

Wendy McCarthy

In the last few weeks, women throughout Australia have been celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Women's Electoral Lobby. Those of us who created WEL would never have imagined it would survive this long, or that it would need to.

When a WEL questionnaire polled candidates for the 1972 election, we were seeking responses to those issues we had defined as requiring government intervention and changed cultural awareness. They were education, family planning, equal pay, access to child care and encouraging and supporting women to go into politics.

The responses to our questions were gobsmacking and illustrated the lack of understanding politicians (men) had about the aspirations of women. My favourite remains "a woman's greatest attribute was her virginity" in response to the question of what is a women's greatest attribute. It did not send the politician out of Parliament and some people even laughed.

I think of the seventies as the decade of consciousness raising. Women's issues remained on the agenda of both political parties. We measured success by the systemic changes we could see. Our mistake was to think this was the beginning of constant, consistent, incremental change and that we would move to a new order of respectful discourse. We believed government regulation would support this and for a while it worked.

Meanwhile, perhaps in response to my favourite slogan, 'A woman's Place is everywhere', thousands of Australian women joined WEL, becoming community activists and defining themselves as feminists. We were redefining the language, and much of the opposition to feminism was focused on our assumption of the title Ms. It ignored the fact that we had come from an era where women lost their

jobs on marriage, not to mention their names, or as I suggest to young women today, their brand.

For almost a decade I worked in family planning as a sex educator and advocate, and I was also the Cleo adviser on sex and relationships. I heard a lot of secrets, not unlike those released by the court this week and central to the current debate in Parliament. I would never have disclosed them. As a family planning person and one who was publicly committed to reproductive choice, people trusted me to give them information when facing an unplanned pregnancy. Those people included politicians who, to my dismay, would then stand in the community and oppose the scheduling of termination of pregnancy on the Medical Benefit schedules. Somehow, they had decided or learnt to compartmentalise their views and actions. We did not reveal their names or their hypocrisy.

In 1975, the first international year of women, a visiting Afro-American lawyer Flo Kennedy advised us to settle for behavioural change and hope hearts and minds would follow. It was sound advice I have tried to follow.

On my appointment to the board of the ABC in 1983 I called myself deputy chair, and was astonished that grown men felt the need to give me instruction in Latin about the derivation of the word chairman .

Since 1996 I have run a mentoring practice, and I constantly hear about the dilemmas women have finding their way through the world of work, where they are treated with disrespect. It is humiliating for them to acknowledge a gender gap in pay, and equally it diminishes them when they are excluded from social corporate events where careers are developed and deals done.

So how is this connected to the debate in parliament and the ugly electronic imagery and words circulating in the

cyber sphere? The answer is: it is not about the revealed fantasies and secrets of an older man or the question of who is a misogynist. It is about reaching a tipping point where we have to say enough is enough.

The Prime Minister has finally called it, and frankly I am grateful. Many women applaud her as they recognise how often they have put up with bad behaviour to avoid being seen as feminist or troublemaker. The disrespect for the office of the Prime Minister and the denigration of the first female in the job is having an impact on all of us. The casual dismissal by many business leaders of her leadership ignores the reality of the Parliament she manages.

Making political judgments some of us might dislike does not give us the right to attack her using old-fashioned sexist language around her fertility, clothes and body shape. For those who sneered at the idea of political correctness, I say bring it back and return to respectful political discourse.