

## **Welcome Speech - Ms Eunice Watson**

Good morning.

Senator the Hon. Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Justice and Customs;

The Hon. Tom Barton, Minister for Police and Corrective Services, and Minister for Racing, Queensland;

The Hon. Judy Spence, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy; Minister for Women's Policy; and Minister for Fair Trading;

Mr Jim O'Sullivan, Commissioner Queensland Police Service;

Ms Christine Nixon, NSW Police President, A.C.W.A.P;

Distinguished guests, our visitors from other places, and my fellow Australians: I am very pleased to be here this day. Although I was born not far from the banks of the Brisbane River, I am a woman of the Munnenjarl Dreaming, and my land is to the south of this city. A privilege has been bestowed upon me, that I, as a Murri woman, have been invited to welcome you to this conference; and I wish you well in your deliberations.

As it is customary law to do so, I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional people of this country, upon whose land we now stand.

The business of this conference is 'Women and Policing' and this is very important to my people and indeed, to all women. The access of women to justice has critical ramifications for every Australian family, and to families across the globe - so please remember that in the way of my people- words are important; but action is the only thing that will bring about real change.

So the decisions that are made here on the floor of this conference, must be translated down to street level and must deliver something real and something positive to women who are there at the coal face of life.

It is beyond dispute that at this time, women are the most vulnerable and most exposed sector of the community in matters of criminal violence and therefore, it is women who require the highest level of support and protection from the legal system.

It is ironic that while we constitute the most significant group of victims within this society, on the other side of the ledger - women are substantially under represented in the processes that shape and determine the administration of law and justice within this country. I acknowledge that

things are changing and we see women now on the highest courts of the land, we see women in our parliaments, women as captains of industry and we see women Police officers on the beat. And I pay tribute to those women who are here today who have attained high office and who are doing so much to advance the cause of the sisterhood; but the pace of progress is far too slow and our survival clock as women is ticking down. Within the Australian nation, women are almost fifty percent of the population, yet there are only a small number of women in federal parliament and even smaller proportion represented in the inner cabinet. When I watch the ABC coverage of Question Time, I would like to see a lot more women on their feet as Ministers, debating and presenting positions on the great matters of the day. I have seen Minister Vanstone and Minister Newman in Federal Parliament. The equation is slightly better in the State Parliament, and we have Ministers doing the business of Government, not primarily as women, but because they are gifted and determined politicians, and they are capable and skilled Administrators.

So there is still a great deal to do in terms of gender equity and so much to do to make our detractors realise that they have to change their ways and respect us for what we are and what we can do.

And we come to the matter of identity, it saddens me as a Murri woman that Aboriginal women have to totally construct a new sense of self - one that reflects our past and one that can confront the trials of today and can meet the challenges of tomorrow. In constructing that new identity, we have to reach back to our roots and draw on a culture that began with the journey of the Rainbow Serpent. The problem is that many of those same creation stories that I was taught as a child, are based on appalling stereo types that have no place in today's world. Many of our dreaming stories are centred around women who were beaten, sold and enslaved by the men of their tribes. In those stories, women had no power - no place, no independence of thought or action. Some of the stories tell of women who tried to break the cycle and rebel against those draconian regimes; but invariably, those wilful women meet with terrible ends and the status quo is maintained.

Well, this conference and this time is not about maintaining the status quo. We are gathering here to identify needs and to develop strategies that will advance the position of women across the global community and we shall do this because we are able to do this and we have to place our feet firmly on the destined path and walk forward into a land that is a safe and secure place for our children and our old people. At one time, we had place and we had power, let us use this forum as a signpost on that journey back to our roots.

Thank you.

*Footnote 8.7.99*

I would like to acknowledge the Commissioner's apology to Aboriginal people, and his comment on air regarding Police/Indigenous relationships. It was a very brave and positive step in the progress towards reconciliation. I am sure it was warmly appreciated by the Indigenous community of Queensland.

Also, the Queensland Police Service should be commended in regard to the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island People.

It appears that the Queensland Police Service has a high proportion of Indigenous recruits.

Cross-cultural training for QPS Officers, which is proving to be such a huge success, should be an ongoing process. Trainees should have, as a part of their training, this component as a compulsory requisite throughout their course. Senior Officers and established Staff should be continually briefed in Indigenous matters, and the Indigenous perspective.