



**Senator the Hon Helen Coonan
Minister for Communications,
Information Technology
& the Arts**

**Deputy Leader of the Government
in the Senate**

Liberal Women of Cabinet dinner

**Canberra
12 October 2006**

Prime Minister, Mrs Howard, to my Ministerial and Parliamentary colleagues to the Federal Director of the Liberal Party Brian Loughnane and his deputy Linda Reynolds and to Danielle Blain – the State President of the Liberal Party in Western Australia and Pat Thompson the Tasmanian Liberal Party's Women's President - welcome.

I regret that the Federal President of the Liberal Party – Chris McDiven – is overseas and unable to be here.

Also to Lady Sonia McMahon, wife of the former Prime Minister William McMahon.

And finally to the Liberal women guests of honour tonight who have shared the enormous privilege and the pleasure of serving in Federal Cabinet – welcome and good evening.

We are here this evening to celebrate the contribution of a small but significant number of Liberal women who have been members of Federal Cabinet.

But tonight is also about the many Liberal women who contribute in Parliament more broadly and contribute to the success and sustainability of the Liberal Party.

And I can truly say that it is not only in the Cabinet room and in the corridors of Parliament House that Liberal women are making a difference.

10 is a magic number for the Liberal Party in 2006. The idea of celebrating the role and achievements of Liberal women coincides with two other significant milestones.

Earlier this year we marked the Prime Minister's tenth year in the job and the Government's tenth year in power.

And so tonight we mark another milestone – that of 10 women in Cabinet.

As I said, the number is small but significant in the history of Australian politics.

What is even more significant is that seven of those 10 women have come from the Liberal Party and that five of those seven women were appointed under the leadership of Prime Minister John Howard and without the aid of a quota system or affirmative action program.

I would like to think that women – no matter how critical the mass – continue to punch above their weights in many of the traditionally male-dominated sectors of industry and in Parliament too.

I am very certain that women are capable of performing well at whatever their chosen profession and politics is no cake walk.

I hope that in 2006 the main focus is on our capabilities and that we have moved beyond just scrutiny of our fashion sense.

Many women in this place – and indeed many men – continually balance the pressures of work, travel and families. Their achievements are admirable

In greater numbers, female politicians have had babies while serving in politics, and have reared young families.

In these days this can only be done with the personal, practical and financial support of their partners.

And we have seen many women face and overcome hardships such as serious illness during their political service.

As women we expect to be put under the microscope and there is a slim margin for error for anyone in this place.

But I believe that women's contribution goes beyond aesthetics, and that we have made a valuable contribution to politics, / to Parliament and to the Australian community more broadly.

I would like to think that during our service in this place we will be known as passionate advocates and fighters for what we believe in, compassionate listeners and powerful legislators but by no means do I think that any of us are shrinking violets!

We give as good as we get in question time and we roll with the punches.

We do not expect – nor should we get - any special treatment.

As Enid Lyons said in her Maiden Speech to Parliament:

“I believe, very sincerely, that any woman entering the public arena must be prepared to work as men work; she must justify herself not as a woman but as a citizen; she must attack the same problems, and be prepared to shoulder the same burdens”.

While all these sentiments are true, I do believe there is a case to briefly pause and reflect on the achievements of women and particularly those Liberal women in politics who have served in Federal Cabinet and in the Howard Ministry.

Right back in 1943 Enid Lyons was a trailblazer in so many ways.

A Prime Minister's wife, a mother of 12, a career in broadcasting and then a life in politics and her appointment as the first female member of Cabinet.

Dame Margaret Guilfoyle followed as both a Minister and member of Cabinet.

She was, until recently, the longest serving female member of Cabinet.

Margaret held an impressive range of portfolios during her time in Parliament ranging from education to finance and social security. We are privileged to have Margaret here with us tonight.

The Hon Jocelyn Newman had two very public battles with ill health during her tenure in the Ministry and Cabinet. This demonstrated the strength and fortitude of a woman and Minister who was to have such a profound effect on the welfare debate in Australia.

She was a valued mentor to me in my early days in the Senate and an example to us all.

Senator Amanda Vanstone – the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs – surpassed Margaret’s record earlier this year to become the longest serving female member of Cabinet.

Amanda is the most recognisable female member of Cabinet for her contributions in some difficult portfolios including Justice and Customs, Employment, Family and Community Services and Immigration.

Her Coopers and Kransky nights are legendary and have no doubt cemented her affable reputation around these halls.

Tonight is also a wonderful opportunity to pay tribute to Senator Kay Patterson for her contribution to Parliament and the Cabinet.

Like Jocelyn, Kay made a significant contribution as Minister for Family and Community Services as well as her service as Minister for Health and Ageing.

Kay is renowned for her empathy and concern for both the broader community and her colleagues.

She seems to have an inexhaustible supply of medicinal remedies for just about every ailment.

Julie Bishop – the Minister for Education, Science and Training and the Minister representing the Prime Minister on Women’s Issues is the tenth woman to join Federal Cabinet. I welcome Julie tonight.

Although a recent addition to Cabinet, Julie is making her mark by battling for greater recognition of Australia’s narrative history and for forging ahead with a national approach to curriculum standards.

In my role as Communications Minister I am pleased to have been able to serve in Cabinet with Kay, Amanda and Julie over the last two years - each of them has been a valued colleague and friend.

Today is an historic day for the portfolio with the passage of a large package of measures to implement the Government’s longstanding commitment to media reform.

We were not the first and are not likely to be the last, however each in her own way has made or continues to make a valuable contribution to the political process.

I am also privileged to have been appointed to the Coalition’s leadership team as the Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and to have had a turn in the big chair during Senate question time earlier this week.

As I said earlier, the contribution of women to the Party, the Parliament and Cabinet is a reason to briefly pause and celebrate.

I thank all of you for showing your support by coming this evening and I particularly thank my colleagues who are here and who have stayed in Canberra on a Thursday night to attend.

Tonight I would also like to acknowledge our husbands, wives and partners. We all know they make an enormous contribution and that we couldn't do what we do without their support.

They are often not given the plaudits they deserve for keeping us sane. Can I urge all of us to continue to hold our partner's hands.

And finally I would particularly like to thank the Prime Minister for his confidence in us and – to use a quintessentially Australian expression – his willingness to give us a fair go.

All proceeds from tonight's dinner will be donated to the Menzies Research Centre and we will be commissioning a book to document the contribution of Liberal women. I think this will be a fitting and lasting tribute and I thank you for your generosity.

The cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said:

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.'

I certainly don't doubt it. Indeed, it is likely to be the only thing that ever has changed the world. Thank you and enjoy your evening.