

**19<sup>th</sup> Women, Management and Employment Relations  
Conference  
Macquarie University, Sydney**

**Speech by Julia Gillard MP**

*Taking the lead on challenges for women in business - Labor's  
fresh approach to work and family balance*

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Thank you for that introduction. It's a great pleasure to be invited to address this conference today and to spend a little time chatting about challenges for women in business.

Women today live in a world of opportunity and are able to live lives that would have been unimaginable for earlier generations.

But as rapid as change has been for perceptions of women and women's roles, there is more change needed still.

Clearly, our society still struggles with visualising women in positions of power and authority.

Described as cranky and bossy during her time in Opposition, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark noted that men with such traits would more likely be deemed to be 'invested with authority'.

But she noted that it would have been worse for her to be seen as a weak, indecisive creature who can never make up her mind.

So it sometimes seems impossible to win no matter what you do. Helen Clark has been described as 'the ugly duckling of New Zealand politics', criticised because her hairstyle was too 'severe' and her teeth too crooked.

Of course the flip side of that is almost as bad when a male opponent – like Joe Hockey - blames their lack of success in politics on “not being pretty enough” rather than on the particularly ugly policy that they are trying to sell.

But there are policies that no amount of cosmetic surgery can fix.

Ultimately, the question of leadership is about what you do, not what you look like. And as more and more women enter politics and take on leadership roles, I am optimistic that the novelty will wear off and there will come a time when we will be judged purely on our achievements and our strength of character rather than whether we ascribe to what are seen as “feminine traits”, fit a particular model of attractiveness for public life or have fruit in a fruit bowl.

But politics is not the only field where women encounter the double standard. When I was at Slater & Gordon as an industrial lawyer and the only woman partner I was conscious of a boisterous and endearing but very boys’ own culture.

By going into politics some might suggest that, in terms of a boys’ culture, I was exiting the frying pan just to enter the fire. And others might suggest that I never really was much of a cook so it’s hardly surprising that I left the frying-pan behind.

Women throughout our workforce face similar experiences. Historically the very way we work has been built around the stereotypical pattern of men’s lives, with an implicit assumption that workers can be endlessly available for work because someone else is attending to the demands of family life.

But in today’s world women and men want and need work and family life to mix together in better ways.

Why is it that the most recent survey of professional women conducted by the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia revealed that most professional women surveyed do not have children and that almost 57% of those with children said that taking maternity leave was detrimental to their careers?

Why is it that the level of childlessness among the professional women surveyed was more than twice the rate estimated for Australian women generally?

Why is it that a man who has to take his children to work in an emergency is viewed as being a good and loving father while a woman faced with the same situation is seen as lacking commitment to her work or unable to keep her family responsibilities under control?

And why is it that a woman who leaves work early to attend a child's parent-teacher interview or school concert often feels compelled to offer apologies and excuses?

In the workplace, as in politics, there are important matters of perception. And just as in politics those perceptions will change as more and more women enter Parliament and take on leadership roles, perceptions in the workplace will change when it becomes the norm for men **and** women to take extended leave from work or utilise flexible working arrangements.

It's not the role of Government to legislate these arrangements for parents. Indeed it would not be possible. But it is not the role of Government to make it harder for working parents. In fact it is the role of Government to look at what might make things just that little bit easier for working parents.

It's the role of Government to take the lead on facilitating and creating incentives for desirable changes in our society that address the challenges faced by its members.

## **Parental leave / Flexible working arrangements**

As part of Labor's industrial relations plan, *Forward with Fairness*, Labor announced that parents will be entitled to up to 24 months of unpaid leave at the time of the birth of a child.

Labor also announced that parents will be able to request flexible work arrangements until their child reaches school age.

When asked about Labor's policy by journalist Laurie Oakes, the Prime Minister claimed that it would result in employers refusing to employ women with young children.

*"You run the risk, Laurie, if you put it into legislation that some employers will avoid employing women, in particular with young children"* [Prime Minister John Howard, 29 April 2007]

On hearing this, I felt compelled to check whether Margaret Thatcher had just become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and whether platform-soled shoes had mysteriously reappeared in my cupboard.

The Prime Minister used exactly the same argument that was used way back in 1979 in connection with the Maternity Leave Test Case of that year. Since that Test Case, women's participation has increased by more than 30 per cent.

It was a knee-jerk reaction from a man living in the past who thinks women are at the margins of our workforce and employers can simply overlook their participation. A man who fails to recognise our economy's twin needs of skilled labour and supporting those who are bringing up the next generation.

A callous response from a man who does not even try to understand the anxiety of young women torn between the need to return to work and the desire to see their child take their first steps.

Labor's approach offers a guaranteed 12 months of unpaid parental leave to each parent and the right to request flexible working arrangements until the child reaches school age. It's a policy that recognises that men often want to be and should be just as involved in the care of their children as women.

It's also a policy that recognises that gender equity and women's opportunities to lead in business and in workplaces will improve when both genders regularly have access to measures that improve work and family balance.

When that happens, we will be able to break down the assumptions and perceptions that only women will take a career break to have children and only women will seek to work flexibly in order to care for children and family members.

Women shouldn't have to bear the burden of needing to be Superwoman in order to be successful. They should be surrounded by men who feel free to make the choice also to be the carer, the at-home parent, the part-time working parent. Men who have more options than simply being the breadwinner and who have a healthy respect for the importance and accomplishment of domestic labour.

In other words, Labor's policy is a policy that takes the lead on facilitating the change that will help to address the challenges that women may face in reaching leadership positions in business.

The creation of genuine options on parental leave is just one part of the industrial relations equation. The truth is that, for parents to have real, rather than theoretical choices, those options need be supported by an industrial relations infrastructure that includes protection from unfair dismissal and an effective and adequate safety net. That is what Labor will deliver.

## **Childcare**

And we know that there is little value in facilitating flexible working arrangements for parents if those parents are unable to secure appropriate care for their children during the times that they are working.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics found recently that nearly 100,000 people cite childcare access reasons for not working. What this means is that many parents would prefer some or more hours of paid work but are unable to access childcare, struggle with the high costs of care or have concerns about obtaining quality care for their children.

We're facing 12 per cent annual increases in the cost of childcare. That means that, for many parents, there is no longer a decision to be made about whether to return to work or stay at home. That decision is made for them because of the financial futility of returning to work. Worse still is the situation where parents need to return to work to meet their mortgage repayments but are unable to locate or access affordable, quality childcare.

That's why Labor is committed to developing up to 260 new childcare centres on school sites to provide convenient childcare places in areas where there are shortages. This will help to reduce waiting lists and contain the costs of childcare. Using school locations is one way of assisting parents with the morning rush as they accomplish the "double drop-off" of getting individual children to school and childcare before the working day begins.

We will also be investing \$450 million to give every Australian four-year old the right to 15 hours of high quality preschool every week for a minimum of 40 weeks a year and that pre-school education will be delivered by qualified early childhood teachers.

And these early learning programs will be provided in preschools, kindergartens or by existing childcare providers – public, private or community-based. Over the longer term, we believe that stand-alone child care and preschools could become integrated into Early Learning Centres,

where care and early learning programs for three and four year olds is combined.

This plan for universal preschool recognises that working parents are often not in a position to deliver and collect their child from a half-day of pre-school. It is intended that those children who typically spend a day in long day care will also have on-site access to a structured preschool program within that day.

### **Office of Work and Family**

Labor has decided that the inter-connecting issues of work and family are so important for our economy and the people who work in it that a Rudd Labor Government will create an Office of Work and Family within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet so that the formulation of policies to get the balance right between work and family life for all Australians takes place at the highest level and is central to all Labor Government policy decisions.

As a first step, the Office of Work and Family will work with the States and Territories and childcare providers to:

- Provide parents with reliable information on local childcare fees, vacancy data and parental reviews so parents are better informed about quality and price;
- Publish breaches by childcare providers of the quality and accreditation standards;
- Require childcare providers to give at least two months' notice to parents of childcare fee increases; and
- Examine options to improve childcare affordability including increasing workplace-based childcare so that parents can be closer to their children.

### **National Work and Family Awards**

As I said earlier, Government's leadership role is not just about facilitating change but also about creating incentives for change.

The existing National Work and Family Awards, a joint government and business partnership with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia have, since 1992, recognised the achievements of many businesses to develop policies and programmes to assist their employees to balance their work and family responsibilities.

The National Work and Family Awards have also underpinned the publication of *Winning Workplaces*, which provides inspiring and practical advice for businesses considering the introduction of arrangements to give employees options to balance work and family.

In that way, they have encouraged businesses to make the changes in their workplace that will help women address the challenges they face in business.

Should Labor win government at the next election, Labor will continue government support for the awards and is keen for the existing joint business and government partnership to continue.

But Labor is also keen to support the further development of the awards and the incentives they offer for change. So here today I will announce the changes Labor proposes to make to the awards, the detail of which will be developed in consultation with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia, which we hope will continue to offer their wonderful support for the awards.

First, Labor is proposing to expand the number of available awards. There are currently awards in a number of categories including public sector and community sector together with small business, medium business and large business awards and a regional and rural award.

I note that Sydney Water, the organisation of which the next speaker today is Managing Director, received a High Commendation in the public sector category this year and that is a very fine achievement indeed.

We will retain those important general categories of awards but will also offer separate awards for the leaders in the various industry sectors such as retail, mining, hospitality, manufacturing and finance.

The structure of the publication *Winning Workplaces* would in turn reflect this approach to enable businesses to identify innovative arrangements and best practice for their industry sector. This approach recognises that it is inappropriate to take a “one size fits all” approach to family-friendly initiatives across industries.

For example, the particular work-family challenges of the “fly-in, fly-out arrangements” of the mining sector are different from the particular work-family challenges of the hospitality sector, which might include unusual and unpredictable shifts.

Following each year’s awards ceremony, Labor is also proposing to fund full page advertisements in the employment pages of major newspapers right across Australia. Those ads would list the winners of the awards and highlight their special achievements.

The purpose of the ads will be to provide the winners of the awards with additional publicity for the efforts they have made in helping their employees reconcile their work and family lives and, in particular, to make those efforts known in the all-important market of skilled job-seekers.

Further, Labor will fund and support the development and promotion of a special symbol that can be used by winners in print and online job advertisements for a period of three years from winning the award.

It is intended that the symbol will become instantly recognisable and trusted by job-seekers to assist them to inform their choices. It is anticipated that the symbol will assist in attracting skilled job-seekers as a result of the commitments made by the employer to assisting its employees to achieve work-family balance.

Finally, as part of the National Work and Family Awards, Labor proposes to accredit all employers that obtain certain standards (as determined by the judging panel of the National Work and Family Awards) in relation to the achievement of work-family balance.

Such accreditation would be for one year only and, for that year, those employers would also be entitled to use a special (but obviously different) symbol in print and online job advertisements. All employers will thereby be encouraged to participate and be rewarded for achieving the relevant standards.

## **Conclusion**

My announcement today on Labor's approach to the National Work and Family Awards is just one small piece of the puzzle of meeting the challenges of women in business.

But it's an important part of driving the changes that are required to meet those challenges.

With the right encouragement, businesses can be endlessly creative about the means of leading change in their business.

Having women in leadership roles is important but not because women would necessarily take a different approach to leadership or bring special, different or better experience or skills to leadership roles. We are neither better nor worse people than our male colleagues and neither better nor worse at our jobs.

But having women in leadership roles is important because our economy simply can't afford to turn away half the talent and half the ability of the Australian community. And we cannot in good conscience frustrate half the aspirations.

Women in leadership roles should not have to make a choice between having the role and having the family. Women in leadership roles should not discover too late that they have made a "creeping non-choice" about having the role and having a family.

By facilitating change and creating the incentives for change, Labor's fresh approach to work and family balance will help address those challenges faced by women in business.

Thank you.