

How the PM is hurting women [AU]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Howard Government began virtually from day one to systematically dismantle the apparatus designed to achieve and nurture equality of opportunity between the sexes. What we have today is a Government whose policy -- implicitly and explicitly -- is to remove women from the full-time workforce.

The implications of this are profound.

Women who are not in full-time employment have no possibility of economic independence. They cannot earn a decent income. Nor can they accumulate savings for retirement. They cannot develop and maintain job skills, keep abreast of professional developments or industry standards. It is difficult, if not impossible, to retain the social skills and confidence that the workplace provides.

In John Howard, Australia got its most reactionary Prime Minister for at least 30 years. Howard is a self-confessed social conservative who has a "white picket fence" view of society and history. Women belong in the home, he believes. His own wife, Janette, has not been employed outside the home since they were married. Once installed in Sydney's Kirribilli House, he immediately began his assault on the employment opportunities of women.

His strategy was swift and transparent. First, he hacked into funds for services that helped women to achieve economic independence. Secondly, he either abolished or slashed the funding, reduced the prestige and, more importantly, the authority of those government offices whose job it was to ensure that women's interests were protected.

Bureaucratic obstacles to turning back the clock for women were dispensed with. And the 1996 budget introduced policies that were the first step in a campaign to force women from the full-time workforce that continues to this day. In that budget, the Government drastically cut funding for child care.

There is a direct relationship between the availability of affordable child care and women's participation in the workforce.

In the first year of the Howard Government, a pattern was starting to emerge. All the women's policy advice mechanisms had been enfeebled, but it was those that promoted or protected women's employment that took the biggest hit. Nor were their legal protections safe from the predatory ideologue who now occupied the prime ministerial suite.

In 2001 I undertook a project of focus group research among Australian women in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Bathurst and Townsville on a range of issues relevant to their lives. These were women from ordinary families, a mixture of full-time mums and women working full or part-time.

Not one of these women could afford formal child care. Those who worked, relied on families or, more commonly, arranged their working lives so that one parent was always home and there was no need to pay for child care.

Under this Government, formal child care has become something only well-off families can afford.

While child-care policy actively discourages women from seeking employment, family and baby assistance policies developed by the Howard Government blatantly seek to keep women in the home or to restrict their economic activity to low-paid part-time work.

This is no white picket fence the Prime Minister is offering. This is a white picket prison. This is a prison that not only confines women but crushes their economic potential.

It is worth recalling the famous words of the American feminist Betty Friedan, who once said that "all women are just a husband away from welfare".

Rather than the white picket paradise he envisages for them, women want to make their own way in the world, to not be dependent on men who may turn out to be unreliable or simply not the one. They want good jobs, often careers, and they want their own houses and other material goods. All this before they even begin to think about having babies.

The Prime Minister cannot change what is inside these women's heads but he can -- and he is making life very difficult for them.

Yet these choices and the hardships they can involve are not valued by the political rulers of our country. They are not even acknowledged. To listen to the Prime Minister you would think that life for Australian women today was just hunky dory.

Increasingly, women have responded to the hard choices now confronting them by having fewer children, having them later in life or, in almost 30 per cent of cases, not having them at all. The result has been a drastic decline in the birthrate that has policy makers concerned about an ageing population and, increasingly and ominously, blaming women for this.

Some of our politicians, most notably the Prime Minister, undoubtedly believed that steering women back to the home that this would automatically turn around the birth rate.

[The] Howard approach has been counter-productive in terms of what he wanted, and it has done immense damage to women. Women feel cheated that they are being forced to choose between employment and motherhood. Young women today grew up in a society that promised them both and they are entitled to feel they deserve both.

How strange, and how cruel, that the person who prides himself on promoting family values has been the one to hasten the destruction of the traditional family by his efforts to make it impossible for women to lead the lives they want.

- reprinted from the Age

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