



No means No even if you're the CEO!

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In the space of one short week, two Australian women, one junior marketer and the other a political juggernaut took their bosses to court and caucus respectively and won. In the space of six days the blogosphere was pulsating with the news that the Chief Executive of David Jones elected to resign for conduct unbecoming against a young woman who worked for the retail chain. By his own admission, he had done wrong and stood down. Other women logged in and blogged in with sad, even depressing tales of poor treatment, sexually permeated work environments, rampant discrimination on unlawful prejudices like family responsibilities, pregnancy and potential pregnancy, being hit upon and preyed upon in supposedly contemporary professional workplaces. And they talked of being victimised, performance managed, even dismissed for complaining about it.

For years some of us working in the Equal Opportunity space have bemoaned the shameful percentage of women on Australian Boards, the inhospitable work cultures that often meant, in my experience, that even if women were appointed to lofty positions in companies and became ex-officio members of the Boys Club, many of those women in time resigned and went elsewhere; always feeling as if they were on the outer. They got concussed butting heads with the glass ceiling, knocked back opportunities where the pressure of future expectations kept them planted on the "sticky floor" or did their bit for population growth, had babies - even if a growing number trying to consolidate their careers first ended up seeking medical assistance to do it - and then promptly collided with the "maternal wall".

Today an unmarried woman, childless by choice from a working class background with a vocal quality than can only be deemed a compelling liability, became our new Prime Minister. Irrespective of my political persuasions, I have walked around today with a lump in my throat, trying to label and store my feelings as if they were Tupperware containers of meat sauce to be tucked away in the freezer for a really heavy work week and asking myself if I would ever forget what I was doing on the day they shot Kevin Rudd and installed - Julia.

I felt this way on the day Obama won his election and it was not about his politics. There was something momentous about the reality of it. The winds of change were rustling among the trees and you could feel the faint breeze and smell the jasmine hinting at the promise of a new season.

The common denominator in the resignation of a seemingly high performing CEO for sexual misconduct and the appointment of a woman to the highest office of our land is that they are potent symbols of empowerment, if not entitlement. The two events signify permission for all Australians, including women, to dare to dream; Kristy Fraser-Kirk of a safe hospitable workplace environment where one day she can have "quiet enjoyment" of her workplace; and for Julia Gillard, with a little help from her friends, to win the most powerful position in the land and on merit.



If I have a concern about either of these two momentous occurrences it is that people will start to think that the battle for equality has clearly been won; that we can pick up our evangelistic bats and balls and go home. I hear some of you say but even high performing CEO's get sacked now if they sexually harass someone. I hear you add that we now have a female PM for goodness sake! What other evidence do we need of the fact that the past is irretrievably behind us? The examples of one are exactly that. Until we stop marvelling at what has happened, it is not yet commonplace. We are not yet gender blind or habituated to a workplace culture that allows all people to reach their potential without fear of predatory behaviour or subjugation.

It should not be remarkable that a Chief Executive resigned his position for his abuse of power and it should not be remarkable that a highly intelligent, hard working, loyal and impressive person by all accounts possessing of warmth and integrity should be recognised for it. But context is king. We have no precedent for either of those two watershed moments in our collective Australian conscience. At the risk of sounding overly sentimental, there won't be anything bigger than this week for me in a long long time.

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