

# SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

## Chapter 18

## Trust the Women

*Alice Perry MP, Federal Member for Holder*

*Excerpts from a speech at the Launch in South Australia of the National Agenda for Women*

*21 March 1988*

*It is a pleasure to share with Senator Rosemary Crowley the job of launching in South Australia the National Agenda for Women.*

*I have followed with interest, and some direct involvement over the last two years, the evolution of the Agenda from its birth in 1985 right up to the production of this program, and now, its implementation.*

*The important thing about the Agenda is that it has been a project of women, for women, by women. Over 25,000 women from all parts of the nation and from all walks of life were directly consulted in its formulation and all Australian women had the opportunity to contribute.*

*It is a remarkable achievement to condense faithfully into a booklet this size, the status, needs and aspirations until the year 2000, of eight million or so Australians who have only one thing in common – their gender.*

*When I say “only” one thing, it’s a very big “only” because it has been our gender which has been the trouble, if I can put it that way, all along, and the reason why it is necessary to carry out exercises like this. But it’s a mistake to do as some male politicians do and put all*

*women in one basket, toss them a few crumbs at election time – a few child-care places here, a health centre there – and trust that it will keep them happy.*

*Women are as varied in their activities as men are – probably more so. They are represented in all kinds of occupations: in domestic work, on production lines, in shops and workshops, in schools and hospitals, in business and in the professions. Women are students, stay-at-home mothers, part-time workers, full-time workers and retirees. And the important thing – and this is what makes the average woman different from the average man – is that in most cases she is each one of these things at various stages of her life.*

*While, on the whole, a man makes one major occupational transition in his life – from school to work – a woman tends to move in and out of the work-force, in and out of jobs, from full-time to part-time work and vice versa. She may need child-care this year but not next, she may need income assistance now, but not later, she may require a bit of affirmative action at one point to nudge her into a job or up the career ladder, but be able to account for herself very nicely, thank you, from then on.*

*So while, at any one point in time, the women of Australia are diverse in their roles and needs, there is no doubt that any long-term government initiative to make women's lot easier and better will help every woman at some time in her life.*

*My experience as the Member for Holder, through personal contact with women in my electorate, has confirmed what I've suspected for a long time: that there are still a lot of unhappy and unfulfilled woman in our community. If their problems are ones of income or employment, then there are things which governments can do. We have already done a lot in these areas and, with the help of our Agenda, we'll be able to do more.*

*But there are women whose problems have no short or medium-term political solutions. These problems are often the result of years of maltreatment, humiliation or repression. They manifest themselves in various psychological disorders and are only relieved in many cases by temporary and unsatisfactory palliatives, such as alcohol and tranquillisers. For many of these women it is too late for any solution.*

*However, we can prevent these problems, and the prevention lies in long-term educational and attitudinal changes. Some advances have been made but evidence, such as that which has come to light recently, that one in four Australians thinks that it's all right for a man to use physical violence against his female partner, indicates that we've got a long way to go.*

*Part of the answer, of course, lies in liberating men from their own traditional roles and stereotypes, so that women may break out of theirs. The Agenda has a very good section on education for woman and girls, but let's not forget that the blokes need a bit of educating too – about it being okay to cry or change a nappy and that there are better ways of solving problems than slapping the missus around.*

*There's a perception around that our government is, in some ways, out of touch, and I agree. But is not because the Prime Minister goes fishing with rich friends or because the Treasurer is late in filing his tax return. These things may not do our image much good, but they are substantially irrelevant. What we are not doing is satisfactorily communicating with the electorate. We are not letting them know about the good things we are doing, and equally importantly, why we are doing them. And we are not listening carefully enough to what they are saying.*

*And that is why I would suggest to this Government that it put a few more women MPs on its benches – put up more woman as candidates in safe seats, put more women in the ministry and more woman in Cabinet.*

*You may ask why. Well, I said that the problem is communication, and I happen to believe that women communicate better than men. It's a perception that I have, but there are libraries full of anthropology text books and Ph.D theses which prove it. I don't know why women communicate better than men but I suspect that the fact that they spend so much time in the company of children has something to do with it.*

*If you listen to an extended interview on the radio with, say, Susan Ryan or Margaret Reynolds, or any number of women MPs I could name, you'll find that, in the main, they don't get aggressive, they don't get unduly offensive, they don't get personal and they don't brush questions off. They speak in plain English with a minimum of jargon and they take trouble to explain, to illustrate and to identify with the listener or problem so that when*

*they've finished, the listener, whatever his or her views may have been before, will at the very least think, "Well, that sounds reasonable, and she seems like a reasonable person."*

*But please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that there are no male MPs who keep their ear to the ground. A lot do – but a lot don't. And particularly it's the men filling the vast bulk of leadership and ministry positions, who don't.*

*But if there are women, good and true, out there in the parties, who want to be MPs, then give them a go. And let's put a few more women into the ministry. They are not likely to put thousands of widows and sole supporting mothers into the work-force without giving a thought as to how in hell they're supposed to find a job when they haven't worked for twenty-five years.*

*Finally, thank you for listening. I commend the Agenda to you and trust that your involvement with it won't end here.*

Barbara Sage MLC joined Alice at the afternoon tea buffet. 'Nice speech, Alice,' she said. 'It hit the right note, I think.'

Alice was looking in vain for scones with jam and cream. 'They always have them at the Senior Cits,' she said, disappointed. 'Don't feminists make scones?'

She settled for a piece of Balfours jubilee cake and put it on the side of her saucer. 'Well,' she said to Barbara, 'it was better than the speech the Minister's office sent me, which was no doubt written by someone in the Office of the Status of Women. It read like an Honours thesis in Women's Studies - full of jargon and statistics. I filed it for future reference and started again. Spent all of Saturday afternoon in the office writing the damn thing.'

Every weekend, on Saturday or Sunday afternoon, or occasionally both, Alice would mount her bicycle and pedal down the side streets of Glenelg East, Glengowrie, Plympton Park and Edwardstown, to her office on South Road. There she would spend three or four hours at her desk going through the ministerial statements, constituent correspondence, petitions, party bulletins and myriad other communications in her IN-basket which she hadn't had time to deal with during the week. She would read and annotate every document and leave it in the OUT-basket for the attention of her staff. Some constituent correspondence,

particularly of the form-letter variety, would receive a form response. Other letters of a personal nature, would receive a personal response, usually drafted by Alice. Others of an abusive or anti-social nature went straight in the bin.

Sometimes the phone on her desk would ring and she would answer it. It was invariably a constituent of hers ringing to complain about something or make an appointment to see her. None of these callers ever expressed surprise that she was in her office on a weekend. She wondered whether they thought it was her home number.

She would often use this largely uninterrupted time to prepare for public hearings conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs. Shortly after entering the Parliament she had been chosen by her faction, the Centre-Left, to be its representative on that august multi-party body. The committee also boasted four members from the Labor Right, including the Chairman, two from the Labor Left, four Liberals and one National. As it was a committee that dealt largely with social policy, there were an unprecedented three women on it – all Labor. The Coalition obviously had trouble spreading its one woman around all the committees. The committee was administered by a team of able public servants from the appropriate secretariat of the Department of the House of Representatives.

The first reference given to the Committee came from the Minister for Veterans' Affairs – an inquiry into the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service. Alice was delighted at this development because her dealings with Mike, her valiant vet from home, had engendered in her a keen interest in the welfare of those forgotten soldiers.

Before its first public hearing the committee held a preliminary meeting in Parliament House. A member of the secretariat handed to each member a sheaf of papers which included information on the date, time and location of the hearing, a list of the submissions to the inquiry tendered by various organisations and private individuals, and the likely witnesses who would give evidence. Alice had seen it all before, and had brought her own copies of the same documents which, along with the relevant submissions themselves, she had studied the previous Saturday afternoon. So she was puzzled to find that, also provided by the secretariat, was a list of questions to be asked of witnesses at the hearing.

'What's this?' she asked one of the secretariat staff. 'You're giving us the questions that we should ask? I've already worked out what I want to ask.'

'Oh no, Mrs Perry,' he hastened to say. 'Ours are just suggested questions. You can ask other questions if you wish.'

'Well, I certainly will. Do you always do this?'

‘Yes, we do. The committee members appreciate it, you know, just in case they haven’t had an opportunity to read and digest the submissions themselves.’

And most of them hadn’t, as it turned out.

Back in the electorate office on Friday, Alice headed into the kitchen to heat up leftovers from the fiery curry that Michael had cooked the night before. Joan said, ‘Can we go through the latest batch of invitations?’

‘Can we do it on Monday?’

‘Well, there’s one that needs a response today.’ She handed it to Alice. It said:

*The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (SA Chapter) invites  
....Mrs Alice Perry MP....*

*To a luncheon with Guest Speaker, Mr Graham Ellwood of  
Peddle Thorp and Harvey Pty Ltd  
Designer of the tallest building proposed in the world (107 storeys)  
Namely Brisbane Central  
  
Adelaide Festival Centre  
\$25 per person*

Alice stared at it for several seconds. ‘It sounds like the function from hell. And they expect me to *pay* for it?’ Then she started to laugh helplessly. ‘The tallest building *proposed* in the world? Well, why don’t I *propose* a building that’s even taller? Maybe 110 storeys? Or 150? And then I could invite people to an expensive lunch to hear about it. It’d be a great fund-raiser.’

‘So you’re declining?’

‘Go away, Joan.’

As Joan left, Warren entered brandishing a letter. ‘I thought you’d enjoy this. Copied to you by one of your supporters.’

*Director of Programs,  
A.B.C.,  
GPO Box 9994, SYDNEY 2001*

*Dear Sir / Madam*

*I protest at the progressive whittling away of jazz programs from the ABC, the most recent instance being the cutting of Jim McLeod's "Hip Pocket" to one night per week.*

*Jazz is admittedly a minority art form, but this itself makes jazz listeners very much dependent on the ABC. Arguably, the most spontaneously creative of all the arts, and with a remarkably talented number of Australian practitioners, jazz deserves more support, not less, from our national broadcaster.*

*I must also make the observation that one has to be an insomniac to hear any jazz at all on the ABC. Why not have a few jazz pieces on National Radio early in the morning? I always listen to National Radio from about 6.30 am for the news and current affairs, but in spite of, rather than because of, the music, which appears to be chosen by someone who hates ABC listeners. I find it difficult to think of any group who could possibly enjoy the early morning music – it could not appeal to lovers of jazz, classical, "standards", folk or even pop. It is truly awful.*

*Yours sincerely*

*R. T. Gun.*

*cc: Alice Perry MP*

*Senator the Hon Gareth Evans, Minister for Transport and Communication*

'My husband could've written this letter,' Alice said to Warren. 'I'll show it to him.' She pondered for a second. 'Do you suppose Gareth will reply to it? Maybe *I'd* better forward it to him as well. Then it'll go to the top of the priority order in the Department of Communication's ministerial correspondence unit.' She looked again at the last sentence of the letter. 'If morning National Radio doesn't play good jazz, classical, standards, folk or pop, what do they play?'

'Probably really bad pop songs,' Warren said, 'like...um...'

'*Lady in Red*,' she said.

'You don't like that song?'

‘No. I have a parliamentary colleague who, whenever he sees me wearing red, which is often, sidles up to me and croons *Lady in Red* in my ear.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘I mean, I’d mind less if it weren’t such a crap song.’

She didn’t mention that the same colleague, who happened to sit directly behind her in the House of Representatives chamber, had, during a recent Question Time, inserted a finger under the back of her bra, pulled it and let it snap back. Another colleague, Maureen Brody MP, was outraged when told of this assault. ‘What did you do?’

‘I turned and gave him the kind of look I might give one of my sons who committed an anti-social act. A look that said, *Try that again and you’re in big trouble*. The problem is, Maureen’ – and she tapped the side of her head – ‘he’s not very bright. You don’t have to be if you’re in a safe seat.’

HANSARD - Thursday 28 April 1988

Statements by members

*Mrs PERRY – Honourable members will no doubt have noticed the banner which has been hanging in King’s Hall for the last few weeks. It was painted by an Australian woman, Dora Meeson, and was carried by herself and other Australian women in the suffragette march in London in 1911. Australian women had been granted the vote federally in 1901 and in all States by 1908 but their British sisters were still denied their basic right to have a say in who would govern them.*

*The banner depicts Britannia being advised by her daughter, Australia, to ‘Trust the women, mother, as I have done’, because of course, Madam Speaker, ‘trust’ was the key word. Women had been denied the vote in Britain and other countries because they were considered to be fickle and flighty creatures who could not be trusted with the grave responsibility of electing governments. However, modern research is showing that the reverse is true.*

*Recent studies by the Australian Labor Party and other groups have shown that women in fact are more stable in their voting patterns than men; that they think more seriously about how they vote. They take into consideration, more than men do, long term implications for their families and they are less susceptible to stimulation of the hip-pocket nerve. Only in the last few weeks, polls have shown that in the Adelaide and Port Adelaide by-elections, where the Labor vote suffered due to a superficial and cynical campaign waged by the Liberal*



*Party, fewer women than men swung away from the Labor Party. What better proof could we have of the essential good sense of woman voters?*

*The suffragette banner has been resurrected, restored and handed to the National Woman's Consultative Council, on behalf of all Australian women, by the Bicentennial Authority. I commend the Authority for its generosity and its appreciation that much of 'history' is, in fact, 'her story'.*

oOo