

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
ADDRESS AT THE LIBERAL WOMEN IN CABINET DINNER,  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA  
12 OCTOBER 2006**

Thank you Margaret for those wonderful, inspiring and very nostalgic words. To Helen Coonan and all of my parliamentary colleagues and supporters and members, ladies and gentlemen, this is an occasion for quiet but intense pride on the part of the Liberal Party. It is a remarkable and indeed unremarked reality that despite all the talk that has emanated from our political opponents about equal rights, about quotas, about reverse discrimination and all the other excuses that have been used, always in a fairly patronising fashion, it is a very remarkable thing that when you actually analyse the record, the true trail-blazers, the true achievers in relation to respecting the equal capacity and the equal commitment of women serving in public life, the true trail-blazers have been the members of the Liberal Party.

Our proudest boast, and in that boast the women of the Liberal Party have spoken with the loudest voice, our proudest boast is that we've done it without rules and quotas. We've done it on merit, we'll always do it on merit, the numbers won't always be equal, perhaps they will never be equal. Perhaps at some time the number of women will exceed the number of men, whatever may be the ultimate working out of all of this, if we do truly believe in the equality of individuals, if we truly do believe in both the aspirations of both men and women who aspire to make a contribution, then we will never embrace quotas, we will never patronise one half of the population with such approaches.

To have seven out of 10, that's a majority you never get in an election, to have seven out of 10 of the Cabinet Ministers this country has seen is a great tribute to the Party. I certainly owe an enormous debt of gratitude in so many ways to the women who've been part of my Government for contributions that they have made, the fact that we now have a record number of women in Cabinet. But we didn't, I didn't arrive at that number as some kind of token. There are three women in the Cabinet because they all deserve to be there by virtue of the quality of their contribution. And they hold diverse portfolios, they hold portfolios that deal with what you might loosely call human services, in the case of education, in the case of immigration Amanda is dealing with one of the most challenging and complicated areas of public policy that we can have in Australia at the beginning of the 21st Century. And of course when I knew I had to find somebody to deal with all of the media moguls I thought Helen's charm would outstrip any of my male colleagues.

Now that is a very politically incorrect remark to make, I am renowned for being politically incorrect and there are some ironies about all of this. One of the ironies is, of course, that the party that's squawked the loudest about giving women a fair go, has fallen a long way behind the party that has just recognised individual talent and that's the difference between us and Labor. And of course you know who would have thought amongst my many critics, that that bloke who rejoiced in the white picket fence and who was, sort of, stereotyped as having a particularly traditional view about the respective roles of women and men in our society, we would end up having so

many female members of a Cabinet and so many female members of his parliamentary party.

It just goes to show that life is completely full of irony, but it also goes to show that we should never, in dealing with issues of this kind, we should never fall for the propaganda, we should never fall for the rhetoric, we should look behind it. It always astonishes me when I hear men or women of the Left, and you know who I'm talking about, men and women of the Left talking about the contribution that women over the last few decades have made to the shaping of public policy, to leadership, to the influences on society and the way in which society has changed. They never seem to include those women who don't fit their particular stereotype. They never seem to mention women like Margaret Thatcher who's probably been in sheer political terms, the most influential woman that the western world has seen in the last 40 or 50 years. The reason they don't mention her, of course, is that she somehow or other doesn't fit the pattern, and it shows the narrowness and the prejudice that lies behind the approach of many of our political opponents to these issues.

But tonight is not the occasion for attacking the other side, let's be charitable, tonight is an occasion for positively extolling the Liberal way of providing equal opportunity for equal talent. It's an occasion for me to express my gratitude to all of the women who have contributed to the success of our party, yes, let's give them a round of applause, and as Margaret reminded us, the party was built from its very inception on the contribution of women. And in fact written into the constitution of the Victorian division, as Margaret will know, is provision for, express provision for women, something perhaps not written in, to quite the same, quite the same extent, the state divisions and the rest of the party. Through all those years as circumstances change, it is inevitable more and more women entered parliament. The Liberal Party held fast to its view that merit alone would be the determinant of whether or not people received political preferment in ministries and in the parliamentary party.

I am deeply grateful for the contribution that women have made to our political success in four elections over the last 10 years. The contribution women have made, not only as marginal seat holders or as Senators, but of course now the reality that people used to rather, under their voice say, a few years ago, of course, they only choose women to run for marginal seats or to run for the Senate, they never give them safe seats in the House of Representatives. Well that little piece of cynicism and that little piece of criticism has been amply disproved in recent times. And the contribution that women, along with men of course, have made to the holding of marginal seats and the retention of government over the last 10 years is the stuff with which the success and the jubilation of the Liberal Party particularly this year, has made. To you Helen who today in a way is a metaphor for the contribution that women have made to our party and to our Government, you've piloted through the Senate a most difficult and complicated piece of legislation, you've had the odd bit of trouble with the odd Senator along the way, you've handled that with great flair. I don't think any of the women have given you any difficulty along the way, I think one or two of the blokes may have, but you've handled it with very, very great skill.

Most importantly tonight is an occasion to honour the 10 women who over the years, the seven Liberal and three Labor women who have been members of the Cabinet, but particularly for us as Liberals to take a quiet, understated, but nonetheless deep pride

in the fact that we have done it more comprehensively, we've done it on merit, we've done it without patronizing 50 per cent of the population, and in the process of doing that we have demonstrated that one of the fundamental values of our party is that we recognise individual aspiration and individual talent without regard to class or race or gender or social background, but merely on the basis of merit and that is something in which all of us as Liberals should be immensely proud. Thank you.