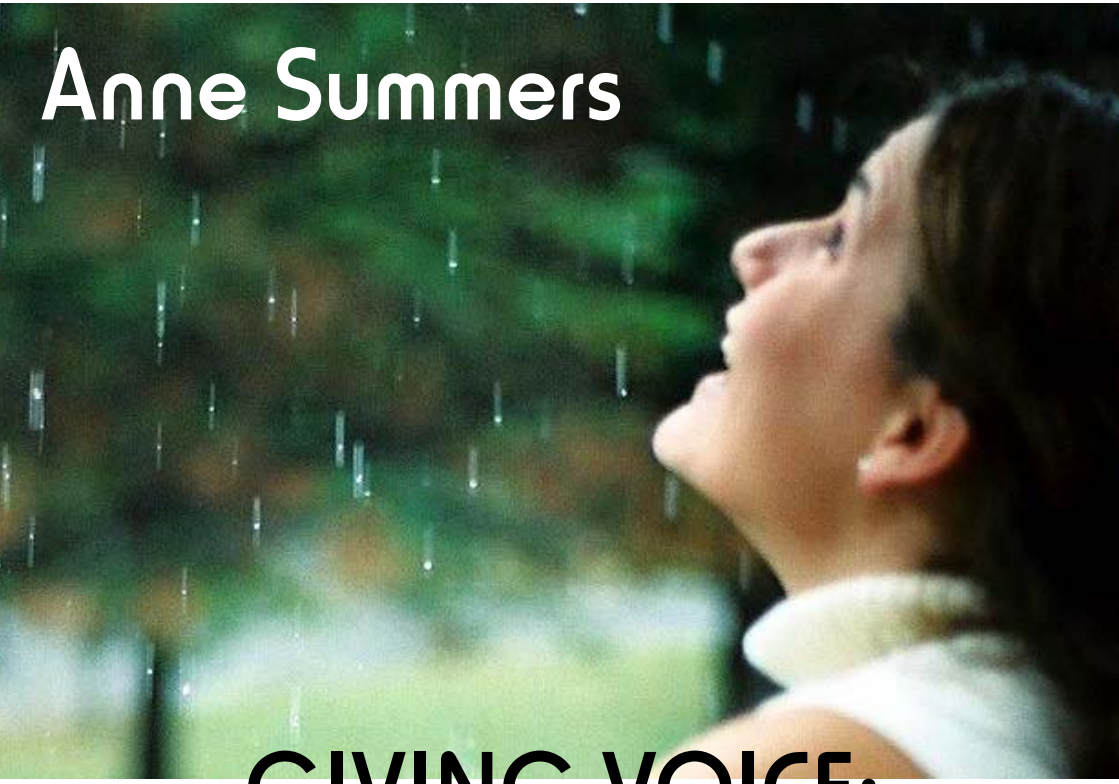
The Office of Women's Policy Presents

The 14th Annual Alicia Johnson Memorial Lecture



Anne Summers

GIVING VOICE:

Speaking up for women silenced by our society

19th and 20th November 2004

Northern Territory Government
Department of the Chief Minister

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Alicia Johnson...

attended school and grew up in Melbourne. She graduated from Monash University in 1986 with a Bachelor of Law/ Economics. She was admitted as a practitioner of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1988.

Alicia began working with the Australia Legal Aid Office in 1988 and resigned to lecture at the NT University Law School in 1991. Some of Alicia's commitments included membership of the NT Domestic Violence Task Force and the Family Planning Association, and being a representative of the NT Law Reform Committee. Alicia was particularly concerned and worked tirelessly for disadvantaged youth, and women who had experienced domestic violence and sexual assault. Alicia died in 1991 aged 28.

Anne Summers...

brings unparalleled authority and credibility to the subject of the position of women in Australia. She ran the federal Office of the Status of Women from 1983 to 1986 when Bob Hawke was Prime Minister and was an advisor on women's issues to Prime Minister Paul Keating prior to the 1993 federal election.

In 1987 in New York she became editor-in-chief of *Ms.* - America's landmark feminist magazine - and the following year, with business partner Sandra Yates bought *Ms.* and *Sassy* magazines in the second only women-led management buyout in US corporate history.

Summers was a leader of the generation and the movement that changed Australia for women. Her involvement in the women's movement has earned her community respect and she has been honoured with Honorary Doctorates from both Flinders University (1994) and the University of New South Wales (2000).

She was involved in helping start Elsie, Australia's first women's refuge and *Refractory Girl*, a women's studies journal.

In 1975 she became a journalist, first on the *National Times*, then becoming Canberra bureau chief for the Australian Financial Review and then the paper's North American editor. In 1975 her book *Damned Whores and God's Police* changed the way women were perceived in this country.

Currently, she writes an opinion column for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In 1989 she was made an Officer in the Order of Australia for her services to journalism and to women,

Friends.

It gives me tremendous pleasure to be here and to be part of the memorializing of Alicia Johnson. I never had the pleasure of knowing Alicia but I have been told what a special person she was, and the wonderful crowd gathered here this evening is certainly a great tribute to her.

In order to honour her memory, I have decided to address the subject of Giving Voice to women who cannot speak for themselves. I chose this in part because this is what Alicia did through her work for women, but I also believe that this theme can help us address many of the major problems women are facing in Australia today.

Alicia worked for and with victims of domestic and sexual violence, as well as with young people, with refugees, and with a range of other people in need of legal advice and practical help. It is wonderful that the Northern Territory government has kept alive her memory through this annual lecture, and that it is something that is held not just in Darwin where Alicia lived, but also in Alice Springs.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to visit the Territory to be part of this event.

A year ago, I published a book called *The End of Equality*. It surprised a lot of people many of whom said to me they thought it was a subject that was a bit old-fashioned, that we had "been there, done that" when it came to women, that we had won all the battles and what could there possibly be to write about? I have basically spent the past year travelling around Australia answering these questions to a wide variety of audiences, and I would like to address them again today.

I imagine Alicia would be appalled that we are still even having the conversation. Like me, she probably thought back in 1991, that we could only move forward when it came to women's rights. She probably did not entertain the possibility that we might start to go backwards.

Neither did I until a couple of years ago when I was forced to confront what was indeed happening to us.

Let me share with you how I see things.

More than thirty years ago we began a revolution in this country. It was a revolution that recognized the legal, social and attitudinal barriers to women achieving equality of opportunity and as it progressed – as these barriers were ripped away – I doubt if anyone in this country escaped the ramifications.

We were all affected. Some of us were pioneers and agents in this revolution – I certainly was myself. Others were beneficiaries, directly or indirectly, as educational opportunities widened, jobs that women once were not allowed to do became open, our incomes improved so that we had at least the possibility of economic autonomy *and* we had the means to control our fertility.

This opening up of opportunities benefited women of all ages and virtually all sectors of society. There really *was* a revolution in the way we women saw ourselves – and in how we expected to be seen and to be treated. Moreover, these advances not only changed women, they also changed men. And they changed relations between women and men – or they should have, because women's lives don't change so comprehensively without impacting on men's.

For thirty years we have seen progress towards equality – or so we assumed. If I can speak for myself, I had always been optimistic, even confident, that this was a revolution that was unstoppable and irreversible.

So it came as quite a shock to me to discover a year or so ago that in fact things were not as they should be, and that we had not merely stalled on our road to equality but that we were actually starting to go backwards.

This might seem hard to believe when all around us are visible signs of women's accomplishments – we see women in all kinds of great jobs, still breaking all sorts of barriers, doing amazing things. Yet you don't have to delve very far

beneath the surface to discover that things are not so rosy. In fact, you could describe them as terrible, even shocking. I decided to put the facts together, to tell this shocking story, in order to Give Voice to women again.

We cannot ignore the facts of our regression. Despite appearances to the contrary, the proportion of women in full-time employment has not increased in thirty years. More Australian women work part-time than at any time in our past, and more than in any other country in the industrialized world. In a great many cases this is not from choice – they'd rather have full-time jobs – but because of the lack of childcare and other support for working mothers. As a consequence of working fewer hours most women do not earn enough money to support themselves.

Equal pay is a myth. Women are earning less, in relation to men, than they did a decade ago. Women's total average weekly earnings are just 65 per cent of men's. In August this year women were earning $301 a week less than men, an annual gap of $15,600. In 1996, the gap was $229.10 a week. Women are falling further and further behind. Even graduates are affected. Despite having studied the same subjects – *and* paid the same fees - women graduates earn less.

This is true for lawyers, which was of course Alicia's profession, as well as for other professionals. The Law Society of NSW calculated that in 2003 the mean income for men with less than a year's experience since admission was $52,600. For women it was $44,000.

At the same time, the number of women totally dependent on welfare has increased to an unprecedented degree.

There are now almost one and a half times as many female-headed sole parent families with children than there were at the beginning of the 1990s and two-thirds of them are totally reliant on government support. These families receive only about half the income of families with two parents where the women are more likely to be in the workforce, even if only part time.

Today there are more divorced women aged over 60 than there are widows and many of these women have limited means of support due to lack of

superannuation and not yet being eligible for the age pension (due to the phase in of equal retirement and qualifying ages for men and women). As a result of all these factors, there are more women living at the economic margin, or in actual poverty, than ever before.

Many of the services women need in order to be able to participate equally in society, such as childcare, simply are neither adequate nor affordable. There is, in fact, a childcare crisis in this country, with estimates of a shortfall of as many as quarter of a million places needed to meet the demand; in addition, the cost of care exceeds the means of all but the most well-off of parents.

Even when you can get a place, the cost is so great that it often becomes the determinant of whether or not a woman continues to hold down a job. I think we all know that the cost of childcare invariably comes from the women's pay packet. In Sydney and Melbourne an average place costs $350 a week yet the maximum government assistance is $140.50 a week – and to qualify for that your combined family income cannot exceed $32,485 a year.

The average payment in 2003 of the Child Care Benefit, the government's only assistance for childcare, was just $28.12 per week.

For many parents and, especially, for women who want employment, this crisis in childcare is a constant source of anxiety and even panic.

Women have precious little power in Australia in the early 21st century.

When we look at the powerful public and commercial institutions of our society, we see that their top ranks remain closed to all but a tiny fraction of women. The numbers are rising slightly, which is to be welcomed, but while they hover at 10.2 per cent of all executive manager positions there is not a lot to celebrate. There is just one CEO of a top company who is female – Gail Kelly of St. George Bank - and only 8.6 per cent of the directors of Australia's top 200 companies in 2004 are women.

When it comes to the legal profession, especially the courts, the picture is not much better. Although in some states more than 20 percent of the

Supreme Court judges are women (in Queensland it is 29 per cent and in Western Australia 22 per cent) in other states such as Tasmania there are none. I am pleased to be able to report that the Northern Territory comes in third, with 16 per cent of its Supreme Court being women – or should I say, "woman", because there is just the one! (It is, compared with some of the States, a small court.)

At the federal level, the higher you go, the fewer the women. Women make up 33 per cent of Family Court judges, but only 13 per cent of Federal Court judges and there are no women at all on the High Court.

The federal Attorney-General, Phillip Ruddock, said last week that he did not see the need to appoint a woman to the High Court.

There has been a large increase in the number of women in state and federal parliaments – there are now 59 women in federal parliament, one fewer than prior to October 9, and this is approximately 26 per cent of the total. But this increase in numbers has not been matched by a corresponding increase in their being appointed to leadership positions.

Today the Northern Territory, with Clare Martin as Chief Minister, is the only part of Australia with a woman political leader. Twelve years ago there were two women state premiers. There have been none since Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence left their positions.

The increase in the number of women parliamentarians has not been accompanied by any noticeable improvement in the protection of women's entitlements; indeed, the decline in women's economic well-being and the roll-back in women's rights has been taking place while the numbers of women entering parliament soared.

Then there's the collateral damage. Women's physical integrity and well being continues to be undermined by a huge and seemingly increasing incidence of sexual and domestic violence.

This is a subject that I want to spend some time on today, both to honour Alicia's memory but also because of the urgent need to do something about it.

Although we do not often link the subject of violence to the question of equality of opportunity for women, I feel it is high time we did. There is no group of women in Australia today in greater need of Voice than those who are subjected to physical, emotional and sexual violence.

Women are far more likely to be victims of sexual or other forms of violence today than at any time in our recent past, possibly in all of our recorded history. It is the same with domestic violence. The shocking incidence of violence against women at the hands of their husbands or other 'intimate partners', as the current jargon has it, is one of the most tragic indicators of how badly we as a society have failed so many women.

Almost 100 women a year are killed in Australia by their intimate partner or other family member. That's almost two a week. Dead – at the hands of someone they presumably once loved. Many thousands more were subjected to varying levels of violence from the men they live with.

Almost as shocking is that as a society we have such a careless disregard for this national toll of violence that we don't even bother to collect regular statistics on it. There are guesstimates and estimates and scattered police and hospital records but, basically, no one has a clue how many women are having the shit beaten out of them night after night in their homes in this country.

In Victoria, a government study of child abuse investigated the presence of factors such as alcohol or substance abuse and violence in families where there was substantiated child abuse. The study found that in 1996–97 there was violence in 38 per cent of such cases, but by 2000–01 this had risen to 52 per cent of affected families. None of the other factors were present to such a degree, and none had increased by anything like this magnitude. We need more information like this, especially on a national scale, yet there seems to be a vile indifference to doing anything about starting to collect it.

In the mid-1990s the Australian Institute of Criminology began a four-year project to establish a national database on restraining orders in an attempt to try to establish a true picture of the levels of violence against women. At the time

about 30,000 such orders were taken out by women each year but we knew very little beyond that. Unfortunately, we still don't know any more because the project was abandoned – a victim of budget cuts in the first year of the Howard government. We do, however, have a national database on stolen vehicles, and it is updated *four times a day*. In mid-2000 it was linked to the New South Wales REVS (Register of Encumbered Vehicles) system for the first time, a move the NSW Minister for Fair Trading said would protect car buyers from unwittingly buying stolen vehicles. NSW police have details of more than 465,000 vehicles. We live in a country that cares more about stolen cars than it does about bashed and violated women.

Nowhere is the violence worse than against Indigenous women. Although they comprise only about two per cent of the total female population, Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander women accounted for approximately 15 per cent of femicide victims, according to a study conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology. The report found that 132 of the 701 women killed in Australia by partners or other family members between July 1989 and June 1998 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. (A further 50 women were not identified by race.)

In 1987 Prime Minister Bob Hawke responded to the shocking news that 99 Aborigines had died while in prisons around Australia between January 1980 and May 1989 by establishing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. That Royal Commission investigated in detail each of those deaths and came up with a comprehensive series of recommendations designed to prevent further deaths in prisons. Who has proposed any form of national inquiry into the far greater number of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander women who have died at the hands of family members? Has any political leader cared enough to commission an investigation into those 132 deaths *and the dozens that have occurred since?* The carnage continues. If anything, it is getting worse.

In 1991, Maryanne Sam's landmark study *Through Black Eyes*, on family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, reported, 'In one community in Queensland, more women have died as a result of violent assault than all the

Black Deaths in Custody in that State.' In 1999, the Queensland government was presented with the *Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence* which documented 'appalling acts of physical brutality and sexual violence ... being perpetrated within some families and across Communities to a degree previously unknown in Indigenous life'.

In her foreword, chairperson of the Task Force, Boni Robertson, paid special tribute to the 'courage of the women on the Task Force'. It had taken unique bravery for them to encourage the veil to be lifted on the shocking incidence of violence – against women, against children (including babies), and against old people – that has now become such a tragic feature of life in too many Indigenous communities. Some members had not been able to complete their assignment. Two women had to withdraw after being physically attacked for trying to expose the abuse that was occurring in their own communities.

The large proportion of Indigenous women using refuges once they were set up in the early 1970s should have been a clue to the large and growing problem of violence in Indigenous communities. In Western Australia, for instance, Indigenous people account for only three per cent of the state's population, but Indigenous women were almost one-third of the total women's refuge population.

The first time I became aware that Indigenous women were indeed ready to share these experiences – albeit in the form of a desperate cry for help – was in May 1999. I was invited by the NSW Women's Refuge Movement to witness a historic event: a delegation of Indigenous women from across the state, including remote areas in the west, had come to Parliament House in Sydney to tell ministers, MPs and senior bureaucrats that they wanted a better response from police and other agencies. The women called their delegation 'Aboriginal Women, Make Your Voices Heard'. The idea of the delegation had arisen from a conference on violence against women that had been held in Lake Burrendong, near Dubbo, about six months before. At that conference women heard powerful and distressing stories from each other about the violence they were witnessing, and enduring. They also heard that

these stories were *not* being reported back to the relevant public servants in Sydney. They decided, enough is enough: they wanted to get their stories out.

That day, in a room in Parliament House in Sydney, these women made sure that the people at the top could no longer plead ignorance about what was happening to Aboriginal women in the state of New South Wales. The women spoke to a small audience that included the head of the Premier's department, the head of the Attorney-General's department, a personal envoy from the Police Commissioner and a host of parliamentary dignitaries.

Just to listen to these women talk was incredibly moving – and extremely upsetting. One woman, from Bourke, said: 'We had a domestic violence death three years ago, and there's going to be more. It's now starting with the grandchildren. My nine year old granddaughter hit me. It's hurting me inside.' These women pleaded for special services, and special workers who understood the problems of Aboriginal communities. They especially pleaded for better treatment at the hands of the police. One of them told of a young woman who had called the police at two in the morning because she was being beaten. When the police arrived, they discovered she had outstanding warrants and arrested her. She spent three days in Sydney's Silverwater prison and when she was released, her violent husband had disappeared with the children. 'The domestic violence was never dealt with,' the gathering was told.

As with rape and other forms of sexual violence, domestic violence only became a political issue because women like Alicia made it one. Over the past 30 years women, in many cases the same women, have battled to keep open the refuges that offered crisis accommodation for women escaping violence while at the same time they tried to keep domestic violence on the political radar. It has not been easy. And the sense of urgency seems to have been lost. The issue no longer has any priority. Women's refuges are now such an essential service in all Australian cities and many towns that, to quote former Labor Senator Pat Giles, they are now 'part of community expectations: you have a police station, you have a post office and you have a women's refuge'.

In other words, women's refuges have now become an accepted part of the social landscape. This is something of a mixed blessing. It is obviously necessary and desirable that women and children have somewhere to go to escape violence but this should only ever be a short-term, emergency response. It should not become a safety valve, letting the perpetrators off the hook or allowing governments to see funding refuges as their principal obligation in addressing violence against women. Why should it be the victims who have to leave their homes?

While safety of the victims needs to be the first consideration during an episode of violence, their permanent dislocation ought not to be a usual or necessary consequence. Yet there is an alarming tendency to treat this dislocation as permanent. The 1996 census conducted its first ever survey of homeless people – and included the residents in women's refuges in its count! Why should these women and kids be seen as homeless? It is the perpetrators who should be made homeless.

And we need to know a great deal more about the extent of the violence.

The last federal government survey on violence against women, in 1996, reported that 1.1 million Australian women had experienced some form of violence in a domestic relationship. This was equivalent to 23 per cent of all women who had ever been married or in a de facto relationship. Children witnessed the violence in almost half a million cases. Almost one-third of these women reported that violence had occurred during a pregnancy, and 14 per cent of these women said the violence had been inflicted for the first time when they were pregnant.

The federal government is not going to repeat this survey.

Instead it will be replaced by a safety survey in 2006 involving both men and women. It may be a useful document on perceptions and experience of crime but it will not be comparable to the one that gave us our first authoritative glimpse into the mostly secret world of domestic violence.

We also need to know a lot more about sexual violence.

Last year 18,000 Australian women reported to police that they had been sexually assaulted. This was a large increase on the previous year's reporting but, we know from crime studies, it represents the mere tip of the iceberg as most such assaults go unreported. Using the formula for under-reporting adopted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, the actual number of women sexually assaulted that year was more like 120,000 - about 328 a day.

In 1966, the total number of rapes reported to police in this country was 251; in 1972, I reported in *Damned Whores and God's Police*, it had risen to 544. I thought that was a shocking increase. What is happening to us that over the course of 40 years the number of sexual assaults perpetrated on Australian women can rise to such levels? It can't all be explained away by the different definitions for "rape" and "sexual assault".

How is it that in 2003 more than 18,000 women in Australia reported a sexual assault to police, and that this figure represented a 10 per cent increase over the previous year, which in turn was nine per cent greater than the year before? Could we have imagined even ten years ago that conviction rates for rape and other forms of sexual assault would be declining?

There is increasing evidence that the reforms of the past thirty years that had been designed to ensure rape victims received justice are in danger or have perhaps already been whittled away. It is as if some judges are totally ignoring these legal reforms and still operating under the archaic rules.

Despite the fact that evidence of a woman's sexual history is inadmissible, it was allowed in 12 per cent of sexual assault trials in New South Wales, according to a state government study of all cases finalised in the District Court between 1994 and 1995. Further ignoring the changes that were supposed to make the court experience less demeaning for the victim (while still preserving the accused's presumption of innocence), 52 per cent of complainants were accused of making false reports on the basis of ulterior motives such as a desire for vengeance, 32 per cent were asked if they had applied for victim's compensation, 57 per cent were questioned about behaving in a sexually provocative manner, 42 per cent were asked about the way they dressed on

the day, 43 per cent were asked why they were in the location where contact with the accused occurred and in 40 per cent of trials the judge 'gave the old-style corroboration warning that it is dangerous to convict on the complainant's evidence alone'. In 65 per cent of the trials there were, on average, two interruptions to evidence because of the distress suffered by the complainants.

Other relatively recent remarks about rape by judges or magistrates had indicated that even in legal circles attitudes to rape had not left the Jurassic age.

I am sure you all remember the case, in South Australia in 1993, of Supreme Court Judge, Justice Derek Bollen, who instructed a jury in a rape in marriage case: 'There is, of course, nothing wrong with a husband faced with his wife's refusal to have intercourse, in attempting in an acceptable way, to persuade her to change her mind, and that may involve a measure of rougher than usual handling'. These comments had caused uproar and women's groups, newspapers and several prominent public figures roundly condemned the judge. The judge apparently saw nothing wrong with saying what he said – nor with his opinion, expressed elsewhere in his remarks, that it was important that innocent men escape false rape charges. He expressed no similar view about the desirability of a raped woman receiving justice.

Yet the woman in question in this case had been subjected to forced anal intercourse, forced oral intercourse, forced vaginal intercourse and had a bottle forcibly inserted into her vagina. A judge on the highest court of South Australia saw this behaviour as being merely 'rougher than usual handling'. If this is what judges think, is it any wonder that, as has been documented, so many Australian boys and men think it is permissible to force women to have sex?

This is another area where we are going backwards.

I have spent a fair amount of time today speaking about violence because it was an area that Alicia devoted much of her time to. It also, in my opinion, goes to the heart of my argument that we reached the end of equality.

Although we never achieved full equality of opportunity between women

and men in Australia, we did for a couple of decades at least have it as a national goal. It was up there on the political agenda and we were making progress. We could report encouraging statistics on women in the workforce, women's earnings, women's appointments to top jobs. This is no longer the case. We have stopped even having the national conversation about women's entitlements and women's rights. Instead, all the talk is of families, or mothers, and women, especially women who *are* mothers, are left to feel that that's the only part of their lives that is held in any esteem.

There is another concept that is central to my argument and that is what I call the breeding creed. This is the philosophy of procreation advocated by the federal government and other powerful agents in Australia who are panicking about our declining birth rate. That rate has fallen well below what is needed to reproduce ourselves, so that we now need to rely on immigration to increase our population.

The brunt of government policy towards women for at least the last eight years has been designed to reverse this decline by making it more difficult for women to hold jobs, even part time jobs, *and* have children. The hope has been, apparently, that women would just give up any career aspirations and decide to stay home and have children.

I was shocked to discover just how much federal government policy in employment, taxation, family payments and child care has been manipulated to penalise women with children who want to work, just as I can still scarcely believe that a prime minister in the 21st century would come up with a policy as cruel and regressive as the Baby Bonus.

This policy has now fortunately been abolished but the thinking that lay behind it has not. We must remember that while that policy masqueraded as a fertility policy, a return of taxes paid by previously employed women when they had a baby, it was in fact an employment policy. A fertility policy would have provided financial rewards for each baby, this one rewarded only the first – and to qualify for the full benefit, a woman had to stay out of employment for five full years.

I think we all know how hard it is to retain skills, qualifications and confidence in oneself after a five-year absence from employment. Here is ideology at work, an ideology that wants women to be breeders before they are anything else. Perhaps to the exclusion of anything else.

It is the breeding creed that has led to the end of equality. Instead of fostering a society where women can be mothers *and* be employed – and thus have an identity, not to mention an income, that is separate from their maternal status - the federal government has done everything in its power to impose on women who want to have children only one choice: fulltime motherhood.

As a society, we should be acknowledging the fears many woman have when they leave their jobs to have a baby – and helping these women to maintain their skills and their feeling of attachment to the workforce. One way to do this, of course, would be to have a national scheme of paid maternity leave. Such a scheme acknowledges that women are "on leave" from their jobs. They have not been exiled permanently from the world of employment – which is what many women feel these days when they leave their jobs to have a baby.

For women in their late 20s or early 30s the crunch really comes when their biological clock starts to collide with their career path. This is the age when most women who are going to have children start to plan for motherhood. Yet more and more women, especially those with higher education and well-paying jobs, are recognising the high price demanded of them when they become mothers, and it is giving many of them pause for thought.

Around 28 per cent of young women today will not have children at all – an all-time high figure for Australia - and they are most likely to be the well-educated, high earning ones who have so much to lose. It is women aged 30 and over with a university degree who have the lowest birth rate.

Yet most women start out wanting and intending to have children. Why do we make it so hard for them? If we really worried about the birth rate wouldn't we be making it as easy as possible?

That would mean acknowledging, and creating policies that facilitate the fact that most women want to continue to have an economic life as well as have babies. Instead we try to force women into a strait-jacket - or what I prefer to call a "white picket prison".

The birth rate has continued to fall since the breeding creed became official policy, which suggests that it is ineffective and even counter-productive. And it is an illogical – as well as an ideological - approach.

Women need to be beware, however, that unless we can change the thinking of our political leaders, even more coercive measures might be in store for them.

Just in case you think I am exaggerating, I invite you to consider the political firestorm that has been raging about abortion. In just the past few weeks we have heard the following:

- The federal health Minister Tony Abbott has asked "Do we really think 100,000 abortions a year is a good thing?" and has claimed that women are being "railroaded" into abortion by parents, husbands, boyfriends and "the culture of convenience".
- The deputy prime minister, John Anderson, has called for a debate "to re-examine our understanding of medical science and the law".
- The South Australian Liberal MP Christopher Pyne has asserted that in one wing of hospitals 24 week old fetuses are being aborted while in another wing, 23 week old babies are being nurtured in neo-natal units; he has called for a total ban of abortions beyond 21 weeks and questioned the need for terminations at all.
- Tasmanian Liberal Senator Eric Abetz has said he opposes public subsidies for terminations via Medicare.
- Queensland Senator-elect, and the man who gave John Howard control of the Senate, Barney Joyce said he wanted an end to public funding of abortion as the price for his vote to privatize Telstra.
- The Governor-General, Michael Jeffery, has called for the number of abortions to be reduced.

Is there something familiar about all these voices?

Yes. They are the voices of men. Speaking on a subject that is of intimate concern to women.

Only one woman, Veterans Affairs Minister De-Anne Kelly, has joined in the call for a limit on abortions. Two weeks ago she said "The death of 100,000 Australians is a national loss and tragedy" and argued that the loss of "these potential young Australians" was a problem for our ageing society. (As someone who in a former life worked in a women's refuge and would have seen at first hand the tragedies of women and violence, I would have thought she might have been a bit more sensitive to the invidious choices women often have to make about continuing with a pregnancy.)

If you don't think this cacophony adds up to a determined political assault on women's reproductive freedom then you are being very naïve. This is the breeding creed at full roar. And this is unprecedented.

We have never had a federal health Minister crusade against a legal medical procedure in this fashion before. We have never had a deputy Prime Minister and the Governor General jump in as well.

And are they being curbed? Hardly. A few women Liberal MPs have stood up for women's right to choose, which is necessary and about time, but where are the male political heavyweights. I don't find it all reassuring that the Treasurer has jumped in merely to remind people that abortion law is a state matter. Coming from the man who, on the night he announced a $3,000 "Baby bribe" as a key part of his budget, told women to go home and "have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country", I hardly think this constitutes a rebuttal of what his colleagues are up to.

For the first week or so of the debate, the Prime Minister had been conspicuously silent. He intervened last week and called for a calm debate. This was ambiguous; it was by no means clear that he was trying to prevent this further assault on women's reproductive rights.

Last weekend, Mr Howard adopted a stronger position. He said there would

be no parliamentary inquiry into abortion and that there would be "no government sponsored" changes to the law. He seemed to be trying to quell the debate.

However, it is going to be very difficult to put this particular genie back into the bottle. The debate has begun and already it is pretty hysterical. It is probably too late to stop it – and I am not even sure that the Prime Minister wants to.

I am pretty suspicious about all this. It is not beyond imagination that Tony Abbott is testing the waters, seeing which way the wind might blow and giving the Prime Minister room to move in case it looks politically tricky for him. This week in federal parliament Mr Abbott refused to guarantee that he was not using his position as federal health minister to push this issue.

And let's be clear as to what it is about.

Tony Abbott and his cronies want to force women back to the bad old days of safe abortion being a prerogative of the rich. They don't of course have the power to change the law and ban abortion in the states but they could do so in the ACT and the Northern Territory – which must be of great concern to you all – and, very importantly, they do have the power to make abortion expensive by removing the Medicare rebate.

They also have a broader and more ambitious agenda. In saying they want to have a debate, they are in fact trying to get the states to reexamine their laws. They say they want to have "a debate" on the issue; in reality they want to generate anxiety and squeamishness by concentrating on the issue of late-term abortions rather than on the reality of abortion in Australia today.

Tony Abbott says there are 100,000 abortions performed in Australia today.

I have challenged him to back up this figure, and he has since admitted that it is a "guesstimate". In fact, he made the number up. There are no national statistics kept so there is no way of knowing. He pulled a nice easy to remember round number out of the air and in a few short weeks that number has been treated as fact. Even people who oppose Mr Abbott are using this figure as the benchmark.

The reality is that Medicare rebates were paid for 73,191 terminations in the twelve months to June 2004. Not all of these were abortions; some were medically required procedures following miscarriage or done for gynecological reasons. The fact is we don't know how many abortions are performed in Australia.

All we know is what happens in South Australia, the only state that publishes data on pregnancy terminations. And, according to that data, the number of abortions is declining. It was reported in the press that in 2003 there were 5,214 abortions performed, down from 5,463 in 2002 and 5,572 in 2001. The same statistics show that less than one per cent of these terminations took place after 20 weeks.

The issue of late-term abortions being a national scandal is a total furphy but, if the experience of the United States is anything to go by, it will be used as an emotional weapon to distort the facts and try to muddy the debate.

Again, based on what we know from South Australia it seems that the majority of abortions are sought by women who are married or in a relationship, many of whom already have children. It seems that many women are terminating pregnancies simply because they can't afford to have another baby.

If we were serious about helping women to have babies, we would be looking at a far wider policy palette than just the Medicare rebate. We would not be trying to force them into unwanted pregnancy by denying them access to affordable abortion. We would be looking at the range of issues I have already raised: access to full-time employment, equal pay, child care, maternity leave.

Instead of advocating a breeding creed, we would be listening to what women themselves say they want: lives that encompass a range of things – marriage, children, careers, travel and some time for themselves. But in pursuing these, they are paying a high price – emotional, financial and even physical – because our society has become one that penalizes women who want to be equal.

I regard this new threat to women's equality as extremely serious. Women

everywhere, and the men who agree with them, have to stand up and be counted on this one. We especially need our women MPs to take a stand. This is a time for them to be our Voice, to speak up for women, women who will suffer if we go backwards on this one. I was pleased to read in the press earlier this week that in Cabinet on Monday Senators Helen Coonan and Amanda Vanstone launched an attack on their colleague Tony Abbott for what he has been trying to do.

They are right. If we don't stop them now, the notion of women's equality will become a fleeting historical memory, something that occurred for a few halcyon years in the late 20th century but which was overturned by ruthless zealots in the 21st.

It is a history I hope never to read, let alone live through, and it is one that I am sure Alicia Johnson could never have imagined could happen, but all the signs are there.

When I named my book *The End of Equality* I meant it to be a wake-up call, not a prophecy. I assumed, perhaps naively, that if I showed things as they really were, not as we imagined them to be or hoped they were, that change would follow. Instead the reverse seems to be happening. I hope we can head it off before the end of equality become a permanent reality and women are relegated back to where too many men obviously believe we belong.

Thank you.