



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN IN POLICING

Thursday 17th August, 2017

The Honourable Lisa Neville MP, Minister for Police

The Honourable Edward O'Donohue MLC, Shadow Minister for Police, Community Service and Corrections

The Honourable Georgie Crozier MLC, Shadow Minister for Women

Graham Ashton AM APM Chief Commissioner, Victorian Police

Wendy Steendam APM Deputy Commissioner, Victorian Police

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders past and present and to any elders here with us this evening.

We are absolutely delighted to welcome you all to Government House: men as well as women, civilians as well as serving and retired police members.

But, may I say, unabashedly, that Victoria Police women are particularly welcome. On this occasion, you are the ones continuing the lineage of your sisters across the last century, as we celebrate the first women in policing in 1917, and the contributions of women since then.

Standing here in 2017, aware of the genuine commitment by the police hierarchy to ensuring a safe and equal workplace for all members, we cannot help but be aware that across our community there is still much progress to be made for women.

Even in this lucky country, women still die or are injured in alarming numbers at the hands of those who are meant to love and care for them.

They are still far too often the victims of sexual abuse and harassment. They are still paid on average 16% or \$261 per week less than men. They still struggle for the breaks that are needed to genuinely share the seats of power in our parliaments, in our boardrooms, our businesses and our public and private organisations.

We can barely imagine what it must have been like for the first women in policing - one hundred years before now.

Think of 1917. Right in the midst of World War 1: the same year as the Battles of Passchendaele and Beersheba.

And in thinking back, it is important to remember that Victoria was not always the progressive 'place to be', that it is now.

Although in 1902 Australia was the first country in the world to give women both the right to vote in federal elections, and also the right to be elected to parliament on a national basis, it was not until six years' later, in 1908, that women first gained the right to vote in this State.

And so, less than a decade before Madge Connor and Elizabeth Beers joined Victoria Police in 1917, they had not even had the right to vote in our State elections.

Initially, both women were employed as unsworn 'agents', to assist in cases involving women and children. They had no powers of arrest and did not wear a uniform. It was not until four years later that women were sworn in with the same powers as men.

Since then, there have been many firsts for Victoria Police women.

In 1947, a uniform especially for policewomen was introduced, although it was not until 1981 that women were allowed to wear pants as part of their uniform.

These 'costume' quirks were common to the law as well, I can assure you. It was at a comparable time that a judge in Victoria 'couldn't see' – quaint language meaning that he refused to hear legal argument from – a female barrister, because her Bar collar was lacier than the traditional male wing collar version.

In 1950, the first female detective, Grace Brebner, came along. In 1960, women took the first three places in the squad of police graduates.

Although it was only in 1973 that female applicants no longer had to be single, and only in 1980 that women were able to apply for handcuffs and batons, by 2001, Victoria Police became the first Australian police force to have a female Chief Commissioner - when Christine Nixon APM was appointed.

And I note it is wonderful to see Bernice Masterson here tonight. A real trail-blazer. The first female Assistant Commissioner appointed in Australia: back in 1989. And the first female indigenous officer, Tarina Fanning too, who joined in 1986.

Today, about one quarter of our police are women, and about 14% of the police ranked sergeant or above are women.

Victoria Police is working hard to recruit more women. In fact, they now account for some 40% of the intake. And there is much work underway to ensure that talented women as well as men come through the ranks.

I congratulate the fortitude of the women who forged the path for those who have followed them in Victoria Police. They have individually and collectively helped forge a path for women in other walks of life as well.

I congratulate the women in Vicpol today who continue to achieve and model the best professional conduct. We are blessed with some outstanding women in the senior ranks of our police force.

And I congratulate the Chief Commissioner and his management team for all that he and they continue to do to ensure a fair and inclusive workplace.

Victoria profits from having its police officers – senior and junior - drawn from 100% of our talented population.

And so congratulations on this important centenary, and now it is my pleasure to invite the Minister for Police, the Honourable Lisa Neville MP to address us.

