

# 'SIT DOWN GIRLIE'

## Legal issues from a feminist perspective

### GO GO GIRLIE

Da da daaaaa ... A very special congratulations go from this Girlie to that Girlie. It was recently announced that Beth Wilson, (unknown to many as the original, true Girlie) will be leaving her position as the President of the Mental Health Review Board in Victoria, and taking up her new appointment as the Health Services Commissioner. Well done, Beth.

### ALL ALONE

In a recent full court hearing of the High Court in Canberra, the one bewigged woman in the row upon row of bar tables said she felt 'lonely'. But at a point in the proceedings when some form of contact with another Girlie was required to maintain composure in the highly testosterone charged environment, the lonely barrister locked eyes for a long moment with the only (lonely?) woman on the bench. They felt composed, the moment passed.

### A MERITORIOUS APPOINTMENT

Girlie also congratulates Christine Wheeler QC, on her recent appointment to the Supreme Court of Western Australia, and on the speech she made at her welcome to the court. Here is an excerpt:

'It has sometimes been the case that when a woman has been appointed to judicial office ... there is a debate about whether she has been appointed on merit or because she is a woman, as if the two are inconsistent with each other. I think there is a sense in which they are, because merit, it seems to me, is a slippery sort of concept and particularly in a relatively conservative profession like ours, it is easy to take the view that we know [merit] when we see it, and it looks a lot like us. It looks like those who are already there ... I hope I do lack, to a degree, that sort of merit ...'

### RAPE LAW EVALUATION REPORT RELEASED (FINALLY)

In Victoria, the Rape Law Reform Evaluation project's second report,

which examines the efficacy of the *Crimes (Rape) Act* 1991 was released the day before Good Friday. Girlie is reliably informed that the report had been finished for over a year, but for reasons best known to the Attorney-General and her staff, it languished, the data becoming more dated by the week, until an appropriate launch date could be found.

The launch method (an official leak to the tabloid press) and the timing of it (just before Easter, no-one will pay any attention) was a slap in the face for all those who had contributed to this important piece of research. Perhaps the Attorney's media officer had not considered all the spare time people have to read the paper over the Easter break, because the report attracted its fair share of media attention, despite the official attempts to bury it.

The report looks at whether the 1991 legislative provisions and associated procedural reforms have achieved their primary aim — to reduce the trauma experienced by rape complainants as they make their way through the criminal justice system. The findings are gleaned from analysis of 242 rape case files from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and other court documents, as well as over a hundred interviews with rape complainants, lawyers, judges, and magistrates. While the report finds that there have been some gains for rape complainants, there is still significant room for improvement in the way the system, and those who run it, deal with these types of prosecutions.

The report is available from the Victorian Department of Justice (contact the Legislation and Policy Branch).

### ANTI-AD CAMPAIGN

Girlie was contacted recently by some women whose breakfasts were spoiled when they opened *The Australian* newspaper on 20 March. The outrageous inappropriateness of the full page spread of a naked woman, designed to sell Volvos, put them off their Weeties and confirmed that feminists and others concerned about female nudity being

used to sell completely unrelated products, would *not* be rushing out to put a deposit on the ultimate in Swedish design and road safety. When the image of a bloke perching on a female flight attendant appeared within pages of the nude girlie car thing, they choked on their cups of tea and reached for the phone to cancel all the flights they had booked on Ansett.

These outraged media watchers are urging others to speak out/act in protest against these sexist images being forced upon us (at the breakfast table and elsewhere). They suggest you might like to call the 1800 number provided in the Volvo ad (tel 1800 812 433) and Ansett Airline's marketing manager (Wendy Peard) on tel 03 9623 2200 or fax 03 9623 2074 and tell them about the flawed nature of their latest ad campaigns.



### US ABORTION DECISION

The US Supreme Court recently disallowed the claim of 6 former students that the Californian University they attended had violated their freedom of religion because its health insurance plan, to which they had contributed, covered abortions. The Court held that the students 'failed to prove any substantial burden' on their religious beliefs and in any event that health care plan would be valid as 'the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling government interest'.

The *Associated Press* report (1.4.97) noted that the former students' claim had been dismissed by a federal court judge, and the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals, before being rejected by the Supreme Court. A very expensive attempt to exercise their right of free religious expression, with the ultimate aim of suppressing the right of others to freely choose parenthood. Girlie thinks they could have used their funds more responsibly.

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