



Speech by

Hon. Margaret Keech

MEMBER FOR ALBERT

Hansard Thursday, 8 March 2007

MOTION: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Hon. MM KEECH (Albert—ALP) (Minister for Tourism, Fair Trading, Wine Industry Development and Women) (11.30 am): On International Women's Day, I move—

That this House—

- recognises International Women's Day on 8 March, and notes that the Queensland Government is celebrating International Women's Day under the theme 'Women at work, know your rights';
- honours the contribution and achievements of working women of Queensland; and
- expresses regret that the Australian Government has undermined the rights and opportunities for working women in Queensland through its WorkChoices industrial relations regime.

The best ally Queensland's working women have is the Beattie Labor government. I am proud to be part of a government that has stood side by side with workers since our election in 1998. This government has always recognised the contribution workers make to this state, and we will continue to support them.

Queensland's theme for International Women's Day is 'Women at work: know your rights, it's your future'. As I have said in this House before, there are very good reasons for choosing this theme. The Howard government's WorkChoices laws are bad for workers and particularly bad for women. Women in the workforce have been swimming against the tide for decades for equal rights and equity in their working conditions. The Howard government has shamelessly robbed them of a chance to achieve these goals. Changes to the IR system introduced by the Howard government under WorkChoices threaten the rights and privileges Queensland workers have earned through our own industrial relations system. Under WorkChoices, women have lost rights and conditions. Conditions such as paid maternity leave, long service leave, unpaid parental leave, superannuation, flexible working conditions as well as penalty rates on casual jobs are under threat. Clearly, women are the most affected when it comes to WorkChoices.

As minister for women, I am particularly concerned that the move towards individual contracts and agreements is likely to widen the gap between male and female take-home pay. But it is not just the Beattie government which is saying that WorkChoices is bad news. Our worst fears have been confirmed by others. A Griffith University study recently highlighted a substantial loss of employment conditions for many workers signing AWAs. The study found that in the first six months under WorkChoices, although there was a reduction in real-time average wages of 1.1 per cent overall, for women the news was doubly bad, with a two per cent fall in their wages.

Members will recall all the hype from the federal government before, during and after the introduction of WorkChoices. The federal government told us that WorkChoices was going to be good for everybody and in particular good for women. Of course it was misleading the public as it usually does. The promises that workers were offered have certainly not been delivered. They were all empty promises and the proof is here to be seen. The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening. Women now earn about 85 per cent of the male wage on average. Women on AWAs take home a pay packet containing just 70 per cent of the wages of their male colleagues. What does that say? It is crystal clear: women on AWAs are far worse off than those on union agreements. This will get even worse under WorkChoices as it progresses. The trends are already apparent. Women in casual employment are the worst affected. This is

an issue that is of particular concern to me as minister for tourism, because the majority of women in this industry are casual and part-timers.

Workers have fought too hard and have come too far to concede defeat, and we as a government will fight with them. The Beattie government will continue to work to provide equality for Queensland workers and in particular women workers. We want women to continue to enjoy the benefits of a booming economy, and we want women to have the same opportunities in the workplace as men. We have to look after the have-nots—those young women who are unskilled, who fall pregnant early or who have missed out on opportunities other women take for granted. These women do not have the same choices as their sisters. They are the ones in casual employment, and they are the ones who are most affected by WorkChoices and this uncaring federal coalition government.

Every day I am encouraged by the smart women I meet. Only this morning, I was joined by my parliamentary secretary, the member for Whitsunday, Jan Jarratt, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education and Training and Minister for the Arts, the member for Aspley, Bonny Barry, at a breakfast celebrating International Women's Day held by the Queensland Resources Council. We delighted in the awards that these women in engineering received. They are pioneers and they are very successful in their chosen field. The Beattie government has developed a range of strategies to encourage women to consider careers in non-traditional industries—industries such as mining, construction, science, engineering and IT. We want them to have a broader choice of careers than their mothers and grandmothers did before them.

I am very pleased that the Smart Women-Smart State action plan will increase education, training and employment opportunities for women in science, engineering and technology industries. Women make up 50 per cent of the Queensland population yet constitute only 34 per cent of the SET workforce. In 2005, remarkably just seven per cent of engineers and 36 per cent of natural and physical scientists were women, so obviously we have a long way to go. For far too long, the brilliance of Queensland women and girls in these fields has been underestimated and underrepresented, and this action plan maps out how we can change this over the next three years. We will do this by raising awareness of SET careers and industries among women, encouraging partnerships and helping women to move between education, training and employment. But the plan is more than this. The plan is also about encouraging and supporting women to move into senior positions of leadership.

The other issue I am very excited about is the Beattie government's industry challenge initiative, which offers cash incentives for businesses to help women balance their work and life. We know women are working harder and longer hours and we know it is tough for women who have children, and certainly members of parliament here who have young children understand that. Businesses and community organisations will be challenged to develop models, implement pilot programs or establish resources that enable employees to work flexibly, improve their skills or develop leadership abilities.

To tackle the Queensland skills shortage head-on, we need to look at some of the reasons women are not entering or staying in the workforce and make some practical long-term changes. Strategies that help women balance their work and family will increase the productivity of Queensland businesses, lower the cost of staff turnover and let them develop a competitive edge as business operators which retain highly skilled staff.

But there is more. The Women in Hard Hats initiative is designed to encourage women to consider careers in non-traditional occupations and help address skills shortages in mining, construction, science, engineering and technology areas. We want hard hat careers to be seen as a viable option for Queensland girls and women. Today at the breakfast we were told that Queensland really does lead the nation in the Women in Hard Hats strategies. We were told that we should be sharing this with other states because Queensland can be very proud of the strong initiatives and the implementation of this strategy.

The Women on Boards strategy is part of the Beattie government's commitment to having more women in leadership roles. This strategy will actively recruit women and build their skills so they are board ready. It requires government departments to demonstrate a balanced gender mix on government boards. I am leading the way with my Tourism Queensland board, where I am pleased to announce that I will be filling two vacancies with women, thus doubling their representation on the Tourism Queensland board.

Another area we are working on is industrial relations seminars. Under WorkChoices, women need to be far more educated about their rights. They also need to be educated about how to negotiate AWAs in the workplace. It is very challenging for a young woman to come into a job and have to negotiate with elderly managers, and these seminars will certainly help women to upgrade their skills.

We also have the Smart Women-Smart State awards which each year attract more and more women. These are tremendously important awards to highlight the incredible women in Queensland. There are a range of resources that the Office for Women has provided with the help of the Queensland Working Women's Service for International Women's Day. I encourage members to access the OFW web site at www.women.qld.gov.au.

I thank all members of parliament who will be supporting this very important motion. I want to return to the theme of International Women's Day and remind every member of this House and all Queenslanders that there is one way that we can protect the hard-won conditions of our women and that is by voting for a Kevin Rudd-led Labor federal government later this year.