



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Thursday, 8 March 2007

MOTION: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (11.44 am): I move the following amendment—

That all words after 'House' be deleted and the following inserted—

- Recognises International Women's Day on 8 March, and notes that the Queensland Government is celebrating International Women's Day; and
- Honours the contribution and achievements of all women in Queensland.

I must say at the outset how bitterly disappointed and how appalled I am that the government has framed this motion to score cheap political points on such an important day as International Women's Day. International Women's Day is not the day to conduct a political stunt. Women are far more important than setting up a political stunt such as this. The government is doing this by framing this motion. This day has enormous history and significance. I am personally offended that the government has chosen to hijack the intent of today to run its industrial campaign. It is nothing more than that. It is using women. Women all over Queensland should stand up and take note of this demonstration of the Beattie government's respect for them. The government is treating Queensland women like pawns in its political game in an attempt to score points in its industrial campaign. It is an insult to all women.

I would also like to point out something else in this motion. This motion focuses on working women. Excuse me, but where are all those wonderful young women who are at school? Where are all those wonderful young women who are studying at university? Where are all those even more wonderful women who have chosen to stay home to look after their families? They are privileged because they are able to stay home. Where are all those even more wonderful women who are retired from the workforce and who are helping to look after their families and helping so much in our communities? I take offence at the intent of motion which is those people in the workforce.

I would now like to talk about what International Women's Day is really about. The very first International Women's Day was held on 19 March 1911 in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Denmark. More than one million men and women turned up at rallies to demand that, among other things, women were given the right to paid work, to vote and to hold public office, which they now have. We are now honouring women.

In Germany at the time the Russian revolutionary and feminist Alexandra Kollontai wrote that there was one seething, trembling sea of women. The first Australian recognition of the day was a rally held in the Sydney Domain on 25 March 1928. It called for an eight-hour day for shop girls, no piecework, a basic wage for the unemployed, annual holidays on full pay and equal pay for equal work.

Today International Women's Day is celebrated in 38 countries. It acknowledges women right across the world and in all areas and spheres. In some places it is even recognised as a public holiday. International Women's Day is to me a celebration of the contributions that women make in every aspect of life, be it in the home, be it on the job or be it in their communities.

For many of us it is a time of reflection and a time to remember the great achievements of women who shaped this country and paved the way for us. Undoubtedly, the greatest breakthrough for Western

women was achieved with the right to vote. In 1903 this right was exercised in Australia federally for the first time. The right to a state vote took a little longer.

The Queensland Women's Electoral League was formed in 1903. It campaigned rigorously for women's suffrage. In 1904, after another bill was defeated in the Legislative Council, the Queensland suffragettes called a public protest meeting at Centennial Hall in Adelaide Street. It was not until January 1905, in the middle of a heatwave, that Queensland women finally won the right to vote. A special sitting was called and the Elections Act Amendment Bill brought an end to repeated blocking of attempts to get women's suffrage through parliament and to abolish the plural vote. Women were there to watch the passing and the Premier invited them to a tea party afterwards.

The historical right to vote in a state election was first exercised in 1907. The first woman to be elected to parliament in Queensland was, as we all know, Irene Longman and she was also the first woman to stand for election. I want to talk a bit about Irene Longman. She was a member of the Country and Progressive National Party and served her electorate of Bulimba from 1929 to 1932. She was a member of the Queensland Women's Electoral League and she was an activist in many women's organisations. The courage and self-belief required to win the seat of Bulimba in 1929 from the sitting Labor member AW Wright is evident in the Labor member's response when asked how the election was going. He replied with a self-satisfied grin, 'Well, you know, I'm only being opposed by a woman.' However, Irene went on to crush Wright's margin from an absolute majority of 1,029 to Labor to an absolute majority to Irene of 401.

While she was seemingly welcomed in the House, Irene was not allowed to eat with the male members in the parliamentary dining room. Instead, she was forced to eat on the veranda. More pressing than this, there were no female bathrooms in Parliament House at the time when she was elected and this situation was apparently not resolved until 34 years later. As the minister mentioned this morning, she was responsible for many things such as the admittance of women into the police force and she was also very concerned with juvenile delinquency. However, women today do not face those sorts of problems. They do not face any of those types of barriers or discriminations that have occurred in the past. It is high time that women actually realised that we are equal. This is an equal country and women do have equality. We have to look back on history and appreciate exactly where we have come from so that we can fully appreciate what women have today.

While we are talking about history, I also want to mention of course that the National Party appointed the very first female to cabinet—Yvonne Chapman, who served the electorate of Pine Rivers and was appointed the Minister for Welfare Services, Youth and Ethnic Affairs in 1986. The state government to its credit recently published a book profiling 21 inspiring Queensland women of the past to celebrate the anniversary of the vote for women. Featured in this book are some wonderful women that we can look back on such as Diamantina Bowen, Lillian Cooper and Ruth Fairfax from the Queensland Country Women's Association. Another particular one is Ruth Don, who was the President of the Queensland Teachers Union. Ruth Don was a remarkable woman. She was the founder of the Australian Women's Forum Club which opened in 1946 to develop the confidence of women. It has been a remarkable organisation right across Queensland for many years, and it is still in existence today.

I worked closely with Ruth Don on many projects and want to commend her for her foresight in forming this organisation. If we looked across the number of women who are in public life today, we would see that a very large proportion of them were members of the Australian Women's Forum Club, which, I have to say, I was a member of since 1986, although I am not anymore because I do not have time to go to the meetings. It is a magnificent organisation and it really does develop the confidence of women.

We do have much to celebrate in 2007, although perhaps in many areas across the professions women are still not represented equally at the top of their chosen professions. Are as many women applying for those positions? We see the numbers and the figures, but are women applying for those positions? Do women want those positions? I also take offence when I am told that a woman has been put especially in a position to make sure that there is a woman in that position. That is an insult to women. But today is about celebrating the achievements of the wonderful women of the past and also celebrating those wonderful women today. My passion is seeing young people achieve their full potential—

Time expired.