

Women's Mentoring Scheme Launch

Monday, 13 September 2004.

- *Distinguished members of the profession*
- *Traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the people of the Kulin Nations.*

This audience is the future of the law. As young and aspiring lawyers, you represent the promise of a better profession. As successful practitioners and mentors, you represent how much has already been achieved. Women are flocking to the law in great numbers and, encouragingly, in 2002, 62% of practitioners under 30 were women. We cannot become complacent however, and the longer I am in Government, the more I realise that good will not naturally and inevitably prevail. It is clear that sheer numbers will not automatically propel women to senior positions.

We should never become complacent about why we want women to succeed in the law. We need women in the law and in senior positions not just for the benefit of those particular women, or those who aspire to follow them. We need women in the law to reflect the experience and diversity of the community, to bring their particular skills and expertise to legal practice and to stem the flow of benefit to a small and privileged few. It must be remembered that, while white, middle-class men have occupied senior positions in public life and the law, white, middle-class men have benefited. The hallowed halls of the Melbourne Club, and of the legal institutions of recent history are not objective, value free zones, but the harbourers of privilege. When we rectify the imbalance of power in our legal and civic institutions, this privilege is, to an extent, dispelled.

So we must continue to work towards transforming public life so that, by participating, by leading, by seeing their diversity reflected in power structures, women have confidence in their capacity to continue to drive reform. But this is not an end in itself. The victory does not lie in women winning the right to become honorary men. Instead, it lies in public and professional life evolving

to reflect the experience of women, in sending a message about the kind of society in which we want to live, in effecting lasting change in *every* woman's life.

We can, of course, do this by reducing inequities in the world of paid employment and by encouraging women to accept senior positions within public life and then propel the agenda. We can also do this by talking about human rights and bringing this discussion to centre stage, thereby allowing us to tackle the conventions that have left women at the margins. Most importantly, we must do this by explaining at every opportunity why the law benefits from women's participation.

Levelling the Playing Field

Clearly, this is an assertion that we have to make over and over again before it resonates or breaks down the tedious suspicion of those who fear that they and their kind are being undermined. I have encountered this suspicion all too often when exercising the privilege of appointing candidates to Victoria's judiciary. Since coming to office, 50% of my appointments have been women, including the first to head a State Supreme Court, Chief Justice Marilyn Warren.

Despite the accusations of the small-minded, unimaginative and presumably idle, let me say that I do not encourage women to accept senior positions as some sort of token gesture. Nor do I do it solely in the pursuit of equality. My reasons are at once more extensive and more selfish than that. I want to be Chief Law Officer of a system that benefits from the expertise and energy of *all* its members. This means that candidates should be appointed on the basis of merit, rather than homogeneity or the old school tie and, for the record, 'merit' *includes*, not excludes women!

In promoting women within the legal profession we are not, as some would have it, doing women any favours. Nor are we appointing women beyond their capabilities. We are simply trying to lift the curtain of invisibility, of direct and indirect discrimination, of baseless assumptions, and the territorial fear of difference that greets women at the door of power.

Government Briefing Practices

We can do it by making it clear that we will not tolerate the insidious discrimination that lurks in the conventions and networks of legal practice. The Government nailed its colours to the mast when it announced its Government Legal Services policy, requiring of the 33 Government panel legal firms to demonstrate equal opportunity in employment and work allocation within firms, and equal opportunity in briefing barristers for government work.

Mentoring Scheme

Of course, just as important as Government policies are structures within the profession that lend women camaraderie, support and inspiration. It is clear that women practitioners benefit from the challenge and the encouragement that spring from groups such as Victorian Women Lawyers and the Women Barristers' Association. It is clear, also, that they derive enormous sustenance from their relationships, both formal and informal, with others they consider to be mentors.

History's first mentor was, in fact, a woman. The Greek mythological arena not being an equal opportunity workplace, the goddess Athena had to disguise herself as a man to do so, but as such she acted as trusted guardian and teacher of Odysseus, the first, perhaps, in a long tradition of women being generous with their wisdom and time and the inspiration of that well worn saying, 'behind every great man....'

The female mentors of the 21st century, however, can go public and we must encourage relationships that can be conduits of wisdom and experience. I congratulate the WBA and VWL for the establishment of such an exciting scheme, and the 60 students involved for your participation. One day I hope that you will be in a position to guide others as they have done for you and wish you a dynamic and mutually inspiring relationship with your mentor, one that will see your aspirations become your achievements and from which the law as a whole will benefit.