

Bob Hawke ... A Leader for Australian Women.

Many words have been written about Bob Hawke's leadership role in transforming the national public policy agenda but his commitment to equality of opportunity for Australian women has received less attention.

Therefore I was impressed when just hours after his death was announced, I received a call from BBC Scotland requesting an interview about the former Prime Minister who had spoken at an International Women's Day event in Brisbane in 1990!

I well remember the occasion.....over 1000 women packed the Brisbane City Council hall at a special breakfast hosted by Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson with Bob Hawke, Premier Wayne Goss and myself as guest speakers. But after nearly three decades why would this be the focus for remembering Bob Hawke's illustrious career?

In the speech Hawke gave that day he focussed on the gender reforms our government had initiated to ensure Australian women had "A Say, A Fair Go and Choice ". As I listened to the BBC archived voice recording I realised these words must have resonated internationally as very progressive for that era when few governments recognised sex discrimination and women's contribution in society was grossly undervalued.

My young interviewer wanted to know why a typical bloke of Bob Hawke's generation could be so committed to changing opportunities for Australian women.

I could have pointed to the role of the second wave of Australian feminists campaigning since the 1970s for recognition in a male dominated society. Or certainly acknowledged the significance of Susan Ryan as the first Labor woman Minister who was assisted by a small number of women parliamentarians in that first Hawke Government.

However, important as Australian women were in creating the environment for long overdue recognition of more than half the population, this could not have occurred so quickly without the leadership role of Bob Hawke. He guaranteed the social reform first advocated by another Labor legend, Gough Whitlam, whose "Its Time "campaign speech"Men and Women of Australia still resonates".

I spent three years as one of only two women in the Hawke Ministry so I understand just how difficult it was to overcome the assumptions of many of my colleagues as we pioneered social policy that put women at the centre of public policy debate. In Cabinet it was the cigar smoking Hawke who calmly negotiated his way through certain resistance as we implemented the National Agenda for Women. A National Women's Health Policy, the National Domestic Violence Strategy, and the Women's Budget Statement were among several major policy initiatives that followed sex discrimination and affirmative action legislation. This programme of action to recognise women as real partners in changing national decision making was very significant at the time and could not have been as successful as it was without a leader like Bob Hawke.

Much has been written of his larrikin ways and some have questioned how his racy reputation would influence serious consideration of gender policy reform. But Bob Hawke was committed to equality

of opportunity ... for young people, for workers, for pensioners ... and this guiding principle enabled him to understand women's aspirations for fundamental change in Australian society.

But Bob Hawke was not just a reforming Prime Minister, because he was very much a leader who loved being with people. I had the opportunity to travel with him in the days when Joh Bjelkje Peterson was state premier and friend of rural Queenslanders. Yet when the then Prime Minister came to country towns he was greeted as a local hero and country women were the first to line up to meet him. After lunches or dinners prepared in his honour. Bob would disappear to take a tea towel with the women clearing up in the kitchen! Some media cynics suggested he only wanted photos taken with women workers, but it was very much part of his natural engagement with people he genuinely respected.

Bob Hawke will be especially remembered for his role as a conciliator and that leadership capacity enabled him to steer social reform in a community that needed to change. His death on the eve of a Federal Election reminds us of his legacy in changing Australia as a more egalitarian country. Bob Hawke would want us to remember this fundamental principle as we head to the polls on Saturday. He initiated change some of which has been forgotten or undervalued, so it is essential a new Labor leader, Bill Shorten takes on a fresh reforming agenda.

Margaret Reynolds

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1988-1990