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Challenges for women leaders

One of the challenges of women's leadership I would like to address is that New Zealand has a particular challenge, which is the perception that we no longer have any challenges. For a magical moment in history, women held all the top constitutional positions in New Zealand—Prime Minister, Governor General, Chief Justice and Speaker of the House of Representatives. At the same time, our largest listed company had a woman at the helm.

That magical moment has passed—we no longer have a woman Governor General, but it is still common to hear people talking about women running the country as if there is no challenge left for New Zealand and as if we do not face any barriers as women in achieving positions of leadership.

I believe there are challenges still. I am quoting someone else when I use the expression 'we may have broken through the glass ceiling but the floor remains very sticky'. Although women do very well in New Zealand and the opportunities are so much better than in other economies, it would be too easy to overstate the case and perhaps lose some of the gains we have made over the years.

One of our greatest challenges is to ensure the next generation does not take hard-won gains for granted and thereby take their eye off the ball and risk losing some of those gains.

I thought I would quickly compare Parliamentary figures, which look very promising. Thirty-three per cent of our Parliamentarians are women and 25 per cent of our Cabinet are women. But when we look at the private sector and academia, it is not so hot: 7 per cent of our directors of the top 100 companies on the New Zealand exchange are women, and 17 per cent of the partners in our top legal firms, and 17 per cent of our university professors and associate professors are women.

We start to look even worse in some other areas. At 7 per cent, the proportion of women on boards is not only low in absolute terms, but we also lag behind many other countries with which New Zealand tends to compare itself, including Australia, which has done better with 10 per cent participation rates.

I think what is good in New Zealand is to have this information out in the public arena, because one way to address some of the inequalities that exist in public life is to shine the spotlight on them—they say one of the best disinfectants is sunlight.

In the public sector, we have made a real difference. We have 42 per cent of women on government-appointed boards and committees. This is a significant improvement on the 7 per cent in the private sector. We have achieved this by having a women's affairs nomination service, a database of women out there who can have their names put

forward. The Ministry of Women's Affairs does not make the appointments, but they make sure they understand what skill sets are being sought. Then they put relevant women forward who have the relevant skills and qualifications being looked for.

What that does is put women on the radar. We think the reason women are not being appointed to boards is not because they are not there, it is because boards do not know where to look for or find them. It is as if they are not on the radar screens. One thing we have done in New Zealand is to ensure that women's names are on the radar screen, and as you can see by our statistics in the government sector, it makes a difference.

This is just one example of what we have achieved in New Zealand to address a fundamental inequality in our system. It only works because the government is committed to advancing the interests of women.

I thought I would end with a quote from the Prime Minister of the day, when our Ministry of Women's Affairs was established over 20 years ago. He really gave the Ministry its underlying terms of reference with the challenge to 'demolish the structure of inequality'. I love that language, and I think it remains a great challenge for New Zealand and indeed for our region, that we demolish the structure of inequality.

Question to Minister Dalziel: To what extent have strong female role models or indeed mentors been part of your career and assumption of a leadership role?

Minister Dalziel's response:

Coming from New Zealand, I think that women's representation in political life is pretty much part of our identity as a nation. We were the first country in the world where women obtained the right to vote in 1893, but it took us a long time before we had realistic levels of representation. It took us until 1998, for example, before we had our first woman Prime Minister, and until 1999 before we had our first elected woman Prime Minister.

So we have come a long way over a long time, over a century, to achieve that ambition. We have 33 per cent—a third of our Parliament is made up of women, and 25 per cent of our Cabinet are women. We have made significant advances. If I look at what makes the difference when we compare where we sit against a world analysis of participation rates on the political stage as it were, then we are actually looking at the nature of electoral systems.

New Zealand ranks 14th in the world in terms of political participation. Rwanda is at the top of the list, with more than 40 per cent. Rwanda has chosen a method of representation, which enables 25 members of its Parliament to be selected from women's ranks so there is a set amount of women who will get there. I believe they are the best people for the job—I do not buy the argument that it is a question of tokenism.

I believe a business case and a profound case for good governance can be made by having diversity in decision making. All of the international studies support the fact that diversity in decision making makes for better quality decisions because it results in a greater range of perspectives that are brought to bear on an issue, and of course a greater degree of assessing the level of risks and opportunities relating to political threats and opportunities, in any given country.

If you actually look at that list, the countries that have proportional representation rather than a strict 'first-past-the-post system' do much better in electing women to be part of their decision-making processes.