

‘State of Progress of Women and Girls’

Since the February Assembly sitting period - a mere 6 weeks ago – a seismic shift has occurred in Australia. When Brittany Higgins disclosed on national television that she was allegedly raped at Parliament House, the nation went into free-fall. Allegation after allegation of rape, sexual harassment, unprofessional behaviour to say the least, exposed an entrenched culture of misogyny in Parliament House. Further to this, Chanel Contos started an online petition in NSW that went viral with hundreds of young people, school children disclosing sexual assault stemming from a sexist culture entrenched in Sydney’s elite private schools. News reports daily, feature disclosures of sexual assault and harassment in our parliaments, institutions and work-places. The media in particular female journalists in this country should be commended for their reporting of these stories, relentlessly perusing the truth and holding those in powerful leadership positions accountable.

Two weeks ago, tens of thousands of women and men Marched for Justice at Parliament house here in Canberra and around the country. Crying Enough is Enough – the voices of women marginalised, women powerless, including the voice of a woman from the grave - were held up – were heard, were believed.. As a nation, we can’t wait while the men in the Federal Liberal party go on behaviour, and empathy courses, or instate Prime Ministers for women - we can’t wait while women are being abused and assaulted every single day – in their homes and their workplaces and in their communities.

Sexual assaults can occur in two contexts – one where the perpetrator is not known to the victim, and secondly, it can occur at the hands of men who are known to the victim, who are trusted, respected - either way, these perpetrators saw themselves in a

position of power over us – where consent did not matter, where we were not equal.

And you know what, women are not equal to men in this country. Australia ranked 44 on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2020, calculated by the World Economic Forum. We are behind the Nordic countries, behind New Zealand, Mexico, the Philippines and Serbia, we are just ahead of Zimbabwe and the United States. Four sub-indexes are used to determine the overall Gender gap score. Australia does very well on gender parity in educational attainment, however, after we leave the education system – everything goes downhill. The three other indexes – Economic participation and opportunity, health, and political empowerment – Australia is well down the list.

In 2006, Australia was 15th on the Global Gender Gap Index. In 15 years – we have gone significantly backwards. The fact that we have gone backwards on these global scales, and the fact that rates of family violence, sexual assault and harassment has all increased, is no coincidence.

In all my work with constituents on the ground, the message that is coming through very strongly is the ground has shifted– views from men and women, has been unanimous. Enough is enough.

I am proud to be part of this Assembly that is over 50% female and that has established a Women's Caucus. I am proud to be part of the ACT Government that will work to reform the process of support for victims of sexual assault. I am proud that we have an ACT Minister for Women, Yvette Berry, who has a voice – and is using it.

As Grace Tame said – we can't fix a problem we don't discuss. Despite how hard the conversations over the past few weeks have been, I strongly encourage the community to keep talking about this.

Keep talking about our culture, our values

Keep talking our expectations of behaviour

Keep talking about consent.

I want to commend every person in our community who has created a safe space, a safe conversation, a safe interaction - for someone to disclose their story or their pain. You are a major part of the solution.

To victims of sexual assault in the ACT, I will be a strong advocate for you. You do not have to carry the weight of the secrets, the burden alone.

To the community more broadly, be brave – support each other to have these hard conversations. If we could talk about sexual assault the way we do about other crimes, openly and with respect for the victims, we will move mountains. Perpetrators of this violence, thrive in the silence. That is why it is all of our responsibility to end the silence.