

**Australian Women Lawyers
15th Anniversary Dinner
17 August 2013
Grand Hyatt, Melbourne**

Distinguished guests, colleagues one and all, on behalf of the Australian Women Lawyers and as its proud Patron, let me welcome you all here tonight to celebrate 15 years of the Australian Women Lawyers.

This is a significant organisation because although there are many local legal women's bodies across Australia this is a truly national body representing the interests of women lawyers all over Australia.

What that means is that the most committed and competent women from all of the states come together to form the Board of Australian Women Lawyers. All are an example of strong competent women leading the way for other women and supportive of other women in their careers and importantly in that ever difficult quest for a work/life balance.

It is no coincidence that the first Patron of this organisation, the Hon. Mary Gaudron, was herself a strong and life long advocate

for women's role in the law to be realised: by women lawyers having equality of pay and conditions, and opportunity; women having equal opportunity at the various Bars and consistent with having a family; women being represented on the Bench of all courts and especially the higher courts in significant numbers.

Much of this has been achieved and that is something to celebrate, as we do tonight. But there is always much more to be done.

About what is yet to be done we need look no further than some of the public opprobrium given to our former Prime Minister, the Honourable Julia Gillard. I know that our guest speaker tonight has expressed views that women have always found it difficult to be in politics and had to be prepared to accept the rough and tumble and the inevitable criticism, and that which the Prime Minister suffered was no different.

I am not sure whether we would necessarily be much apart in what I am about to say. I accept much of her underlying premise that if you go into public life in that way then you have to be prepared to accept the scrutiny that comes with it and not be thin skinned. We may not differ much on that; but I do think that as women who leadership roles in our various disciplines, it is concerning to see what might be a genuinely underlying and unpleasant misogyny in at least parts of our society.

I hope sincerely that it is confined to parts only; those parts who find their natural outlet in the radio programs of the shock jocks and the more provocative journalists in the print media. No doubt the anonymity and coverage of social media encourages excesses of all kinds in large measure from cowards who would not be brave enough to make those comments publicly or face to face.

We have undoubtedly seen some of that with the former Prime Minister. We saw it again recently in what can only be said to be the absurd response on social media to the British journalist following her campaign for women's representation which was successful in getting Jane Austen to appear on the UK ten pound bank notes. This included graphic death and rape threats both to her and to a female Labour MP who supported the bank note campaign.

With respect to those who think otherwise I do not think this kind of attack would be mounted towards men by women.

However what this does indicate I think quite clearly is that we still have a long way to go before women achieve not only the equality of opportunity, but the equality of acceptance. One shouldn't have to be Boadicea to be a respected leader.

What that demonstrates to me is that, to the age old taunt, why do you need a Women Lawyers Association, I would say the answer is obvious.

On the bright side there is much to celebrate in the last 15 years. There are two female Chief Justices of superior courts, one in the Commonwealth and one in the State. There are three women on the High Court. There are many women on the Bench of courts all over Australia. There are many but not enough women who are Senior Counsel and I appreciate that we keep removing some of them for judicial appointment. The last two of three appointments to the Federal Court in Melbourne were women and yesterday I attended a welcome to Justice Melanie Sloss to the Supreme Court of Victoria.

Five new appointments to the Family Court included three women and bring the percentage of women on the Family Court Bench to 48.5%.

So women are doing better in the law but there are still difficulties particularly with work/life balance with families.

Nevertheless we should celebrate as we will tonight, how far we have come.

The Australian Women Lawyers was launched on the anniversary of the centenary of women's participation in the legal profession in Australia at the Australian Legal Convention in Melbourne on 19 September 1997. The report appearing in the publication *Brief*, the publication of the Western Australian Law Society, records that the occasion was marked by a launch at the Grand Hyatt Melbourne and attended by approximately 700 guests and delegates to the Australian Legal Convention and "represented the culmination of several years work by a dedicated group of women throughout the country".

Justice Mary Gaudron, the Patron of AWL officially launched the organisation with a challenging, insightful speech drawn from her observations as a lone woman at the peak of the legal profession. She said "I welcome the formation of the Australia Women Lawyers because it seems to me that it is the acknowledgement by women lawyers...that they are different and an assertion of their right to be so. I welcome it because it seems to me to have implicit in it a demand that the legal profession take stock of itself and of those practices which have resulted in the under representation of women in the important areas of legal practice and the judiciary, not because women should have a larger share of the spoils of legal practice but because they have to the potential to improve law and the administration of justice."

I think if Mary were here now she would broaden that to say that we need to affirm the right of women to hold senior positions in our society as the norm, not as an aberration.

Glancing through my old copies of *Brief*, the publication of the Law Society of Western Australia, I observed unexpectedly a short note in a 1982 edition attributed to me. It said the following “At a meeting of women lawyers on 26 May 1982 it was resolved to form an association called Women Lawyers of Western Australia, the officers of the association are: President Vivian Payne, Vice-President Toni Kennedy, Secretary Diana Bryant, Treasurer Anne Payne. Committee members: Christine Wheeler, Rhonda Griffiths, Kim Rooney, Rebecca Vidler.” The association hopes to make recommendations and work for the reform of the law and its administration, particularly as it pertains to women to work for the removal of discrimination against women on the ground of their sex and generally to promote the interests of women both in the legal profession and outside it.”

My initial excitement however was short lived as I turned the page to read a spirited response by Chris Wheeler to the Editor which commenced, “An article in the April edition of *Brief* was critical of the proposed establishment of an association for women lawyers in WA....”.

I am pleased to note it is still flourishing.

It is fitting that I should conclude by reading to you what our first Patron Mary Gaudron would like to say because she was unable to attend tonight.

[Read notes from Mary Gaudron]

Let us stand and charge our glasses and do exactly as Mary has exhorted us to do - drink a toast to Australian Women Lawyers.

Chief Justice Diana Bryant AO QC