

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW with Tanya Plibersek, Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women. Interviewed by phone by SNV editor, Anne Summers, 7 July, 2008**

*Anne Summers: How are you enjoying the job.*

Tanya Plibersek: It's fabulous. This will be my 10<sup>th</sup> year in the parliament and all of that time in Opposition, so just having the opportunity to do some things that we want to do is just great

*AS: Yeah fantastic. I got sent a questionnaire the other day from the Office of Women about the website. So I was very pleased to see that something is going to happen there because it's a shocking website.*

TP: We've got heaps to do. The challenge is prioritising. I just want to do everything at once. We'll cope with that. That's a good problem to have.

*AS: Can you explain in a few sentences how it is that your approach to women's policy differs from that of the Howard government?*

TP: For a start, I think you could say our approach is a harder, evidence-based approach. We're looking at the evidence of what women themselves see as continuing issues for them, and also what the statistics about men and women in Australia tell us continue to be issues and we are basing our policies and our responses on that evidence. I want the Office for Women to be a much harder-edged policy driver than it has been in recent years so that it engages at a very high level with other departments like Employment and Education, Health, Human Services, all of those areas. That means having people employed within the Office of Women who have a great deal of policy expertise, and giving them the power and the authority to work at that very high level with other agencies.

*AS: Did you consider changing back the name of the office? You are the Minister for the Status of Women, not just Women.*

TP: Well it was put to me that we could call it the Office of the Status of Women and I didn't really spend too much time thinking about changing the name because nobody has made a case to me that it would make that great a difference to what the office does or is able to do. And every time you change the name of the organization you go through a whole period of re-branding and re-branding. It's expensive and time-consuming.

*AS: In terms of the differences between you and the previous government, do you bring to the position assumptions about what women's role is or should be?*

TP: Well I suppose if that's a way of asking me if I'm a feminist the answer is Yes! What that means for me is that all Australian women have maximum choice in their lives and choice in opportunity, so we've prioritised the two areas of economic security and independence, and violence against women for the first years. These are ones that I think sit very well with that idea that women deserve to have the maximum range of options in their lives and maximum range of freedom to pursue what they want to do in their lives. I think that the paid maternity leave debate is a really interesting example of that because it is a debate about women's economic security and independence and also a debate about the importance and legitimacy of being able to care for their young babies in a way that's good for young babies and good for mothers.

*AS: I guess that's partly what I was thinking of. The previous government's policy settings were all predicated on the notion that it was preferable for mothers to stay at home.*

TP: Well I don't think that's right, but I think that women absolutely have the right to make those decisions for themselves. For some women the choice is to prioritize the career for however long. For some women their preference is to stay at home particularly with their young children. I don't see that as my role or the government's role to give preference to either of those options but to facilitate maximum choice and I think to do that in a way is to quite properly separate your own notions about what you want in your own life from the role of government.

The role of government is not to make those choices for people but to give people maximum options. I don't think you have really two options. If for example you're talking to someone about going back to work in a job that doesn't pay particularly well or where conditions are very family unfriendly or you know where the extra hours at work don't end up contributing particularly to the family income because you spend so much on childcare that it's almost a zero-sum game. I don't think that is true choice, so I think that there is a role for government in picking up some of those areas where, left to our own devices, families struggle a bit, or women struggle a bit to make choices that are genuinely good for them. But I certainly don't have a preference for women to be at home.

*AS: And you wouldn't agree that policies should direct them in that way?*

TP: I don't think policies should direct people to make those choices but I think that what we do in a policy sense can give greater freedom and make things easier for people and that would be my aim. I would see it as an important thing, for example, for us to be concentrating still - for the third or fourth decade in a row - on encouraging young women to think about career options in non-traditional areas, non-traditional trades, where they've got the potential for greater life-long earnings and consequently greater retirement savings. We still have the role of government to facilitate those types of choices but we don't set up policy to direct that sort of thing.

*AS: You mention that the two priority areas for the first year are women's economic security and violence. How did you come to choose those two areas?*

TP: As a shadow minister I held formal consultations and had an enormous number of conversations and letters and emails as a shadow minister. In formal consultations, they're the issues that come up broadly again and again and they're both areas that I think personally are very important. I've got a background in the area of domestic violence [she worked for the Domestic Violence Unit in the NSW Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women] so I've seen first hand not only the impact of domestic violence on society but also the potential for change and improvement.

As a result of that, I am aware of the impact that sexual assault and domestic violence have on the community, but also that there are actually things we can do that we're not doing. It seemed to me to be an area that governments are frightened of in a way because the problems seem too large and we're used to imagining that we can only have limited impact on something that has been so prevalent in our society for such a long time that I actually don't necessarily agree with that. I think that with the right policy we can reduce rates of violence over time. We can certainly improve our responses in the short term.

*AS: Why has the office of childcare moved from the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACSLA) to Employment and also part of it has gone to Prime Minister and Cabinet. I just wonder what significance that has for policy that it's moved out of your area.*

TP: Because it's now early childhood education. I think it really signifies the change in our attitude to what childcare is and does. There has been, you'll be very aware, an enormous body of work about how important investment in the early years is and the Prime Minister is really focused on it being an educational opportunity from a very young age. I think that that's essentially the reason it's moved is so that there's a better continuum between childcare and school years and in fact I think that's a very good signal.

*AS: There's been another move and that's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) which has moved from Employment to your area. I can understand why you'd want to have control of that agency but I'm just wondering what that means, whether or not you still see it as an employment-related body or do you see a new role for EOWA?*

TP: Oh definitely it's still an employment-related body. It's done some great work and terrific research that partners well with lots of businesses. I have asked them and the Office of Women to work more closely together on the issue of the gender pay gap, particularly as it affects lower-paid workers as well. EOWA has done some great research, I think quite incredible research, for example on the gender pay gap in the ASX top 200 companies, especially in the top jobs, and it's true it's very important for them to be doing all of that. But I wanted them to be working a little bit more closely with the Office of Women on strategies to reduce the gender pay gap on the other end of the employment market as well and the two agencies working together is going to be a good thing.

*AS: Do you see any other sorts of change for EOWA?*

TP: I know that there's still a great deal of work that's happening in other parts of government as well. If you look in the agriculture section, for example, we've been working very closely with Tony Burke on small rural and regional businesses, particularly in drought-affected areas. There's a lot of these that are run by women to supplement their farming income and I'm using the expertise in the Office for Women and what we can learn from EOWA to work in that area as well.

*AS: The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee are reviewing the Sex Discrimination Act. Do you have any plans to review the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act (1999) that EOWA administers?*

TP: There's no plan to do it at the moment, but I have asked Anna McPhee, the director, to advise me on all sorts of areas where I'd like to see further work done.

*AS: Moving on to the area of women in business, are you aware of any issues under your jurisdiction that are significant for women in business, especially in the private sector? Is there anything you can do, for instance, to encourage a greater representation of women in the management and leadership of Australia's companies?*

TP: I'm having a look at whether the AppointWomen program, which has an online website, has been effective yet. I think we need to do a lot more work in the women in leadership area. We've got that AppointWomen website, we've got new leadership grants, we're working, as I said, with the Department of Agriculture and a number of other departments on putting women on to their boards and increasing opportunities for women in their areas of responsibility. I'm working with my ministerial colleagues to make sure that they're pulling their weight. But I think that there is an enormous number of things that we could be doing.

We've just had the APEC Forum in Peru recently and there were a number of Australian women involved with the gender group associated with that. We've sent more women to work on business opportunities between Australian women, particularly in small- to medium-sized business and linking them into export opportunities in Asia. We've had a rural and

regional women's summit in Canberra. One of the main purposes of that was to build economic capacity in rural and regional areas, particularly in drought-affected rural and regional areas. There's a lot that we're doing along the way, but there's an enormous amount still to do. I think things like the research done by EOWA on the gender pay gap in the ASX top 200 companies, having that sort of evidence base for it is incredibly important and makes the case very strongly. But there's still a great deal of need in the area.

*AS: Well there's not just the pay gap it's also the lack of people, the lack of women there, so I think under the previous government there was a reluctance for the government to have any kind of role, even a kind of a commenting role on these things and perhaps under this government that might change a bit?*

TP: We're not shy about that...

*AS: Leadership from government can be very powerful...*

TP: ...and we've tightened up the eligibility criteria for the EOWA Employer of Choice for Women Awards. That's coming for the first time this year. That was in the pipeline before we took over, to be fair to them. But we've had some people complaining that they didn't like the tighter criteria. [Laughs.]

*AS: You recently announced the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children. What are you hoping this council can achieve? Are you confident it can break away from the old paradigm, that seemed to me under the previous government, they threw a huge amount of money at this issue but not very much came out of it except public education via television commercials and a lot of research, but not much actually changed. Are you confident you can change that? You said you were. I'm interested in how you might do that.*

TP: Yes. I don't want to over-egg the pudding, but I do believe that in a logical evidence-based plan that has solutions that are also evidence based. We know a lot about what works, but we don't always spread that around. We don't do what works all the time. We've got people on the Council who are incredibly experienced in this area and what I've asked them to do is develop a national plan by the end of the year. I'm confident that they're going to have a good plan that will allocate between levels of government and between the non-government sector as well and we'll have a role for the broader community. The plan will be based on what works.

*AS: It's not just a plan for the federal government...*

TP: No, this is something where we'll expect other levels of government to sign on as well and we'll expect, I mean there are a lot of organisations that work in this area and we would hope that they would be able to play a role as well. The early example of that obviously is the partnership that we've got with the White Ribbon Day Foundation. We've given them a million dollars over four years to expand their activities to out of the capital cities, where they've been pretty much based until now, and get their white ribbon ambassadors into more schools to talk to more young men about their behaviour.

So, yes, I'm confident that we can make a difference over time but it's a huge social problem and I don't pretend that overnight we're going to fix this. It's going to take a generation of work to really bring down the rates, but we've done that with smoking. I don't want to be flippant in making the comparison, but that sort of public health based approach... maybe the better example is drink driving. You tell people why it's a bad idea, you work with them to change their behaviour. If they continue to behave in the wrong way then you throw the book at them. That approach to domestic violence, if you talk to them about why it's a bad idea,

you set up legal structures to make it less likely and if people transgress, you throw the book at them. I think that's an effective approach but it doesn't happen overnight.

*AS: Elizabeth Broderick, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, has reported that had been absolutely shattered by the feedback she was getting about violence during her recent Listening Tour of Australia. And obviously your own soundings would say the same thing.*

TP: I was just talking to her the other day and we're going to work very closely together because we've got very similar things on the agenda. It is stunning.

Kevin Rudd came to the first meeting of the National Council and the Council were quite gob smacked by what he said. He is absolutely committed to doing something in this area. He says give me an evidence-based plan. Tell me what's going to work and we'll work with you to do that. He's not shy about that. He's not shy about the idea behind the White Ribbon Day campaign, for example, that men have to show leadership in stopping men's violence, that there's been a sort of unspoken thing for years now that we don't allocate responsibility.

*AS: Exactly. Or we make excuses for perpetrators. Just finally, Tanya, you're also the minister for housing, so I wonder if you see a chance for any synergies between the housing work and the needs of women and children who become homeless as a result of domestic violence.*

TP: Clearly there are. I'm expecting in August some research that I commissioned late last year on the relationship between domestic violence and homelessness. I know that it's a complex relationship but we need to drill down a little deeper into that. One of the jobs that I asked the Council to do very early on was to look at promoting more broadly, nationally, the safe-at-home programs of various types that exist. Tasmania's got one. Victoria's going down this route. We've got them in a few locations in New South Wales where you try and support the victims of domestic violence and children to remain safely in the family's home and move the perpetrators out. We're looking at ways of popularising that approach.

We know that the majority of people who approach supported accommodation assistance program services are women and kids escaping domestic violence so if we bring down the rates of violence we also improve the situation, not just individually for those people but we reduce the numbers who are having to approach homelessness services. I think the effect of domestic violence on kids is an issue that we haven't tackled in any serious way. Our kids who are going to homelessness services with their mothers are really disconnecting largely from school and from their peer group. That's another issue of enormous concern, because it increases the likelihood that women either won't leave violent relationships or increases the likelihood that they'll return. There's a lot of work that we're doing in this area, both through the White Paper process and also from the women's perspective.

*AS: Which White Paper is that?*

TP: the Homelessness White Paper that we're doing. We're looking to acknowledge different sorts of homelessness. Homelessness occurs for a whole variety of reasons and the approach you take to addressing it has to be targeted to the specific needs of the client groups that you're looking at. One of the largest client groups is women and kids leaving homes because of domestic violence. The way we respond to their needs making sure that either, where we can, people stay safely at home so we reduce the number of people becoming homelessness. First we try and turn off the tap but when people aren't able to stay safely at home and they do that on emergency accommodation that we meet their individual support needs as quickly as we can. In a lot of cases families prefer independent living accommodation rather than share houses when there's kids involved because there's all sorts of tension at meal times etc so we look at the actual form of the support that we're

giving them. We look at the needs of kids as well, connecting them as quickly as possible back into school and sporting activities and other things that normalise life because that takes a lot of pressure off Mum so she can concentrate on the other things she needs to put her life into order. There's a lot of work to be done but I think we're in a really exciting period with the homelessness Green Paper and White Paper process giving us an opportunity to change really quite substantially the way that we work with families who have become homeless, you know Mum and kids who've become homeless to give them security and end their homelessness as quickly as possible.

*AS: Is there anything else that I haven't covered that you would like to add?*

TP: No. I mean I can talk all day, but I don't think that would help. [Laughs]