

## **Gender Equality and the future for women in the Labor Party**

Tanja Kovac, Victorian Labor Women's Conference, 13.8.16

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### **Acknowledgements**

I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Can I acknowledge Tamika Hicks, Jenny Stramilos and the rest of Victorian Labor Women's Policy Committee for inviting me here today. It appears that being the convenor of the Women's Policy Committee is the quickest pathway to becoming a political advisor these days. I'm not sure if the committee can cope with losing another Maree or Tamika. So those of you looking to have a political career – you need to volunteer!

I would also like to acknowledge Minister for Children and Families, Jenny Mikakos, Parliamentary Secretary for Health Mary-Anne Thomas, federal candidates Marg Darcy and Peta Murphy and our union sisters who are here today.

But I'd especially like to thank my colleague and friend, Minister for Women and the Prevention of Family Violence, Fiona Richardson.

Today, I am here in my capacity as National Co-Convenor of EMILY's List Australia. But as you probably know, I am also Fiona's Chief of Staff. Usually it is me, standing in the back listening to Fiona give speeches like this. So this is a little swap today.

I just wanted to thank her today for her support and for being so prepared to share leadership with me.

Sharing leadership is a special gift good women give to each other.

I wished I'd kept the note you wrote to me on my first day "We'll do this as a team".

And so we do.

The last eighteen months have been an intensive experience working with you - the Royal Commission into Family Violence, getting Respectful Relationships into the State Curriculum, family violence leave for our public sector workers, developing a

Family Violence Index and the Gender Equality Strategy. The biggest budget for women's equality and prevention of violence against women in the history of the state - \$61.6 million.

So much leadership to be proud of, sister.

A little known fact is that Fiona has an all-woman Ministerial Office. In a political world dominated by men, to have an office full of card carrying feminists across the factions is a rare thing in deed.

I'm doing a dream job because of the choices you make, Fi.

It's one thing to be a Women's Minister; yet another to invest in women while doing it.

You walk the talk.

And that matters to me.

If you say you believe in gender equality, you need to give meaning to that.

You don't say one thing and do another.

Unfortunately, in my experience of campaigning over the last twenty years for Labor, human rights and women I have come to understand that pretty speeches are not always backed up by political action.

### **Taking Affirmative Action**

In 2014, I commenced what the late, great Joan Kirner and her good mate Kay Setches called for me "my bleeding" in the Labor Party.

After attending my first National Conference of the party and observing a dispiriting lack of women in leadership positions, I decided that I would do anything I could to try to change that.

To take the torch which had been passed to me from feminist elders and work to reach the holy grail of women's organising – the commitment to gender parity.

It was not going to be easy. I knew that.

Challenging the conspiratorial circles of informal male power in our party was going to be tough.

You know the scrums of men I am talking about.

The times when men hang out together clutching fags, phones and manila folders of lists and names and numbers.

Those places where power and patronage is passed from one male factional leader to the next.

I'd never been elected to my local branch or FEA, hadn't stood for a position in the party before.

But over the next two years, I did everything I could to ensure that I would be in the room at that next conference with a vote.

One vote, it turns out, is pretty powerful.

All the votes of women at ALP National Conference – well, that is rule making; ground breaking.

Thanks to a determined campaign led by EMILY's List women (women from every faction and sub-fraction within the party), the final barrier to women's equal participation was stripped away, with a rule change and a leadership commitment from Bill Shorten that will see women achieve 50% representation by 2025.

There were some last minute attempts to scuttle the affirmative action rule change; shenanigans were required to use our sisters on social media to bring reluctant NSW men to the negotiating table. But we got the work done in the end.

Lest you think this target is too far away, spare a thought for the following sobering statistic.

The World Economic Forum has predicted that global gender parity is still 117 years away.

117 years!

2025 doesn't seem so bad compared to 2133.

We have a choice.

We will see equality in our lifetime by working together. In our party, the nation and across the globe.

But if we don't work together all of us in this room and some of our children won't be alive to see the change we believe in.

## **Just Us**

Take just a moment and look around this room. Go on. Really take a look at each other.

You know how you once thought that there was someone with more authority; more power; more knowledge than you who was going to make things happen?

They're not there anymore.

Gough and Joan are no longer with us.

The only hope for a stronger party and a better country is ourselves.

Which is why I want to reflect a little on why gatherings of women like this and the political work we do together is so important.

In these places we build the future together.

This is where AA was born.

Last night EMILY's List women dedicated themselves to ending unequal pay in Australia with a plan for a national women's strike.

We can do it.

But it will depend on us all acting collectively and abiding by a set of agreed principles for our work.

## **Four principles for women wanting equality in the Labor party.**

I'd like to suggest four of the principles that I think we should commit to together:

1. **Firstly, we need to all call out the gender gap.** The future of gender equality rests almost entirely on the bravery of women prepared to shout

loudly about all the ways that we are still not equal. I'm not going to name them all in an audience like this because we know what they are. (Pay Gap, Super gap, lack of women on boards)

I know you know this stuff. My question to you is – how often do you speak out about it? And where? And when?

I'm not just talking about the occasional facebook post or retweeting a Clementine Ford article.

I'm talking about those times at work or a branch or a factional meeting where it is so obvious that women are being left out and screwed over. We need to name the gender gap.

Not enough women preselected in your faction? Name it.

No women in a negotiating team. Name it.

No women getting jobs in political offices? Name it.

Young women's organisers not getting the same pay as young men? Name it.

It won't change if you don't name it.

I know why so many women don't want to speak out. I know it's unpleasant to be called names for speaking your mind.

- Feminazi.
- Hysterical
- Mad f-ing witches.

I know each time I bang on about this stuff I am labelled as a humourless, feminist troublemaker.

But if we do not collectively speak about the gender gap whenever we are in rooms full of men, then we will not see change in our lifetimes.

The future depends on us not being fair-weather feminists.

**2. The second thing we need to do together is to agree on the work we will do together to make change. If the gender gap is the problem, what are our solutions?**

EMILY's List has over the years developed a focus on five things to guide the work of our MP's:

- **Equality achieved through measurable targets and quotas.**  
Twenty-two years ago, when the first AA target was adopted we had only ten women in the House of Reps out of a lower house caucus of 90. It was even worse in Victoria – just three women in the legislative assembly. Women have gone from ten to 40% of our caucus in twenty years. Labor is now outpacing all other political parties on support for women.
- **Being pro-choice is another principle.** This national project is incomplete for EMILY's List. We've had success in Victoria, Tasmania, SA & WA. But we've struggled in Qld and NSW.
- **Diversity, Childcare, Equal Pay** are our other principles. But we haven't really thought through how the women we support might achieve these principles when they get elected.

We need to spend more time together like this to work through our shared policy goals and stay pledged to them at party conferences and let our women know that we expect them to see them through in parliament.

Because if we don't do this work, there will be bad outcomes for women.

This week the census has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. And its saddened me because it is important political infrastructure for women in Australia.

It collects and publishes sex disaggregated data. Only through this data can we understand the differences in the lives of women and men.

Sadly, it was a Labor government who decided to cut back on the ABS Time Use Surveys. These are public surveys which assess what men and women

spend their time on, telling us who is doing the lion share of paid and unpaid work and caring responsibilities.

Helping women with the juggle struggle depended on us doing Time Use Surveys. But some of our women must have voted against doing this in Cabinet.

Equality was not simply about getting bums on seats.

It was about women working together to deliver good outcomes for other women.

**3. Which is why our third principle needs to be a commitment to supporting each other.** For me, this is non-negotiable.

We cannot hope for any sort of equality if we do not support each other publicly and behind the scenes.

What does it mean to support women? Simple things really. Being kind, thoughtful, inclusive. Checking in with each other.

It means sharing leadership. Creating more opportunities for women to determine their own future autonomously.

If you're not collaborating and co-operating with other women in the movement then I really do wonder what you're doing in the movement at all.

Supporting each other also means paying attention if your colleagues are in trouble, or hurting or going through a rough time.

EMILY's List says that when women support women, women win.

But the opposite of that is also true.

When women don't support women for their own ambition or self-aggrandisement, all women end up losing.

There is nothing more dangerous to our cause of equality than women who kick the ladder down after them. None of us will smash through glass ceilings with this kind of selfishness.

Madeline Albright said that there was a special place in hell for women who don't support other women. Regrettably, I can tell you, there are a few women in our movement with seats being warmed for them next to Beezelbub.

When you knock around women's politics as long as I have, you learn quickly which women will sell out others in a heartbeat if it means advancing themselves.

It's only small group, but they are there.

These were the women who are the first to speak out against the likelihood of AA being a success; who ran damage for the boys on our campaign. Curiously, they were also some of the first people to take credit for AA's ultimate success.

These women might talk feminist, but not they're not walking feminist.

Supporting each other counts most when its trickiest.

In those moments where the stakes are high and the political hurly burly is chewing people up and spitting them out. These are the times when you need a strong feminist compass to keep you heading towards women's progress.

And that brings me to the final and perhaps most important work we need to do together to guarantee women's equality into the future.

4. **We need to agree together that there are no circumstances in which we will condone violence against women.**

I am proud that so many Labor politicians, particularly men like Daniel and Bill, have started to talk about violence against women and to show a steadfast commitment to change.

The record investments in Victoria and Queensland to addressing family violence are simply extraordinary. These achievements are due to decades of feminist activists in our party insisting that violence against women be a policy issue in our party.

But if we are fair dinkum about addressing violence in our communities, we are also going to have to also look a little closer to home.

You know I've been thinking a lot lately about how being a member of the Labor party is so much like being part of an enormous family - with all the corny clichés.

We come together only for special occasions: National Conferences and election days.

We have our parental party leaders, aging grandparents – Bob and Paul - the embarrassing uncles and aunts and the pesky upstart siblings floating around NUS and Young Labor.

Romances, marriages and children across the factions.

And just like a family, we have our little secrets.

That sometimes we're not that nice to each other. Especially to women.

In the fabulous but sadly out of print book, *Party Girls: Labor Women Now*, Julia Gillard observed:

*“The Labor Party's roots are in unionism and militant industrial struggle. While many women were heroes in these struggles, the culture born was one of male bonds, male mateship, male leadership and male aggression.”*

Aggression. A carefully chosen word.

Let me call it for what it is.

It's a culture of threats and violence.

I know we don't want to talk about it. I know it makes us uncomfortable.

Don't forget that I am talking about my family here – a family that I love.

But we have to talk about it.

And to do that, I want to use the definition of violence which is the standard in family violence practice.

Family violence is any behaviour that is:

*threatening, coercive, controlling or intended to cause the family or household member to be fearful.*

*It includes physical, verbal, emotional, sexual or psychological abuse.*

*It includes neglect.*

*It includes financial abuse.*

In our party all elements of this definition of violence are part of our party.

***threatening, coercive, controlling or intended to causing members to be fearful***

These practices exist when factional bosses insist you hand over your hard earned caucus vote at National Conference. The implied and sometimes open hostility towards those people who want to exercise a free vote is extraordinary.

Ask yourself how many times you've heard someone say "*We can't trust her/him because we can't control them*"

*"If you don't do this for x or y; then we won't support you/you'll never get a job/you won't be an MP"*

Mind games, deception, manipulation.

***physical, verbal, emotional, sexual or psychological abuse.***

This is obviously the worst kind of violence. When it's this ugly it usually makes the front page.

We've lost Chiefs of Staff, party secretaries, good politicians and candidates because of this kind of abuse.

And yet we do very little to challenge the culture that enables it.

In fact, we encourage it with our silence. We reward politicians with the sharpest tongue and the cruellest wit.

Gillard said,

*"the greatest displays of male political aggression are saved for inter-factional negotiations and intra-factional dissent-crushing."*

How true.

But is there really any situation that warrants threatening to throw a woman out of a window or putting an axe through her head?

### ***Neglect***

Another, no less abhorrent part of family violence is days, weeks, months and sometimes years of the silent treatment.

Isolating and not communicating with women is a powerful tool in our party. It's designed to hurt in the heart and the head.

There is an epidemic of unreturned phone calls.

Ostracising has become a sport.

It's ugly to watch it from the sidelines. Even worse to be in it.

I am often called on to mentor women about getting involved in politics and lately I have become concerned about whether I am doing the right thing encouraging these women to pursue their dream of being an MP.

Because the risk of psychological harm from being treated like dirt by people who are supposed to be in your own team – its debilitating.

Funnily enough the worst kind of ostracising and neglect is preserved for women who stand up to male bullies. They get blamed for calling out or taking it up to the men.

There's a name for this in family violence practice.

It's called victim blaming.

### ***Financial abuse***

Which seats get the lion's share of party investment?

Who gets influential and well paid jobs within Ministerial and electorate office?

Whose memberships lay unprocessed?

Who gets to be Treasurer?

How have we allowed so many of these unhealthy practices and relationships to develop in our lovely family?

The same way we have allowed violence in our communities.

We have not addressed the inequality of women.

The key driver of family violence is gender inequality and as long as this persists in our party, so too will aggression, threats and bullying.

### **Backlash**

I want to believe it that we will get to gender parity by 2025.

I do.

But the backlash and the pushback from men is so enormous.

During the AA negotiations I managed to participate in a formal cross factional discussion where women were at the table.

We'd made it – we were in the discussion. We were shaping outcomes.

AA was going to be on the agenda of conference.

But when a couple of men thought I was out of earshot I overheard an intriguing conversation.

*“What we really need to do is get together with (insert heavyweight male names & factions) and sit down and nut this out”*

*“Good idea”*

What’s this?

Ahh, I see.

So this is how it’s actually done.

A date is set for a bro-love party.

Men go hang out somewhere where we aren’t invited and they carve up the spoils between themselves.

This is why despite twenty years of AA, the stats on our safest seats in Australia have not shifted an inch.

The men want them and they get them.

Because they decide that together.

Across the factions.

I know this room is full of women from across the party – every faction is represented here. You need to know that men from every group participated in this meeting without questioning it.

Our comrades. Left & Right. Together.

What amused me the most was when I called several of them out on it.

*“Did you meet on Saturday to determine the factional carve up & the boy’s position on AA?”*

*“Ummmm, No” (chagrin; flushed faces)*

Men – my peers – still deny that they were at this meeting to this day.

Last year when I became Chief of Staff a male union leader said to me:

*“I don’t speak to you! You’re beneath me. I talk to leaders and MP’s, not schlepers like you”*

Since when, comrade?

I’ve known you since University.

Even deeply good men, our mates, can be brought into patriarchy.

With my last political breath I won’t accept it.

I will speak out against it.

No matter how many targets are on my back, prizes for my scalp or opportunities it means I miss out on.

I expect this speech to make its way to men in power and for certain people to be displeased.

I know this. I still say it.

I don’t really want to say it alone.

But I believe if we have any hope of reaching equality, we will need to speak out against a sub-culture of the male bonds, male mateship, male leadership and male aggression that dominates informal power.

And we will need to stop blaming women for making difficult but principled choices not to put up with harassment and bullying.

I am optimistic about the future.

No one was prepared to speak against AA publicly and in the end no-one even voted against it on national conference floor.

But that doesn't mean that there won't be all sorts of machinations to limit its effectiveness into the future.

Next week, I am going to listen to Andrew Leigh speak about the politics of love. I am deeply committed to this idea and as some of you know have been writing and speaking about the care economy and what a language of love within our party might look like. It gives me hope that men like Andrew want to have this discussion, too.

It gives me hope that Bill sent a message to this meeting – unprompted – to tell us to get on with our work here.

Julia was right. The future is female. But only if we work together.