The LIBERAL face of FEMINISM

The Liberal Party is in a state of flux. After almost a decade of Labor rule, it's struggling to come to terms with the mood of the 90s. A vigorous opponent of the attempt to find that in the 'traditional family' is Amanda Vanstone. Here she speaks to Karen Coleman.

Amanda Vanstone, at 37, belongs to the new breed of Liberals. She joined the party at 26, became branch vice president within a year, and seven years later found herself elected to the Senate. She held a couple of portfolios in the shadow ministry under John Howard, but at present has none. She is outspoken on issues like abortion and women's re-entry into the workforce. She lives with her husband, two dogs and a cockie. Her first job on leaving school was with Myers department store.

I started tertiary study with Myers, then I went to another retailer, and then I set up my own small business, retailing modern art graphics — etchings, silk screens, reproductions, that sort of thing. And I hated it! I hated the loneliness, hated being on my own. I realised I had to get out of that. Around that time I was just about to finish law and an opportunity came up for wholesaling cheese. I took that up, but I got rid of it as soon as I was elected.

You practised law in 1984 — one year before you went into parliament?
Yes.

You did your law degree part-time?
Yes, an arts/law degree.

Was that hard work?
Well, it doesn't make me very sympathetic to full-time students who expect to get it all on a plate.

I'm not very sympathetic to them either — I teach them all the time.

I'm patron of the University Liberal Club in South Australia and of the Young Liberals, and I sometimes wonder if they have made the right choice. I see a lot of full-time students from some, not all, wealthy families, and I think you just don't understand how lucky you are. Or how unlucky. If you said to me now: "look, you are a fool - when your mother offered to keep you at home so you could go to university, you turned it
down.” For the life of me I can’t figure out why I did that now. I’m not sure if I had my life over again I’d do it differently, but I do know that a good deal of what I’ve learned, I’ve learned through those work experiences.

You’ve been outspoken in the past in your criticisms of Liberal policies on women and the family. How important do you think your contribution has been in changing Liberal Party policy on these issues?

It doesn’t matter what anyone says about your contribution, you have to have faith that somewhere it will make a difference, and you can’t expect — you have no right to expect — that you will be told where it has.

So I’ve argued with lots of people about the perceptions they have of how Australian families are, and I think a lot of people on both sides of the House have some very outdated perceptions of the make-up of Australian families. They also have some outdated perceptions about the motives of sole parent beneficiaries. But I don’t know whether my talking has been the final
catalyst in the change, but I’ve certainly been pushing for the direction that our last policy came to. Now there is a recognition that the majority of married women are working and that they deserve the rewards they get for the extra effort they put in.

Are you referring to the child care rebate?

Yes, and even to the extensions to the Dependent Spouse Debate. I’ve got other long-term views about what ought to happen to that, which many of my colleagues wouldn’t endorse.

And what do you think should happen with that rebate?

Our policy is good because without actually increasing the rebate itself, we increased the amount you could earn before you lost the rebate, and we decreased the rate at which it’s to be taken away. That means that with the rebate, which so many people have argued works as a disincentive for women to return to work, that disincentive has been very substantially reduced because you could earn more before you started to lose anything, and even then you lost it at a slower rate. So even on something as conservatively framed as the Dependent Spouse Rebate I think we have made some good changes. I’m not saying that the DSR is a good thing - I’m saying the changes we have made to it have made it a much better rebate.

So what do you think of the Dependent Spouse Rebate in the long term?

I’d rather see the money that now goes into the Dependent Spouse Rebate go straight to families with children, irrespective of the structure of the family.

Would you income-test that money?

That depends on the sort of benefit you turn it into. My preference is for putting that money into families with children without discriminating about the family structure. I firmly believe that money should be given to families as a consequence of children and it should vary according to the number of children you have.

What about people who are on single parents’ pensions?

They have been fairly viciously treated by this government. I think the changes in 1987 looked okay on paper, but had catastrophic effects on people.

To a large extent you’re talking about people who haven’t worked for 20-odd years and their chances of getting back into the workforce at that age, without skills or confidence, are pretty much zero for most of them. I think that [1987] treatment was vicious. It was done with no forewarning - people didn’t know about it until a couple of weeks before it happened. But, by the same token, at that same stage, the Liberal Party’s papers actually advocated that they lose it when the youngest child turned 12.

I sometimes think that many people believe in immaculate conceptions because they’re so willing to blame the sole parent, the mother, as though a man was never involved. The father is perhaps not taking the appropriate monetary responsibility for that child. On that question, I must say I was very pleased to see both sides supporting changes to the maintenance arrangements. But I have a real feeling that we cannot continue to believe that, because a couple want to split up, society will foot the bill for them. That doesn’t mean that I would ever advocate a reduction in the level of the sole parent benefit.

I would like to see a better sharing of the assets when they do split up and a realisation on the part of both parties that they cannot expect, when they split up, to maintain the same standard of living. I’ll be damned if the split up of a middle-class couple should mean that someone on a lower income has a portion of their tax spent on maintaining that lifestyle. It just ain’t fair.

Do you know that I’ve had a number of constituents who look me straight in the eye and say they expect their children still to go to private schools after they have broken up. It is not fair enough if they expect other taxpayers to pay for it.

What do you think of this proposition: as soon as people divorce, women should get back into the workforce as soon as possible and that government should provide adequate and real programs to assist that transition, which, of course, means proper child care.

I’d agree. Some of these issues have been addressed by changes in the maintenance system. But it’s interesting that the average duration on that benefit is not as long as a lot of people imagine it to be. Government should facilitate child care not only for those women but for all women who want to work.

Most people’s stereotype of single parents is fairly unrealistic: for instance, only about 13% or 17% are teenage unmarried mothers, and yet the stereotype is that most of them are.

Many of those perceptions and assumptions are held across the political spectrum by most politicians. It’s not confined to the Liberal and National Parties, it’s across the board in the community.

I think you actually had a go at people in the Liberal Party who were talking about women as economic conscripts - the notion that they are forced into the workforce.

That’s right. Someone asked once at a Women’s Services Club: “if you could say one thing to young girls leaving school now, what would it be?” I had to
respond: "never, ever, imagine you won't have to support yourself". If we could have every young girl leaving school, thinking "I'm going to have to make a break for myself in this world", then we'd be a lot better off.

A lot of your thinking is at odds with Liberal-National Party policy.

I don't know about the National Party, but my thinking is not at odds in any way at all with Liberal Party philosophy or, by and large, with the majority of my colleagues. You'll find there are a lot more men in the Liberal Party who understand these issues than you might imagine.

What about the National Party? They seem to have very reactionary notions about the family and women.

I don't have much to do with them. I had a run-in once with Ian Cameron from Queensland. Around the time of the affirmative action legislation he was saying something to the effect that we should have policies to encourage women to stay at home and be in the kitchen. I said something to the effect that Mr Cameron's remarks made me regret that his mother had obviously gone from the kitchen into that other room where women are frequently useful. I was quite amused because it took some of the Nats a long time to cotton on that it was a joke.

Speaking of the Affirmative Action Bill, seven people from your party crossed the floor on that. Were you one of them?

No. For two reasons. The first was that we supported the Public Service Reform Bill [with its EEO provisions for the public sector] and the Affirmative Action legislation which was the EEO stuff for the private sector. We were, after all, the ones who asked for a bill for the Commonwealth Statutory Authorities. In that Bill the government changed some of the wording. While you could argue that the changes weren't substantial, it nonetheless upset some of my colleagues. The changes didn't seem necessary and the government didn't explain them. If you're serious about EEO, you adopt wording that everyone is happy with. The government was just playing politics.

The second reason was that the bill had two separate powers for a minister. Now, lots of bills give a minister general power — it's just a normal administrative function — but this had an additional one relating to the powers a minister had to demand changes in the corporate plan. I didn't see that it was appropriate because a statutory authority is presumably out of the department and separate for a particular reason, and so it seemed stupid to give the minister control over the personnel function. My colleagues who crossed the floor didn't think that was really relevant.

What's your view on affirmative action legislation?

I don't think you should call it affirmative action legislation because it doesn't set targets to be achieved under pain of a penalty. I'd never agree to that; it's very bad for women. The legislation simply requires you to address your mind to women's employment. It's far softer than people imagine. I think there might be some administrative problems but I would expect that, given that the Act affects such a broad section of the business community. Valerie Pratt is taking a commonsense approach in the implementation. I worry whether it will achieve its desired aim but that's another matter.

You gave a speech recently on abortion. What's your position on that?

In the end, a woman's view has to be the one which rules the day.

A coalition of certain politicians against abortion was formed in Canberra a while ago. Will they attempt some action?

I wouldn't be surprised.

You were shadow spokesperson on Women's Affairs. Now it's Jocelyn Newman. Were you replaced when Howard lost the leadership?

No, a bit before that, when we had a reshuffle. It was Robert Hill for a while and then Jocelyn Newman.

How did you feel about being dropped?

Oh, that's politics - in and out.

Would you like to be in that position again?

I'd like to have an influence on the way people think about those matters but I'm not really fussy about how that's done.

Are women's affairs quite important to you?

When I entered parliament I didn't really want a lot to do with women's affairs, but I saw on my side of politics there was not a lot of interest shown and because of that void I've gravitated towards women's issues. I'm interested in other things as well.

What are they?

My big interest at the moment is in licit drugs, pharmaceuticals, poor prescribing habits and what we do about that. That comes down to what we should do about the pharmaceutical benefits. We've got huge health problems related to licit drugs. There are other interests as well.

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