

The Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, writes exclusively for SNV on her recent national “Listening Tour” of Australia and her expectations of how the change of government will impact on her fight against discrimination and violence.

I am now half way through my national Listening Tour, having been to NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT, and I will be visiting WA, NT and Qld shortly. The issue of gender equality is certainly registering with the Australian community and I am confident that the issue is resonating with policymakers in Canberra as well.

Since November last year my team and I have been making our way around the country meeting with business, community and employee groups and holding public consultations; from focus groups with members of Asian Women at work, meetings with State Office's for women, to visiting an abattoir in Murray Bridge, we've been there Listening. I've been overwhelmed by the variety and depth of responses from all sectors of the community but the issues that really stand out have been Paid Maternity Leave, lack of retirement savings for women, Sexual Harassment and violence against women. The need for quality, accessible and affordable childcare is a real priority issue for Australians and not just women. Likewise, sexual harassment continues to be a real issue affecting women's economic independence in the workplace, causing them to stop, move jobs and have interrupted careers. The prevalence of this issue has surprised me and I sometimes wonder how far we've come. As we know, sexual harassment and violence against women are not topics that are often spoken about and I have learnt a lot from my Listening Tour by hearing the personal stories from women who have been affected by harassment and violence.

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The issue of workplace flexibility is always a hotly discussed topic. We still seem to be at a stage where flexibility is seen as a concession employers make to respond to individuals. The challenge is to progress thinking so that flexible work is seen as an equal alternative to the traditional model of work.

The working population is ageing and mature-age workers (particularly women) are taking on additional caring responsibilities. From a business perspective, the impending skills shortage means that we need to look at ways to attract and retain experienced staff.

I recently met with the Federal Attorney-General and had some very constructive discussions around our work in the sex and age discrimination areas. There are a lot of important issues surrounding pay equity and workplace relations reform that are currently on the political agenda. HREOC has welcomed the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Paid Maternity Leave and I expect there will be a lot more discussion on these and other important issues over the coming months, particularly around the right to request flexible work arrangements under the proposed new federal workplace relations legislation. A number of HREOC's *It's about Time* recommendations were reflected in ALP policies in the lead up to the 2007 Election and I am looking forward to having ongoing discussions with the Government on ways to promote greater gender equality,

achieve real economic benefits through workplace flexibility and create a society that is free from discrimination, harassment and violence.

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The ALP's National Platform stated that Federal Labor would strengthen and improve the Sex Discrimination Act and the powers of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner (SDC) to protect women against discrimination on the basis of gender and family and carer's responsibilities. The current legislation was introduced in 1984 and since then there have been major changes in demography including greater female participation rates. HREOC welcomes the government's commitment to revisit the legislation. In particular, HREOC is keen to improve national legislative protection from discrimination on the grounds of family and caring responsibilities.

I welcomed the record number of women in leadership positions in the new Federal Government in both Cabinet and the outer ministry. We now have a female Deputy Prime Minister as well as a female Deputy Opposition Leader and the youngest federal minister ever to be appointed, Ms Kate Ellis, is also a woman. As I said during the unveiling of the Rudd Government ministry last December, increasing women in leadership positions in government, business and across Australian society on the basis of merit, not age or gender, is vital to addressing the gender inequalities that remain. I am particularly keen that we ensure that the issues of gender equality feature prominently at the upcoming national summit on Australia's future. It's important that we don't ignore some of the harsh realities such as the continuing level of violence against women and the challenges faced by the most disadvantaged in our society, many of whom are women.

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With this the rapid ageing of the population, we really need to think about the institutional assumptions that govern our approach to retirement savings and superannuation. As Commissioner responsible for Age Discrimination, (and I was confronted when I read the definition of mature worker as 45 years and over - that's me!), I have a particular role in looking at ways to redefine how we think about our own age and our perceptions on remaining in the paid workforce and the 'transition to retirement'. We also need to revisit the negative stereotypes that serve as barriers to mature-age employment. In this regard, I read with interest that technology plays a significant role in the lifestyle of mature age Australians, with 75% of those aged 45-54 years and 60% of those aged 55-64 years, using a computer at home. The data shows us that mature age Australians are still active participants in the workforce, but at the same time, grandparents are the main source of informal childcare, providing care for 60% of children receiving informal care. It's clear that the issues around balancing work and family responsibilities continue to be important as we get older and I see this as a very important aspect of my work during my five year term as Commissioner.