



THE HON MILTON DICK MP

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH: INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION, KIGALI, RWANDA

GENERAL DEBATE

***Topic: Gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments as drivers of change
for a more resilient and peaceful world***

Mr President, fellow delegates.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this fundamental issue, on behalf of the Australian Parliament.

I agree gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments drive change, such as better decision-making and policies. We know this leads to resilient countries - and ultimately - a resilient world.

As we strive towards gender parity in our parliaments, we must make changes to ensure the appropriate mechanisms support the wellbeing of our parliamentarians.

In June 1902, more than 120 years ago, most Australian women achieved suffrage. We were the first nation in the world to grant women the right to stand for election, and the second nation to grant women the right to vote.

Women have been represented in the Australian Parliament since 1943. Since then, the number of women elected to the House of Representatives and the Senate has continued to rise. This year, we saw a record number of women elected to the Australian Parliament. Now, 45 per cent of all Members of Parliament are women.

Similarly, the percentage of women holding ministerial offices in the Australian Parliament has increased, where nearly half are women. And this year, our first female of Islamic faith and first female First Nations person were appointed to serve as cabinet ministers.

These statistics and recent appointments are significant events within the Australian Parliament. It demonstrates the growing trend of increasing diversity amongst our parliamentarians.

With this trend towards gender equality in parliaments, we must ensure the appropriate changes are occurring in our workplaces to ensure they become and remain gender-sensitive.

A gender-sensitive parliament provides support and mechanisms to enable equal participation for all people.

Our parliaments have traditionally been set up for a male-dominated workforce, with features of long hours, lack of support for caregiving arrangements and codes of conduct that do not consider power imbalances or diversity and inclusion.

Over a year ago, there was significant media attention around the work culture and environment of the Australian Parliament House. This media attention highlighted the substantial changes needed to make the parliamentary workplace, a safer and more supportive environment.

Across the country, women and their supporters marched against gendered violence and gender discrimination in the workplace.

This was our opportunity to evaluate our workplace and how we should be adapting to the changing workforce in Parliament.

We have an obligation – as the Australian Parliament and a workplace – to ensure our working environment is respectful and allows parliamentarians, and those who support them, to perform at their best, on behalf of the nation.

Changes must be made at all levels, with legislation, policy, and practical measures.

The Australian Parliament commissioned an independent review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces. This independent review made recommendations to ensure Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces are safe and respectful, and that the nation's Parliament reflects best practice in the prevention and handling of bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

The report made recommendations focusing on five key areas:

- leadership
- diversity, equality, and inclusion
- systems to support performance
- standards of behaviour, reporting obligations and accountability mechanisms, and
- safety and wellbeing.

All recommendations were agreed to, and the responsibility for their implementation is shared across the parliamentary leadership, government, political parties, Presiding Officers, parliamentary departments, and a Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Standards.

With bipartisan support, the Australian Parliament has already made several changes to its workplace this year.

A Joint Statement of Acknowledgment was delivered by the Presiding Officers to both Houses of Parliament in February. The statement has set the tone for the Australian Parliament to commit itself to the highest standards of conduct, respect, and inclusion.

Both Houses have made changes to the sitting calendar and order of business to provide greater balance and flexibility, being more responsive to the needs to balance work and family responsibilities.

Some of the changes include scheduling parliamentary sittings outside school holidays, and procedures to reduce late night sittings.

A parliamentary committee is currently investigating how to improve safety and respect, by reviewing sexist or otherwise exclusionary and discriminatory language, in the practices and procedures of the House of Representative.

We recognise that these reforms are just the start in ensuring the Australian Parliament is responsive to the growing trend of women. Particularly in these times of change, we must continue reforming our systems and mechanisms to ensure we are responding to the needs and interests of all our Parliamentarians regardless of their gender.

This is the expectation of all Australians, and it is a shared responsibility for all people to drive the change.

As Speaker of the Australian House of Representatives, it is my honour and my privilege to oversee the Australian Parliament as it undertakes these changes for the benefit of its country and citizens.

Thank you.