women's rights as my topic for the 1978 Newcastle lecture. I have done so because I believe the achievement of genuine equality of opportunity and dignity by women is probably the major challenge for social democracies during the next decade.

My choice of subject will no doubt surprise many and that is itself a reason for coming to grips with the reality of women's situation in Australia, and with the challenges that changing that reality poses. But, unfortunately, too often Australian men - including many politicians, media personalities, business and trade union leaders - adopt a defensive, sniggering attitude towards women's problems, needs and rights.

I do not share that view. My Government, in South Australia, is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women. But that, in itself, is not something we can boast about. The motive behind our various legislative and administrative moves in this area is to assure women only what has always been theirs by right ... the opportunity to make the most of their individual potential in any endeavour, whether as home makers or as members of the work force. I hasten to add that this "right", in Australia, has usually been denied to most women.

In our society women are still recognised as being different from men, in a non-biological sense, and they are still in the position of having to argue for rights as though they were a small, disadvantaged minority group with peculiar problems. The reality is, of course, that women make up 50% of our population, but in most areas of life they are treated as a sub-species, lacking influence and deprived of responsibility.

Any profile of women indicates three changes in women's lives of great importance in recent years. The first is the falling birthrate and the effects this has had on women's domestic situation; the second is the continued increase in female employment; and the third, that most of this increase occurs amongst married women.

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In 1891 the average completed family size in Australia was 6.5. By 1921 it had fallen to 4 and in 1971 it was 2.7. It has since declined even further and is at present below zero population growth - at about 1.8.

A hundred years ago women's economic contribution to the family was so direct that it could be properly described as a form of primary production. Raw materials were processed into goods contributing to the family's wellbeing. A "good wife" grew vegetables, kept chooks, boiled soap and candles, made butter, sewed and knitted the clothing for her family's use and performed the duties, unpaid, of teacher and nurse.

For my grandmother there was little choice about domestic labour. There were no washing machines, no refrigerators, no convenience foods. Her days were filled with domestic work.

For many women today this is not the case. They are able, if they wish, to allow many once essential tasks to be taken over by machines in the home and by workers in the factory. Now, they can have more time away from domestic chores than they could before, they live longer, they are healthier and they have fewer children.

On average a woman's last child is born when she is about 25 and by the time she is in her early 30's her children are in school for seven hours a day. So today, instead of being a primary producer, a woman's direct economic contribution is often made by her going out to work to earn money. With this money she pays the electricity and buys massed produced clothing and furnishings.

The changing role of women, then, centres around employment. Women have always been employed, within the family. Today, they are also employed in increasing numbers outside the family.

The most remarkable change in women's lives in the last twenty years has been their increasing participation in the work force. This change was precipitated by the great increase in the tertiary or servicing sector of employment. Indeed, from 1971 to 1977 the female workforce in my State, South Australia, grew at three times the rate at which the female population expanded.

In particular, there was rapid growth in the numbers of married women entering the workforce - an increase of 66,700, or 98%, during the same period.

However, the workforce and work situation was constructed by adult males for males

and is still, all too frequently, arranged around the assumption that a proper participant in the workforce has somebody at home to cook her meals, do her washing, bring up her children; in short do all the work necessary to maintain a properly productive worker. Working women have never had such a support system behind them, and more and more working men don't have it either, as "their" women go out to work because of economic necessity.

I think it's necessary that the workforce change to accommodate the different needs of people and its partly in response to this that the South Australian Public Service Board has adopted a policy of permanent part time work with pro rata employment benefits. A person who works half time or more can enjoy permanence in his or her position, as well as benefits such as superannuation, long service leave, sick leave and recreation leave.

This is an example of a work situation altering to accommodate the needs of its participants. People actually do work part time and, significantly, 88% of those workers are females, many of whom have families or are solo mothers. They are in the workforce under particular conditions, but they should not be denied employee benefits just because they do not work full time.

I can think of examples from my own circle of acquaintances where women lost jobs they had for twenty years because they had no security of tenure and no employee benefits.

They were part time workers and were penalised because of it.

I have been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the rights and role of women in the workforce, and particularly the role of married women.

From one side I have been told that this emphasis is somehow demeaning to women who are homemakers. Other critics say it's wrong to encourage married women to re-enter the workforce because of high unemployment amongst the young. Worst of all I've been told that its married women who are stealing mens jobs - even though many women are forced by economic necessity to perform tasks which few men would contemplate.

I, and my Government, reject these criticisms for what they are - nonsense. People should be able to compete equally for jobs regardless of their sex or marital status.

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In South Australia married women now comprise 64% of the total female workforce, compared with 52% in 1966. Obviously its absurd for our opponents to suggest that these women should not work.

Who would perform their work? Whilst unemployment is high amongst women under twenty, there aren't sufficient unemployed single women to replace married women in the workforce, even if it was deemed desirable to do so.

Again, the South Australian Government's policy is quite clear. Our Sex Discrimination Act renders unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sex or marital status in employment, education and in the provision of goods and services. That such an Act was necessary was proved by the findings of our Parliamentary Select Committee Into Sex Discrimination which met from 1973 until 1975.

It was found that women were forced to resign on marriage from their employment, were rehired on less satisfactory terms and denied a range of employee benefits simply because of their marital status. Such discrimination was not practised against men, because of the "breadwinner" concept of the male wage earner.

Let me give you an example from the Select Committee's Report. Women on teaching scholarships lost any rights to travelling allowances or concessions when they married. This wasn't the case with male teachers, for it was assumed that women married men wealthier than themselves and that men married women poorer than themselves. On the basis of this assumption married women had to prove poverty before they were entitled to concessions which men married to working wives retained automatically.

It took a long time for Governments to act to correct these injustices. It was only eleven years ago, when I first became Premier of South Australia, that we changed the rules so that women retained their jobs after marriage if they were employed in the Public Service.

Indeed, throughout Australia, it was customary for women who worked in banks to be asked to resign on marriage, even as late as 1974.

The change in attitude which has led to the removal of such restrictions on married women's employment came about because married women were required in the workforce. Certainly this was true of teaching in the 1960's. If married women had not been employed as teachers there would not have been enough teachers to put in front of classes.

But the various legal blows for womens rights, like our Sex Discrimination Act, have not always been translated into changes in people's attitudes. Customs and prejudices enshrined in a history of discrimination against women cannot be simply legislated away.

Women are still under educated, under trained, under unionised and forced to work in the lowest paid occupations with little hope of advancement.

Equal pay has not meant equal opportunity and women workers are still clustered in a narrow range of typically "female" occupations.

Women work at women's work, and despite their increasing numbers in the workforce they are not participating on equal terms.

Margaret Power, in her article entitled "The Wages of Sex" showed that in 1911 84% of the female workforce worked in jobs that were recognisably "female". In 1971 that percentage had dropped to 82%. The change in 60 years had been pitiful.

The Fact Bulletins put out by the South Australian Department of Labour and Industry and my Womens Advisory Unit show that one-third of all working women in South Australia work in clerical occupations. Indeed, more than one-third of Australia's workforce is competing with itself for a particularly narrow range of jobs.

There are twenty-seven jobs which are recognisable as being performed by women, as compared with over three hundred jobs which are theoretically open to both men and women, but in practise are performed by men. Its staggering, but of the 246 South Australian women who completed apprenticeships in 1977, all but 21 were hairdressers.

The situation, of course, is worsened by the fact that younger women have been hardest hit by unemployment and that job opportunities are shrinking in some of the "traditionally female" areas of work sought after by school leavers.

Commonwealth Employment Service data comparing numbers of unemployed persons with vacancies by occupational group indicate a ghetto situation in female unemployment. This is particularly noticeable in the clerical/administrative area where the supply of potential women workers greatly exceeds the number of potential jobs. So, what can we do.

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Apart from the Sex Discrimination Act and the appointment of an Equal Opportunities Commissioner, the South Australian Government has established an Equal Opportunities Advisory Panel and an Equal Opportunities Officer in the Public Service. With us they are working hard to introduce real equality of opportunity for women in recruitment, training, promotion, classification and pay in an attempt to make the South Australian Public Service an ideal employer of women and set an example to the rest of the community.

In addition a Working Womens Centre will be established early in 1979. Its task will be to help women with the difficulties they face at work. Its hoped that the centre will also form a bridge between women and unions because female union membership is very low. Many unions neglect the interest of women partly because they have so few women members.

Women do not join unions because they feel they can gain very little from them ... despite the fact that the lot of most women workers is down at the bottom, earning less money, with little chance of self improvement or advancement within the context of the work place.

We hope that the Working Womens Centre will be able to heighten awareness amongst women about the benefits that union membership brings and will act as a force to enlighten unions of the particular needs of working women.

The adoption by the A.C.T.U. of the Working Women Charter has led to the formation of a special sub-committee of the South Australian Trades and Labour Council, which gives the Working Womens Centre its full support. Ours, I believe, will be the only Centre of its kind in Australia which is funded entirely out of State money.

But nowhere is the challenge for womens equality of opportunity so pressing as in the area of education.

It is, of course, true that women are equally as intelligent and capable as men. But its also true that women are brought up very differently from men and are often deprived of the opportunities to realise their capabilities.

Retention rates for secondary school girls have improved in recent years but most girls are still limited by the nature of the courses taken. Indeed, our research has shown that Australian schools still tend to channel girls along traditional lines, emphasising traditional "female" skills. This tendency, of course, is

paralleled and reinforced by family attitudes, which often appear to give encouragement and incentives to sons, but not daughters, to persist through high school with mathematics and science, and to train for highly skilled, high status occupations.

In contrast, the quality and quantity of information and guidance given to school girls still leaves much to be desired. The direct result of this conditioning and stereotyping is that, upon leaving school, girls have not adopted the idea that all occupations and skills may be available to them. Girl school leavers, then, have not had the opportunity to acquire the basic skills and background education which are likely to be decisive in competitive situations in gaining entry into many professional courses or into many apprenticeship trades.

Many young women, particularly those employed in factory or clerical areas, feel alienated from their work. Deprived of opportunities to take on responsibilities work is often seen as a finite quality in their lives. Is it small wonder, then, that sometimes they see the only solution as being a Mr. Right coming along to "take them away from all this".

Changing the assumptions and attitudes which contribute to the narrowing of women's life options will prove women's biggest battle.

Obviously, then, one of the reasons for the concentration of women in such a narrow range of occupations is women's education. Research undertaken in South Australia in 1976 indicates that 89% of women in the workforce have no post secondary qualifications. The comparable figure for men is 71%.

Australia is undertraining its women and is, therefore, wasting a huge economic resource, as well as frustrating human potential. Women have few work qualifications and when we look at the sort of qualifications they have we find they are clustered into typically female areas of training, like nursing and primary school teaching.

Women outside the workforce are probably less trained and less educated. Indeed, when we turn from post-secondary work qualifications to post-secondary education women are just as badly off. For every two males at University there is one woman. It's true that women make up 49% of the enrolment at colleges of advanced education but they are concentrated in liberal studies, paramedical studies and teacher education. The same slant is shown in universities, where women make up more than 50% of the student enrolment only in education and arts.

The choices men and women make about the subjects that women will study is made very early in secondary schools or so it appears. At Matriculation level girls, as a group, achieve better than boys in all subjects but they are again concentrated on the arts and humanities, subjects which restrict their range of choices. Indeed, while women make up more than 50% of the total student enrolment in subjects like French, English, German, Music and Classical Studies, they make up less than 30% of the student enrolment in chemistry, maths and physics.

So women are clustered in particular areas of education and not surprisingly in particular areas of employment.

Sexism in education, according to a report of the Schools Commission, is a process through which females and males not only learn that different things are required and expected of them because of their sex but they learn those things in an unexamined way.

The South Australian Government believes that education should make no assumptions about sex role differences. Instead, the purpose of a good education should be to encourage people to challenge their assumptions and explore alternatives.

In South Australia we've set out to improve the image of the female role as transmitted through the curricula of schools. Efforts are also being made to improve the self esteem of both girls in our schools and women teachers.

We are also committed to improving the representation of women in the administration of schools, and to try to change the attitudes of those teachers and administrators who exhibit, overtly or covertly, discriminatory attitudes against women.

Essentially, I believe that schools should prepare both boys and girls for the reality of their future in a society where expectations about appropriate behaviour for males and females are changing.

Let me give you a few examples of how we're setting out to achieve these goals. Efforts are being made to improve the access of girls to male dominated secondary school subjects such as maths, chemistry and craft, and boys to home economics and commercial studies.

We have also established a Special Task Force to develop strategies which teachers can use to broaden the career expectations of girls, and a register of women in non-traditional female roles is being developed to give girls information about actual examples of women in South Australia who work outside conventional "female" jobs.

This information will be published and distributed for use in schools for career counselling of girls and for the development of curriculum material. For instance, our new primary social studies curriculum has been developed with a conscious attempt to make it non-sexist.

Our Government also employs two teachers in a Womens Studies Resource Centre which acts as a resource and information centre for its 800 registered borrowers and for teachers in schools seeking information about womens roles.

In addition, our Sexism in Early Reading Instruction Project employs a teacher to work in junior primary schools to help teachers develop non-sexist curriculum materials and teaching strategies.

The story book "Mary" may still have a little lamb but she might also be enrolled in a course in civil engineering.

If we are to provide properly for women we must recognise their true situation while insisting that they do not have to be limited by it. Women clearly have singular needs with regard to information, and because of their social situation there are special kinds of information which will be more relevant to them than to men.

For instance, women have special needs for information about contraception, abortion, their legal rights as the victims of domestic violence or rape, or in their claims for sexual freedom.

These issues are important, particularly as society has so often defined women in terms of their sexuality.

When Debra McCulloch, my Women's Adviser, went overseas on a study trip, earlier this year, she discovered that Australia was well provided for in terms of resources for women. However, many women lead fairly isolated lives in our communities and they are not always aware of the resources that exist to help, especially in times of crisis.

The South Australian Government has established, as a pilot project, a Women's Information Switchboard, in an attempt to study the needs within the community for specialised information services.

The Switchboard has a staff of six drawn from a variety of backgrounds and speaking amongst them five languages other than English. It is open from 9.30 am until 9.30 in the evening, seven days a week. Since it opened in July it has been answering an average of sixty calls a day.

Women are seeking advice from the switchboard about a whole range of women's issues, but the most difficult problems are those connected with women's rights to pensions and women's rights in law.

The Switchboard's staff have been trained as lay advocates to appear for women before the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and have accompanied women to the Family Court, indeed to all interviews if necessary.

From our point of view we've gained a greater insight into the special problems of women, particularly the constraints sometimes opposed by women's role in the family.

As a result of this information a submission is being prepared for the Family Law Select Committee. Indeed, Debra McCulloch acts regularly on matters brought before her by the Switchboard.

Central to achieving a greater degree of independence for women is, of course, the provision of child care facilities. Obviously, this is important for working mothers but increasingly these facilities are being used by other mothers so that they can get out and about, have a break for a while or develop other interests.

In 1975, before our State Election, I said the Government would eliminate all fees in Kindergartens and I promised that we would achieve the development of a universal pre-school system for four year olds by the end of the decade.

When that commitment was made it was estimated that there were places equal to approximately 64% of all children aged four years and under five years in South Australia. By June last year, I'm proud to say, two years after making that commitment, the estimated proportion had risen to 92%.

Obviously, the provision of child care facilities providing temporary relief for mothers, is a vitally important issue.

In South Australia, we have made other changes to the law and bureaucratic practices on behalf of women. In particular, the changes made to the law relating to rape and other sexual offences have gained considerable publicity ; much of which has been misinformed.

Now in South Australia a rape victim tenders her evidence at the Magistrates Court by written affidavit. She can be called for cross examination only if the defense lawyer makes a successful application to the Magistrate that cross examination of her is germane to his client's alleged offence. Her prior sexual experience is not admissible as evidence unless a successful application is made to the Judge in Chambers.

The definition of rape has also been widened to include oral and anal rape, and legislation is being drafted to remove the right to an unsworn statement, following recommendations of the Mitchell Committee on the Reform of the Criminal Law.

South Australia has also criminalised rape in marriage, the first State under the Common Law to do so.

In the provision of services for the rape victim and, indeed, for the victims of domestic violence (who are almost always women) South Australia has provided an all female Rape Enquiry Centre, male and female police in patrol cars, a 24 hour Crisis Care Unit with radio controlled cars for speedy help, the Sexual Assault Referral Centre at one of our major hospitals and the Rape Crisis Centre.

For a population of 850,000 people Adelaide is now particularly well served with welfare resources, a deliberate policy of the S.A. Labor Government. Partly because of this and partly because of the concern of the Government for the rights of women South Australia leads this nation in its services for women.

However, the spread and variety of resources available for women in need emphasises all the more strongly the very basic problems of womens rights; sexuality, education and employment.

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The first major work of the new Womens Movement was the Second Sex by Simone De Beauvoir, published in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1953. As that impressive work shows us, women are differentiated by their "otherness" from men and by their sexuality. We can see the evidence of this in the way our society treats prostitutes, rape victims, sexually active female teenagers as opposed to male teenagers, and wives.

The concept that a woman is her husband's property was inherent in British law only 100 years ago and we are still suffering from the legacy of that concept.

Within marriage women are not yet equal partners although it may only be at the point of separation and divorce that this becomes clear. Women still do not have an automatic right to half the assets of a marriage for there is still an attitude current in Australia that a person who pays for assets from earnings received outside the home has more rights to those assets than someone who has provided unpaid labor within it.

The difficulties that women face under the law derive directly from the belief that a woman is her husband's property and, as such, has fewer rights than he does.

The growing participation of women in employment outside the home creates a greater chance of equality for women, although personally often providing some measure of hardship. Although women are still very much responsible for the housework and organisation of the home as well as their full time paid employment, their financial independence must alter the nature of marriage and suggests much more the possibility of a genuine partnership.

Womens equal participation in public life is a goal our society should be striving towards, so that decisions made within our society are made equally by men and women and not just by one sex for the benefit of the other.

New South Wales and Victoria followed South Australia in the provision of Anti Discrimination Legislation, and similar laws are being prepared for Tasmania and for the A.C.T.

Anti Discrimination legislation allows individuals to have wrongs redressed. Just as an aggrieved worker can complain to the Industrial Commission, so can an aggrieved worker discriminated against on the grounds of sex or marital status complain to the Commission for Equal Opportunity. But this provision is only the beginning. Experience overseas has shown that further Government encouragement maintained in the collection of the Fisheries Department Library is essential to establish fishing goals and targets. .../13.

The provision of goals and targets to which firms, companies, employers of all kinds, can work, is frequently criticised - largely because it is completely misunderstood. The evidence from the United States shows that such goals can have a profound effect on womens employment.

In Seattle, between 1976 and 1978, construction firms who had contracts with the Municipal Authority had to meet a goal of 15% female employment.

Construction firms without such contracts had no similar goals to meet. At the end of that two year period the construction firms with Municipal contracts had achieved 15% female employment, while construction firms working independently employed no women at all.

This suggestion about goals and targets was recently made by my Women's Advisor to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. She suggested that by 1980, 15% of locally made television programmes should be written, directed and produced by women. By 1985, she said, 45% of locally made programmes should be written, directed and produced by women.

The television stations protested that they would very much like to show programmes written and produced by women, but they said there was not sufficient material of good quality available. Ms. McCulloch pointed out that the television stations used this argument about locally made programmes before 1973. Then, they said they would have loved to have shown Australian films, but there were not enough good ones available.

Since 1973 there has been a considerable growth in the television and film industry in Australia, because each station had to meet a target proportion of locally produced material.

Exactly the same goal can be set for material written and produced by women. Indeed, Simone De Beauvoir, says in the Second Sex that men's bewilderment about women is due to the lack of cultural artifacts by women. We need more films, television programmes, sculptures and musical compositions by women if men are to be able to understand women.

Similar goals and targets in education would have the same effect. I foresee a time when engineering faculties will have 10% of their places set aside for women and the other 90% of places open to equal competition between men and women.

Then, the notion that our best scientific brains will be male will not hold the same force as it does today. Women's entry into what are, at present, male dominated fields of study and employment will be of considerable benefit to both sexes and to society at large, as all studies have shown.

To treat women as lesser beings, in law, education or employment, is to diminish us as a society. Quite simply, we are wasting a huge proportion of Australia's most valuable resource, its people.

If we are to develop our talents fully we must educate and employ women to the best of their ability.

That is the challenge. The reality is, however, that Australian women are still discriminated against in most aspects of their lives. That discrimination may not be enshrined in law but is certainly entrenched in attitudes. Indeed, as I have said before, I believe that women in Australia are still too often seen by men as being primarily sex objects or mother figures - stereotypes instead of individuals, dependents instead of equals.

But it won't always be that way.

The changing role of women, particularly with their increasing participation in the work force, is already breaking down many barriers to women's equal place in public life. But the equal right to work must be seen as paramount.

Women will never be able to realise their potential as individuals if they are denied the right to economic independence.

But the challenge is not to enforce new roles on women but to give them the opportunity to make their choices in life independently, as thinking people. I believe we cannot shirk that challenge.

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