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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONDOLENCES

Whitlam, Mrs Margaret Elaine, AO

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (17:42): Can I start off by saying what truly moving and heartfelt speeches we have heard from both sides of the House since the passing of this very inspirational Australian woman, Margaret Whitlam. And it is highly evident that her wit, charm and kind nature touched many people in the political sphere and I am sure many more outside of it.

Margaret was of course the wife of one of Australia's great political powerhouses, Gough Whitlam. He is a Labor icon, a Labor legend. But a place by his side was never in his shadow. I remember growing up as a young girl in the 1970s in suburban Melbourne and being very aware at a very young age of the role Margaret Whitlam was playing. She had a huge influence on my mother and my sisters during that time and she was one of the first role models for me not only of a woman in a position of power but of what a marriage should be as well. She showed that marriage should be an equal, respectful relationship and partnership where two people are joined in love and mutual admiration. I know Gough's commitment to Margaret—as many have said today and over recent days, he said it was his greatest appointment—showed that a man can actually be married to a woman who is strong and who expresses her view. He in a way was a role model of what a husband can be being married to a woman of that nature.

The 1970s were a time when women were starting to discover their own voices. Germaine Greer was becoming a household name and the women's liberation movement was changing the way society functioned. Margaret's place in this world was, I believe, to help women redefine themselves and in turn redefine their role in society. She was a role model through and through but most importantly she had influence and she knew how to use it, particularly at a time when throughout the world women were becoming more empowered in so many ways. She threw out the rule book on how to be a Prime Minister's wife and used her position to help others and to instigate social change. Margaret spoke out on issues she felt very strongly about, particularly when it came to women's rights. She spoke out on issues such as abortion law and contraceptive advice. She was able to connect with Australian women as only a woman can do. And Australian women loved her for it. In fact, I was speaking about Margaret Whitlam with my mother on the weekend. My mother really did love her and apparently she had been in tears since hearing the news. Margaret had a huge impact on women, particularly those women, as I said, who were becoming empowered and gaining their own voice in the seventies. She was at the forefront of that and she was very much loved by women particularly of that generation.

She had a way with the media pack, who I bet she enjoyed working up into a lather until they were eating out of the palm of her hand. We have heard some stories today and also in recent days about how they were eating out of the palm of her hand. Lucky her.

Margaret had a way about her. She had a self-confidence and a talent not only for political life but also for public life. She had ambition and she inspired many women. She made it clear that being a wife was about more than cooking, cleaning and raising kids—that was very important, but that women had a range of choices and that being a wife included more dimensions to life than that. She absolutely redefined the role of the 'first lady' and showed the world that women with high-profile husbands can achieve success in their own right and should not be ashamed to seek it out. I am sure Gough was much better off because of Margaret's personal ambitions and achievements.

The member before me really underscored for me the fact that she actually lived through a great deal of social change in this country and throughout the world, particularly for women. She would have seen the end of the marriage vans and she would have seen women emerging into society, as I mentioned before, gaining voices, gaining empowerment, gaining greater control over their fertility and gaining greater access to education—thanks to the reforms her husband introduced in the seventies. She saw so much. The beauty of Margaret Whitlam was that she was at the vanguard of that.

In closing, I would like to pass on my deepest condolences to the Whitlam family. Although I never met Margaret Whitlam, I feel as if I have known her for a very long time. I am sure many other Australian women feel the same way. I know my mum does. She will be missed. She was a true inspiration for generations of women and her legacy will live on.