



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SEX DISCRIMINATION AMENDMENT
(TEACHING PROFESSION) BILL 2004

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 23 March 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Tuesday, 23 March 2004
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Questioner
Speaker Macklin, Jenny, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (8.37 pm)—What we know about this Prime Minister is that he introduces changes to the Sex Discrimination Act when he is in trouble. We have seen it before, and we are now seeing it again with the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004 being rushed into the parliament entirely because we have seen the Prime Minister's falling poll numbers, not because we do not have enough male teachers in our primary schools.

This Prime Minister has been in the job for eight years and has not worried about this issue before. But now we have a Prime Minister responding to his own political difficulties by trying to shrink our country, trying to make the country smaller by making it less fair than it is. That great Australian virtue, fairness, is at the heart of the Sex Discrimination Act, and this bill is an attack on that essential Australian value.

This bill seeks to wind back Australia's antidiscrimination laws, laws which are there to protect every single Australian. We know that the Prime Minister has been antagonistic towards antidiscrimination laws right from the start. During the third reading debate on the Sex Discrimination Bill 1983, he said:

... I am a profound sceptic of the value to our society of the Human Rights Commission.

He went on to say:

... I certainly have major reservations about the concept of affirmative action legislation and I certainly do not regard support of this legislation as being indicative of support for that.

He has obviously changed his mind about that. So much for this Prime Minister being the conviction politician that he says he is. He is now proposing to change the Sex Discrimination Act to permit affirmative action for men to become teachers. The Prime Minister has done one of his usual about-faces on affirmative action by dumping his long-held opposition to affirmative action legislation, just because he is in serious political trouble.

It is not hard to understand why a man like this Prime Minister is profoundly sceptical about the value of antidiscrimination laws. These are the laws—this is an extraordinarily important point to make in this debate—that challenge deep-seated prejudices held in our community. It therefore follows that attacks on antidiscrimination laws are fertile ground for politicians who exploit community intolerance and prejudice. We have seen, through experience, that this Prime Minister is exactly that sort of politician. Attacking the Sex Discrimination Act is his natural territory, especially when he is in trouble. As I said at the start, he has done it before.

We should all acknowledge here tonight that this bill is not about getting more male teachers into our classrooms. It does not tackle the real reason why so few men teach in our primary schools. All the evidence shows that the real barriers to men becoming teachers and staying in our primary schools are about pay, career structure and status compared with other professions. They are the issues. State governments, Catholic and independent schools all need to work to improve the status of teaching. That is what will make a difference. But pay and career structures will not be addressed by winding back the Sex Discrimination Act.

This bill will also not solve the other significant issue the government is seeking to address: it will not solve the multiple and complex issues holding boys' education back. In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister admitted this yesterday when he wrote in the *Australian* newspaper:

Amending the Sex Discrimination Act will never solve these problems, nor will it deal with their symptoms.

It is extraordinary that we have this government proceeding with this bill when they know that it will not deal with these serious issues. The insincerity of the government on this issue was summed up at a recent press conference by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education, Science and Training. After just two days of talking up their commitment to boys' education you would have expected the government to back up their

concern with some money and some real policy. At that press conference to announce the government's schools funding package, the education minister was asked by a journalist:

Is there anything in this package, Dr Nelson, to encourage more male teachers into the system?

Wait for it! Wait for the minister's reply:

... there is nothing specific in this package for the encouragement of men into teaching itself.

So the minister talks up the problem. He talks and talks about it. He even co-chaired the House of Representatives committee that looked into boys' education. But when it comes to him actually doing something as the minister for education, outlining the next four years of funding for government schools, Catholic schools and independent schools, there is not one single initiative to get more young men into teaching.

I just made reference to the fact that the education minister co-chaired the House of Representatives inquiry, the report of which was called *Boys: getting it right*. That inquiry found that there are major problems facing boys but that the major cause of boys' problems—this is from the report of the parliamentary committee that this minister chaired—when it comes to their educational achievement was the decline of the extended family and community and structural economic change.

The report did not recommend changes to the Sex Discrimination Act. Instead, it recommended that the Commonwealth provide scholarships for equal numbers of males and females to undertake teacher training, and these would be based on merit. But do we see any additional scholarships offered by the Commonwealth to men and women, on the basis of merit, to encourage them into teacher training? No. We do not see any initiative from the government when it comes to encouraging more young men into teaching.

In fact, the minister has implemented only one of the report's recommendations, and that was to write letters to the state and territory ministers to put boys' education on the agenda of the ministerial council. What a pathetic achievement by this minister! He has the opportunity to offer equal numbers of scholarships to encourage more men into teaching but does nothing of the sort.

This approach of equal numbers of scholarships for men and women was also suggested by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and, I am pleased to say, was agreed to by the Catholic Education Commission when they met last Friday and decided that they would offer 24 additional merit based scholarships—12 for men and 12 for women. So the Catholic Education Commission can see the sense in this approach which was recommended by the House of Representatives inquiry, but the Howard government cannot see the sense of it. They have just announced all their schools funding, and there is not one scholarship and not one effort to get more men into teacher education.

The Prime Minister, when talking about this change to the act, has repeatedly referred to the Catholic Education Commission's application to the human rights commission as the reason that this legislation is necessary. So you would have to say that, on the Prime Minister's own logic, now that the Catholic Education Commission is able to offer 12 male scholarships along with 12 scholarships for women, this bill is unnecessary. And I would again call on those opposite to put whatever pressure is necessary to get the Prime Minister and the education minister to withdraw this bill. It is unnecessary.

I guess we will not see it withdrawn because, even though the Catholic Education Commission have their scholarships, the Prime Minister's numbers, as we see in the polls today, are still falling. So he cannot afford to ditch his attempts to just score political points. That is all he is doing. He is just trying to score political points and playing politics with boys' education—not actually making any practical impression on this important issue. I want to quote a couple of paragraphs from the Catholic Education Commission's press statement of 15 March. They said:

Contrary to recent media reports, the Sydney Catholic Education Office did not request a change to the Sex Discrimination Act.

So they did not ask for this change. They do not want this change. They have achieved what they wanted. They went on to say:

A far bigger challenge is the need to address the underlying reasons why more men are not attracted to teaching. These include the status of the profession, salaries and career opportunities.

I could not agree with them more. Boys' education is of course a serious issue. I have two boys, and I am sure there are many parents of boys in this parliament. We all care about what happens to boys at school. And it deserves a serious policy response. But we do not get a serious policy response from this government. All we get from this government is an attempt to play politics—the government trying to change the Sex Discrimination Act to allow discrimination on the basis of gender for teaching scholarships.

Anyone who knows anything about schools knows it is not entrenched discrimination that is stopping men entering the teaching profession. If anyone can show me entrenched discrimination facing men, I will be prepared to look at it. But I can see no entrenched discrimination preventing men applying to get into teaching and then taking up those positions in schools. Men who want to be teachers are not discriminated against in their employment. As the Catholic Education Commission has said, there are multiple and complex reasons why men are not becoming teachers. From my point of view, discrimination is not one of those reasons. This bill will not work. All it does is legalise discrimination, and it is certainly going to be strongly opposed by Labor.

I want to stress that getting more men into schools is one of the policy priorities of the Labor Party—but, by contrast, we intend to put forward a comprehensive strategy. We do not believe that solutions to this issue lie in legalising discrimination on the basis of gender. We want to see more male teachers in our schools and we will implement a five-point plan to encourage more men into schools. There are two issues here: one is to get more men into teaching and the second is to address the educational needs of boys. The plan that we have put forward includes a national campaign to attract quality entrants to teaching, targeting men at school and at university who have the relevant skills and backgrounds. We know that those states that have already embarked on these sorts of campaigns are having some success.

Secondly, we not only want to encourage more young males into teaching; we want to encourage more male mentors to work with schools and with parents and to involve fathers in a range of activities in our schools, whether it is reading to students, using technology, vocational education, music, drama or sporting activities—all of the things where male mentors could make a great contribution. We want to see incentives for quality teaching, including for teachers who have the skills necessary to improve the learning outcomes of boys. Most importantly, we want to target improvements in teaching skills for male and female teachers in the Commonwealth's professional development program.

We will always have boys in classrooms with female teachers, and I have no doubt those teachers will do a wonderful job. It is our responsibility, through the professional development program, to make sure that all teachers, male and female, get the professional development that they need to make sure that they are well skilled to educate our boys. We also know that student discipline and welfare programs are critical, and this is the fifth part of Labor's program when it comes to addressing these very important issues. Many of the boys who are currently struggling at school are located in areas with concentrations of social and economic disadvantage.

I also want to address an issue which of course the government never look at because it is not within their frame of thinking. Many of the boys who are currently struggling at school are actually located in areas of serious concentration of social and economic disadvantage. I gave a speech a couple of years ago which was called 'Postcodes to Prosperity'. I argued that postcodes mattered when it came to education. I pointed out that, in 1999, the retention rate to year 12 for boys in the inner part of eastern Melbourne was 94 per cent—those boys were doing pretty well; 12 per cent of boys attained low grades in their Victorian Certificate of Education English; and the unemployment rate for men in that area is very low.

Contrast that to the north-west of Melbourne; the contrast could not be sharper. In 1999 the year 12 retention rate for boys was just 55 per cent. More than 35 per cent of boys in these suburbs attained very low grades in their year 12 English exam. The male unemployment rate in that area is very high. These figures show that it is not the case that all boys are struggling; geographic location and socioeconomic status make an enormous difference. So you would have to wonder why a government that says it is committed to improving educational outcomes for boys would continue to increase funding to the wealthiest non-government schools in this country.

If the government is really concerned about the education of boys, why has it given some of the wealthiest non-government schools in this country an increase in funding over the last four years of 150 per cent while giving little more than indexation to schools in suburbs that are really struggling—the schools where the boys are not really keeping up? If the government really cared about boys' education, it would not have published a fact sheet that implied that the wealthy King's School was underfunded compared with Fairvale High School in Sydney's west. We know it is much more likely that the boys at Fairvale High School will be doing it tough than

the boys at the King's School. Of course, the government is not really concerned about the large number of boys who are struggling, otherwise it would not have given a 195 per cent increase in funding to the King's School while only giving a 20 per cent increase to students at Fairvale High School.

This government is patently not concerned about the serious issues of boys' education, otherwise it would change its schools funding system and make sure that schools were funded on the basis of need. Just last Sunday, the Attorney-General was at it again, releasing a media statement that falsely stated that the Western Australian Department of Education and Training offered male-only scholarships. The Deputy Prime Minister repeated this false claim yesterday. No male-only teaching scholarships are offered by the Western Australian department. Last year, Western Australia offered 200 teaching scholarships in a range of categories. In the final year teaching category, on the basis of merit, 35 scholarships went to men and 27 to women. The rest of the scholarships were for maths, science and those sorts of things.

One thing that is very clear is Western Australia's commitment to getting more men into teaching. They market these scholarships to men. But, in the end, all applicants apply on merit. Why are the scholarships offered on merit? It is because Western Australia, like parents—and certainly like the Australian Labor Party—wants the best teachers teaching their children, regardless of the sex of the teacher. To choose teachers on any other criteria weakens the quality of teachers in our schools.

I will finish with an extraordinary quote from the Prime Minister, speaking back in 1992. In a second reading debate on the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Amendment Bill 1992, he said:

I hope the Government will have absolutely no problem with the impeccable principle of non-discrimination—an impeccable liberal principle—

This is the Prime Minister's view, back in 1992—

that people ought to be recruited on the basis of merit and merit alone. Nothing else should determine the entitlement of somebody to a job.

It seems that that was the view of the Prime Minister back in 1992, but it is not his view when he is in such serious political trouble.

The Labor Party is committed to getting more male teachers into our schools, but we want the best teachers in our schools. We will encourage men to apply for teaching, but we want to make sure that the real issues are tackled when it comes to getting more men into teaching. We will not be playing politics—which is all that this bill is about.