



Speech by

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Hansard Thursday, 24 February 2005

CENTENARY OF WOMEN'S RIGHT TO VOTE

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (4.34 pm): Celebrations and commemorations provide us with connections to our past and our future. Already, 2005 has some powerful milestones to make us stop and consider our place in history. One hundred years have passed since most women in Queensland received voting rights. It is the 40th anniversary of Indigenous Australians receiving the same rights. Darwin was bombed about 63 years ago. A few months ago, a tsunami killed 300,000 of our Asian neighbours and destroyed their livelihoods.

Why I juxtapose some of these other events with the women's vote is that they are reminders of change—some manmade and some by natural forces beyond our control. They are also pointers to the fact that, with all the blessings of living in a free country with a history of long democratic stability, our part in history is not simply to be observers and to enjoy the comfort of our backyards and beaches.

The significance of this centenary is about more than just the right to vote. It is the kind of active citizenship which demands our actions as well as our opinions. It speaks loudly of effecting change through a compassionate activism and it calls us to serve not only ourselves but also our neighbours, both locally and globally. I have always felt very passionate about local community and working with others who share the vision to build a better society. After 12 years in parliament, I also recognise that it requires more than the simple passage of laws. It demands the more costly and complex answers of human care and involvement.

There is still much to do in our local community to alleviate hardship and to advance the cause of women to lead whole, healthy and happy lives. Issues include the pursuit of appropriate child care, freedom from domestic violence and the fight against the scourge of child abuse and its impacts, which can scar people mentally for life. However, there is another issue which cannot go unmentioned and unchallenged, as it was one of the greatest blots on this parliament's history with regard to the status of women, that is, the legalisation of brothels under the Beattie government. It is a disgrace that with all of the advancements for women, the state sanctioned the view that it is okay to buy and sell women's bodies as long as they get paid and are physically safe. This totally ignores these women's mental health and the ethics—or lack of ethics—of exploiting a workforce that has an above average history of abuse as children and a low socio-economic background.

Too many people with a vested interest in the prostitution industry continue to influence government policy. It is time that women who have left prostitution and who know that its damage is much more than physical have their voices heard so that genuine efforts to help prevent other young women—and men—from entering this degrading industry can finally receive real government support.

I read the CMC review of prostitution laws and I was stunned that the Beattie government is now claiming in its submissions that it had kept its promise to introduce programs to help women out of prostitution. This was despite years of Beattie government ministers being unable to outline what these programs were, following the passage of the legalised brothel laws, when I sought details in writing. Obviously such programs were not top-of-mind or of high priority to the government.

I thank the women who have had the courage to talk with me about the effect of working in the prostitution industry. I urge the women of this parliament to help support their efforts to build services which rebuild shattered lives and treat these women with the dignity and respect that is as much their birthright as it is ours.

I also take this opportunity in the lead-up to International Women's Day to consider our international sisters and the milestones that they are yet to achieve. We must also ask what we can do to help them. Members may have heard that Australia is a signatory to the UN's millennium development goals. Information on this can be found at www.un.org/millenniumgoals. These call on us to help achieve the following (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality and empower women; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and, (8) develop a global partnership for development.

All of these goals, with their individual targets, have the potential to profoundly impact upon the lives of women in the Third World. However, it is the first goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to which I wish to draw members' attention, and to the fact that 2005 is also the UN International Year of Microcredit. Information can be found at www.yearofmicrocredit.org.

What a bland name. But when we dig further we find that the story is exciting, achievable and provides answers to the question: how can I make a difference to world poverty? For as little as the cost of a meal at McDonalds for the average Australian family, a Third World woman could establish a small business that would break the cycle of poverty and feed her family for life.

The problem is accessing the finance and support. That is where microfinancing comes in. These are small loans provided with business development support through not-for-profit community organisations such as Opportunity International. I have friends involved in Opportunity International—and members can read about the organisation at www.opportunity.org.au—who are currently working on rebuilding Indonesia after the tsunami. However, for 20 years the results of their work in many countries has helped thousands of poor Third World women in particular move from subsistence to sustainability and economic empowerment.

Alice Jere, a 47-year-old chicken farmer from Zambia, who began her business with a \$50 loan from Opportunity International, made history on Thursday, 18 November 2004 when she opened the markets at the London Stock Exchange to mark the launch of the UN Year of Microcredit 2005. Alice Jere is one example of how microcredit is empowering women all over the world. On the back of a \$50 loan she has put her five children through school and college as well as supported a number of AIDS orphans.

Nancy Barry, President of Women's World Banking, said—

Microfinance needs to be viewed not as some cute and adorable thing that that not-for-profit organisations do, nor as a public relations activity of banks. It needs to be seen and treated as the base and backbone of domestic financial systems.

For me, I want to do my part in breaking world poverty by supporting those involved in sustainable development. For others it may be through other organisations or by answering the call by being on the front line. It is my hope that 2005 will be a year where we build upon and share in the bounties of the opportunities that we have inherited and that we work for the advancement of women not only in our state but also throughout the world. Then we will be able to celebrate not only our right to vote but also our calling as global citizens.