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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY PARLIAMENTARY BREAKFAST

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 2019

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Good morning everybody.

I too wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, I pay my respects to elders both past and present.

In particular, as the Prime Minister has said today we will hear the 11th Closing the Gap Report, we should add to those words of respect and acknowledgement of country with the promise of a better life and greater opportunities for our First Australians.

This is my sixth United Nations Women's Breakfast as Leader and it is always an important day in the Parliamentary calendar, and I think the organisers.

I acknowledge the Prime Minister, and I appreciate very much his words.

I also acknowledge that Tanya Plibersek, my remarkable Deputy is unwell this morning so she can't be here but she wanted me to send her apologies.

We are of course accompanied here by Penny Wong, our Leader in the Senate.

I acknowledge the presence of Julie Bishop and Kelly O'Dywer amongst other MPs.

And Claire Moore is also here amongst them from the Labor team, and she's been an outstanding champion for the rights of women for her whole Parliamentary career.

And Senator Di Natale is here with some of his team, and of course Kerry Phelps is making her mark in the House of Representatives.

I should also just say this, because this is the opportunity I have, but I just want to wish my wife Chloe who is not here a happy Valentine's Day.

I'm not sure if I'll get any ticks for that.

This event is an annual opportunity as I've said, to look to where we can do better when it comes to gender equality and I really just want to make two remarks.

I want to first of all talk about our region and then at home.

UN Women have been working of course, extensively in the Pacific region.

Leaders and writers describe our Pacific as 'the Blue Continent'.

10 million people on small islands, scattered amongst an ocean mass, which is bigger than all of the continental land mass across the globe.

The Pacific has diverse cultures and languages and legal systems – but many face the challenges of development.

So many of these nations, the inadequacy of the health system disproportionately falls upon women.

There's one example I wish to share - the maternal death rate in the broader Pacific is shockingly, and unacceptably high.

It's all the more so because such a high proportion of these deaths are simply preventable through better family planning processes.

The rates of cervical cancer in the Pacific are among the highest in the world.

It should be a source of some discomfort for us at the very least, that just to our north, a woman in the Pacific, our neighbour, our sister, is nine times more likely

to die from cervical cancer than a woman in Australia.

Yet, Australia has led the world in developing and subsidising HPV immunisation, to the point that we can almost talk seriously about eradicating that virus from Australia, entirely.

In our rich and generous country we have the know-how, and we have the resources.

I think it is a test of our willpower, our initiative, our leadership, our national character in the region.

If we have the means the assist, if we have the means to save lives, then we should.

I think this same truth applies to economic and social policy in Australia as well.

I believe that achieving equality for women is a test of our national character.

If we can be the nation who treats women equally in the world, then we will be the richest and most successful country in the world, bar none.

But if we want to see real change, and meaningful progress:

- In attitudes and culture and respect
- In economic security, fair wages and a secure retirement
- In education and health and safety from violence
- And in the decision-making bodies of our nation

We cannot sit by and hope that the passage of time will accomplish this outcome.

We should not say to ourselves, or kid ourselves that inequality is just a question of bad luck or happenstance for individual blame.

We have to be prepared to recognise that structural unfairnesses exists in our society and we have to address entrenched disadvantage.

It is why my Party has spent our time in Opposition developing a comprehensive agenda to achieve equality for women.

A new push to close the gender pay gap, through better recognition of the social and economic contribution of workers in feminised industries.

What I mean by that is that we have, in some industries a disproportionate number of women working in them.

And this nation as I know from my days back being a union rep, and through my study of history, has always been relatively good at valuing the intellectual work of people or the physical labour of people.

But where we have had a gap in our analysis of wages is in valuing the emotional content of peoples work.

If you are a child care worker, an early years educator, if you are a teacher, if you are a nurse.

You don't just have to commit intellectually or physically to your job, the people in your care take their cues from your emotional demeanor.

So we ask a lot of our carers and in the caring profession, but we have not been so good at valuing that work.

And so for early childhood educators, we will have policies to talk about improving your circumstances.

For people who work in aged care.

For the pioneers of the NDIS - just as we needed community services.

Of course, reforming superannuation is crucial, because Australia's women workforce more often than not take time out of their careers to start and raise a family, and this shouldn't have an implication that you retire poor because of your unpaid care of family.

We need to invest in better and safer accommodation for women fleeing violence at home.

Because as conversations are had around the proverbial coffee room or watching terrible stories of tragedy on the television, when the worst has occurred people still ask all too often, "*why did she stay?*" instead we should ask "*where could she go?*"

Sometimes the change we need is about attitudes and mindset and culture as well.

It took 42 years for Labor to elect a woman to Federal Parliament, Dorothy Tangney, the first woman to serve in the Senate.

It was 50 years later in 1992, in the early 90s' that we were still debating in Labor how to recruit more women into our own ranks.

Both sides of politics had a fairly low proportion of women in their political parties represented in Canberra.

In 1994, and not with everyone's immediate support, but the party came to the view that we would apply quotas.

To set a clear and measurable, tangible target, and what's more, hold ourselves to account if we fell short.

We've now lifted that quota, twice since then.

If we enjoy some success at the next election, we will be the first government in Australian history at the national level with 50 per cent women.

So for me, the proposition is simple, the lesson is clear the lived expression of a generation: quotas work, targets work. Accountability works.

That's why for example, Tanya has made it clear that we're going to apply the same kind of standards to boards and government departments and a whole host of other appointments.

To put plainly: whether it is our parliament, the cabinet, the judiciary, the public service or government boards, we believe public institutions should look like the community that they represent and serve.

I always believe that you get better policy for women, when there are more women involved in the decision-making.

Indeed, before someone says it from the audience, you just get better policy when there's more women involved in decision making.

This breakfast is always a nice breakfast, I listened carefully to the Prime Minister's remarks and they were good words.

I do believe that a breakfast like this is a cause for hope, but we all know that the answer can never be hope alone.

We cannot merely wish for better, we need to make it work.

We need to hold ourselves responsible and accountable – not just this morning, not just today but every day.

Good morning and thank you.

ENDS

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