So without further ado I would like to get on to the main business and start by introducing the Honourable Mary Delahunty who is the Minister for Women’s Affairs, Planning and the Arts in Victoria and has already been on the airwaves very effectively this morning. Everybody keeps coming up to me and saying did you hear that, did you hear that so it has been a great start for the day and she is going to talk about Women’s Voices Shaping Public Policy on Work and Family Issues.

Belinda, thank you very much and I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we enjoy this very important meeting the Wurrundjeri people. Let me also acknowledge some of the outstanding women who are here today and thank them for coming to this discussion. The Hon. Joan Kirner, former Premier of Victoria and of course co convener of EMILY’s List, Pru Goward, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner and author of the interim report which has kick started this debate, Professor Ruth Durkin, Vice Chancellor of RMIT, Professor Belinda Probert of course, Sharan Burrow, President of the ACTU thank you very much for being such an important part of this debate; Linda Hancock, convener of the Victorian Women’s Electoral Lobby, Marion Lau, Chairperson of the Ethnic Communities Council, Leonie Morgan, Victorian Co-Convener of EMILY’s List and as it happens President of the ALP Women’s Policy Committee, one of our best Policy Committees in terms of effectiveness; Margaret Parker, Women Chiefs of Enterprises International, Victorian Branch; and Liberty Sanger, President of the YWCA here in Victoria.

Thank you all very much for coming to this conversation because that is what it is. We now have a framework for a principle that we all believe in, the job now is to implement that principle into a workable, national model for paid maternity leave for the women of Australia.

I was just discussing briefly with Pru about the times we worked together at the ABC so it is fabulous to be on the same platform again today working for the same outcome again. I asked Pru if we had paid maternity leave when we were at the ABC and she said yes. Pru can probably tell the story, if you dared take it you would lose your shift so it was a fairly strong disincentive to get back to work smartly. In fact didn’t have paid maternity leave, I was on contract as many women are on contract now and on less money probably than I was at that time. So when I stopped work the money stopped and I guess for many women that’s exactly the position they face now. They stop work and the money stops. So the decision about having a child is a critical decision. Not just about what sort of a mother and parent you are going to be, but what sort of a provider you and, if you have a partner, can be.

I think one of the best ways to achieve this goal is to have an evidence based policy debate. You won’t win this debate unless you can present to Government, and particularly to the Federal Government, but also the State Governments, compelling evidence of why this should happen and how it can happen.
Let me just start with the international context. Our nearest neighbour, New Zealand, is about to implement, on July 1st a national system of paid maternity leave. You know, they jump ahead of Australia in many ways, they gave women the vote first and now they are introducing a national scheme of paid maternity leave before Australia. I met the Prime Minister of New Zealand the other night at a small function we had here in Melbourne for her during her visit here and I asked her how difficult was it to get up. She just looked at me and said “We just did it”. I thought that’s a Government for you. It was very interesting and I won’t name the names of the gentlemen in suits that were surrounding Helen and I as we had this discussion but you could imagine the first question that was asked, how much did it cost. Well there is cost in money terms and that is serious for any Government but there is also a social cost if you don’t do it. So New Zealand will introduce that scheme on the 1st July. It will mean that 14 of Australia’s top 20 trading partners will have some form of national paid maternity leave. This then leaves Australia and the richest country on earth, the United States, as the only two out of the 30 OECD countries who will not provide some form of paid maternity leave on a national basis. Two out of 30 countries.

Now this has been recognised by the Federal Leader of the Opposition, Simon Crean, who has indicated that a Crean Labor Government will introduce a system of paid maternity leave. The National Labor Women’s Conference in April confirmed support for a paid maternity leave scheme acknowledging that whatever scheme is introduced in Australia, and I guess it is not when but how, it should be based upon the principles that paid maternity leave is a human right for women, is required to address the systemic discrimination of women in the workforce and of course women in this room know instinctively that there is still that systemic subterranean form of discrimination for many women in Australia. You only have to look at the figures. Women are still being paid, on average, around 67% of average male earnings. Here it is at the beginning of a new millennium and women are still being paid, on average, around 67% of average male earnings. Thirdly the other principle on which paid maternity leave must rest is the principle of supporting the notion of income security for women. I want to talk about that in a bit more detail later.

So the three principles on which a national system of paid maternity leave should operate are that it is a fundamental human right, it is required to address that systemic discrimination of women in the workforce and it is absolutely central and becoming even more important as a way, part of the suite of policies, that can provide income support for women throughout their lives.

The National Labor Women’s Conference passed also an addendum motion which endorsed Simon Crean’s plan for consultation on how such a scheme might work in practice. A plan for consultation with business, with unions and with the wider community in designing an appropriate model. And I think that is precisely what we are doing here today, beginning the design work, enhancing the design work about what the model would be. Certainly Pru Goward’s paper has been seminal in this debate, not only because it comes from the Federal Sex Commissioner but also because it outlines in an erudite way and as you would expect policy based way the range of options and some of the models. I think it is because of the strength of that work and the range of inputs into that paper that we have not had the notion of paid maternity leave dismissed out of hand as perhaps many of us expected the forces of
darkness and those we normally expect to respond in an instinctively negative way. It just didn’t occur. It didn’t occur when this interim paper was brought down in April and that’s a terrific credit to Pru and the work that she did, but it also says there is a window of opportunity and in my life if there is a window of opportunity that opens that much you shove the window up and you jump in. That’s what we are doing today.

Let’s look at the debate as it’s begun thanks to that paper. There are options there, not necessarily exhaustive but certainly valuable in kick starting of this debate. The Democrats have added another dimension to this debate, a Private Member’s Bill into the Senate proposes a model that provides for 14 weeks of paid maternity leave by means of Government funding with the additional top up from employers and indeed employees. Now there will be many factors that influence the final model but it is absolutely vital a range of women’s voices are heard as we move forward. We need lateral thinking and we of course need an evidence base to inform this policy.

What do I mean by lateral thinking? Well I am sure many of you look closely at the Baby Bonus; $1.2 billion for the Baby Bonus. How much better that money could have been spent and can be spent implementing a national scheme of paid maternity leave. The estimates are around anything between $300m rising up to perhaps $400m. There are certainly plenty of funds within that pool provided by the Baby Bonus to look at, not only a national scheme of paid maternity leave, but also flexible work options, child care and other caring services.

So if we want to think laterally there is a pot of money already that the Federal Government says it is devoting to women. But of course it is not devoting that money to women who are working or certainly women who don’t have children but who would like to have children and have to think of that decision from a social and economic point of view. The Baby Bonus doesn’t provide any benefit for working families. It doesn’t acknowledge that women and men increasingly have responsibilities around caring for aging parents or for family members who may have disabilities. It is also, I think, backward looking. I think it is not acknowledging the facts of the way we live now and whether we like it or not these are the facts. Facts are women’s participation in the paid workforce is increasing and will continue to increase. In Victoria, for example, the latest figures that we have at March 2002 show that women’s labour force participation rates are at 71.5% for those aged between 20 and 54 years. Part time work of course continues to be the big challenge and for many, many women it is the most desired form of participating in the workforce. However 54.1% of all employed women in Victoria work full time. Half of all women are still working full time, while 45.9% are working part time. Significantly though women make up 72% of all part time workers.

Family structures have also changed dramatically. We are doing a lot of work in Victoria now on the population growth in this state and the types of population, the types of households that’s implicit in this extra population coming from Interstate and what we are seeing is a dramatic change in the notion of the family. Now women know this, but what we are seeing is increasing demand for single person or dual occupancy households. Facts are that more and more women are living alone. More and more women are continually outliving their partners, more and more women are choosing to live alone. So there is an increasing demand for housing of single persons
or dual occupancy. That’s a social revolution and it implies much about how we support women throughout their lives. Well we all know about the falling birth rate right across the world. That’s also informing parts of the population debate but what it also says is that women make a decision about how many children they are going to have based on their social circumstances, their economic security and indeed their assessment of their long term economic security and ability to support their families.

One of the interesting points made by Pru’s interim paper is that the provision of paid maternity leave is regarded by the Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women Working Party as being an appropriate measure to support motherhood. Well of course it is, absolutely. If women think they will enjoy paid maternity leave of course they will think more positively about the decision to have a child. But the Australian birth rate has fallen below replacement rates in the early 70’s and certainly now we see not only a falling birth rate but we see an increase in the peak age for child bearing. In Victoria the peak age for childbirth is now 31 years. In 1970 it was 25 years of age. So again figures that you are all very very familiar with but the evidence is clearly there, women are delaying children and are having less children and we ask the question why and how is our society supporting them to make the best decisions. It’s an easy mistake to think that this declining birthrate is a woman’s problem. It’s not. It is a question that the whole society, the whole community must be engaged in and if we marginalize this notion of the falling birthrate as being a woman’s, we marginalize a whole range of debate around paid maternity leave, equality in the work place and fairer rates of pay. We know we have got an ageing population. We know that the median age in Australia in 1999 was 34.9 years and it is expected to increase to 46.5 years by the year 2051. We are seeing a significant change in the demography of our population. An ageing population, a declining birthrate. And what you see is an increase in the number of women in that ageing population, women who have to support themselves, support other family members.

The Bracks Government is looking closely at these social changes and how we can in an effective way as a State Government support women’s choices and support women’s rights. We have a blue print for the next 10 years in this State called “Growing Victoria Together”. It identifies 11 broad issues that the Government believes through it’s consultations with Victorians, through a continuing dialogue and debate, are of greatest importance to Victoria over the next decade. Central to this is the need to build cohesive community and one of the priorities around a cohesive community, of course, is the balance between work and family. It is an issue for men and it’s an issue for women and it is a particular issue of course for our children. So that is the broad blue print if you like. How can we recreate and support strong cohesive communities. In the 90’s communities were left behind in this frantic pursuit for the great economy. Now the community is saying return the notion of community to us. We expect leadership from Government in providing the supports to a meaningful community environment. So that’s one of our goals.

We know that there has been some progress made in that providing extra subsidies in pre schools for example. Certainly trying to repair some of the damage that was caused in the child sector, but there is very much more to be done and we are aware of that. And so today it’s I think appropriate that we announce the next Premier’s Women’s Summit here in Victoria which will occur on the 17th July will have as it’s
centrepiece, have as it’s theme and will spend the day discussing the notions and needs around women, work and families. And of course central to that will be paid maternity leave but we’ll broaden it out to child care, to kindergarten, to education and continuing that debate, that discussion, the dialogue.

It should be noted that Victoria actually leads the states in terms of paid maternity leave for public servants. We provide 12 weeks paid maternity leave to our employees which is consistent with what the Commonwealth does. It’s not quite matched with the ILO standard of 14 weeks but it is a Government scheme that if you look around the nation leads the states. Paid maternity leave in other state public services varies from 4 weeks in South Australia, 6 weeks in Queensland and 9 weeks in NSW. Western Australia does not have a uniform paid maternity leave scheme for public servants but does have scope to negotiate for up to 6 weeks paid leave as part of an enterprise bargaining process. Tasmania does not provide for any paid maternity leave for its public servants. They use a form of sick leave, by request and negotiation. So you can see there is a desperate picture right around the nation and that’s why it is so critical that together Labor Governments around the nation work with our women, our communities to implement a model of paid maternity leave at a national level, to provide support for the existing Federal Government and certainly for a Crean Federal Labor Government.

We should also note, and I think this is very very encouraging and it is also a support for the work that Pru has done, that business is starting to talk positively about paid maternity leave. There is clear evidence that shows that business is aware of the value of hanging onto highly skilled, well trained, effective employees and certainly organisations like the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Industry Group have not dismissed paid maternity leave out of hand. They are showing signs of interest in the discussion around the model and of course people like Anne Sherry at the top of the Bank of Melbourne, have been important in this State and important nationally to the debate that it is not being dismissed out of hand.

We have to get our act together and agree on a model that can be accepted at the Federal level and pushed for by Labor States right around the nation. So thank you very much for coming and I am looking forward to seeing the shape of the model as we go forward after the discussions today.

**Belinda Probert (Chair)**

Thank you very much Mary for that opening session.