

**IPAA WA Conference 'Women in Public Sector Leadership' 20 November 2020
John Byrne, Commissioner for Equal Opportunity**

Good morning and thank you for inviting me here today.

Gender equity and women in leadership are of great importance for fairness and equity and for the future of Australia.

Earlier this morning I opened the People with Disabilities State Conference.

I have a disability. I have been profoundly deaf since I was a child. That can cause some interesting situations in public speaking, but I am sure we will get by.

It is well known that leadership positions are dominated by men. More men than women continue to be selected as leaders. That is because men tend to select other men for leadership roles. It is called unconscious bias. Selection panels see merit and equity in selecting the best clone of themselves.

As a result, we have leadership that does not reflect the diversity of the people they serve. This shows in inferior service and missing programs. For example, I am sure Australia would have free childcare if the gender balance in Federal Parliament was better.

The WA Public Sector Commissioner Sharyn O'Neill and Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment Sonja O'Leary are to be commended for developing policies for diversity in employment. A result of their work, and their predecessors, is that over 40% of leaders in the public service are women and the service is well on track to achieve 50%. It is also commendable that Sharyn and Sonja are addressing diversity regarding Aboriginal people, people with disability and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

People tend to point to men as being responsible for unconscious bias. It is true that unconscious bias by men is a problem for increasing women in leadership.

However, as a person with a disability, my personal experience is that unconscious bias is not exclusively a male phenomenon. Women have similar unconscious bias to men about employment of people with disability and other diversity groups.

I think the real issue is diversity in leadership. Women in leadership is a very important part but is not the whole story.

Suppose that in five years time the CEOs of public sector organisations met in a room and over half turn out to be female. That would be an outstanding success.

But what if none of the CEOs wore a hijab, there were no Aboriginal people, no one with dark skin and no one in a wheelchair or with a guide dog. We would still not have diverse leadership and would not achieve the benefits of diversity.

We must avoid ending up with leadership that is a monoculture of men and women who went to the same schools and universities and have the same unconscious

biases that disadvantage Aboriginal people, people with disability and people with different skin colour.

We need to address unconscious bias in women as well as men and recognise that the real problem is the way merit is used.

Unconscious bias has turned the merit principle into a tyranny.

I think the best way to address unconscious bias is still to require selection panels to select on merit but with an explicit requirement to consider diversity.

Merit must never be allowed to operate on its own. It can result in poor outcomes due to unconscious bias. We must always consider merit and diversity together.

How can we do this? There are many ways of doing it.

One way that I advocate is that membership of every selection panel should be diverse, and every selection panel should be required to select more than one person from the applicants. One selected applicant should be from a diversity group. Unconscious bias may then be neutralised since each of the recommended applicants would tend to be the most meritorious applicant with their diversity characteristic.

The CEO can then appoint one of the recommended applicants. That allows the CEO to balance corporate objectives, including diversity. It also empowers the CEO and makes the CEO fully accountable for the diversity of the organisation.

That is not the only strategy.

Some examples of other strategies are the requirement of Australian Labor Party that women must be candidates for a target proportion of winnable seats. Targets can work well, and it would be a foolish person who said that the women elected have less merit than the men. Targets are also central to the Public Sector Commission diversity strategy for women to hold 50% of leadership positions by 2025, which I am confident will be achieved well ahead of time.

Another strategy is to ensure diversity in new intakes of employees. I am impressed by South 32, a large mining company based in Perth, that has good representation of women in leadership positions despite the 'pipeline' issues that other mining companies talk about.

I am also impressed by Clough a construction company in Western Australia that recently recruited equal numbers of male and female interns, challenging the status quo within the business.

These strategies are all measures intended to achieve equality, which are permitted under the Equal Opportunity Act.

The Equal Opportunity Commission is a founding member of CEO's for Gender Equity. I have seen the conversation in Western Australia change from fixing women

to fixing organisation culture. There has been a shift from awareness raising to taking action that recognises that gender equity is the smart thing to do.

Thank you