

Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration, 26 May 2014

**Reply to Former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard by Tanja Kovac, National Co-
Convenor of EMILY's List Australia**

Thank you, Julia.

Not just for today or for your future work, where you are building a commitment to invest in education across the globe, but for the collaborative, consensus seeking, forward thinking leadership of Australia you provided as Prime Minister.

Thank you for the NDIS. And for Gonski and a better education for all.

Thank you for building the senior learning unit at my children's primary school and for the thousands of other buildings which are creating a small revolution in State Schools across the country.

Thank you for ensuring that women were always equal partners in leadership.

I am not Joan Kirner, but I am standing in her shoes. These are big shoes to fill. Well, actually, they're quite small.

I asked Joan – So, what size are those shoes of yours? And she said “I dunno, Tanja, I have no idea”.

When you have been a Premier and an education activist you don't have time to worry about shoe size. There are many more important things to worry about. But for those of you interested in these matters of fashion, Joan tells me she's a size seven, much smaller than mine, but still big shoes to fill.

I know nothing would have given Joan more pleasure today than to see an oration, named in her honour, being given by you, Julia. Our first female Prime Minister. A woman she mentored and supported to lead.

You and Joan share many similarities in your leadership journey.

The State School girls made good; the passion for a fair education that drove you to be the top of your game; the commitment to community and to women.

There is a new documentary coming out in a few weeks looking at women's political organising across the globe called "*She's Beautiful When She's Angry*".

I'm sure when you were giving your misogyny speech that you were not prepared for how beautiful we would find you in your rage.

In that same documentary, an old feminist remarks that "*You never retire from women's issues*"

The misogyny speech has meant that you can never retire from women's issues anywhere across the globe.

Great women leaders never give up on women's issues and they never give up on social justice.

Great women leaders transform upon retirement.

Eleanor Roosevelt, when she was First Lady of the United States, no doubt thought that she had reached the pinnacle of leadership allowed a woman of her generation. But little did she know when she retired from that role, the United Nations Human Rights Commission would come calling upon her.

This transformation also taking place right now for Hilary Clinton.

Women leaders, sitting atop a lonely apex, a little like Judy Horacek's wonderful cartoon, Women of Altitude. Women leaders who see over the top of challenges and continue to lead long after their term expires.

This is what the former leader of Ireland, Mary Robinson is doing, and the former leader of New Zealand, Helen Clark. They all become more after they have left office. Even Joan Kirner transformed after being Premier into a wise woman warrior for future generations of women leaders through her work at EMILY's List.

We are now watching your transformation, Julia, – a powerful transformation – as you start to share the good ideas you started here in Australia around the rest of the world.

This week, more than ever, there is Julia Nostalgia.

It's in the twitterverse and in the commentariat.

After a diabolical budget, everyone is shouting – come back, baby! All is forgiven.

You tried to warn us about them.

Well, the blue ties and the blue bloods have taken back control of the nation for the vested interests they serve – and the budget is their vision of Australia writ large.

A budget of degradation for social justice and inclusion.

A budget that hurts the poor, hurts women and hurts those who cannot defend themselves.

Social justice is the antidote to the ills of conservative entitlement.

At EMILY's List, we are used to being attacked by the Abbott, Hockeys, Bolts, Jones and Albrechtsens of this world for supporting initiatives that give women a leg up.

Affirmative action or any kind of positive discrimination that helps marginalised people is always under attack by people who claim that such initiatives are an offense to merit.

But there is nothing less meritorious than nepotism.

Nothing more a challenge to equal opportunity than reward based only on wealth.

Nothing more problematic for a fair go than hereditary born to rule.

Or more damaging to fairness and equality than boys club patronage.

Social Justice is the antidote to these kinds of conservative, anti-meritorious entitlements.

When Hockey says the Age of Entitlement is Over, these are just weasel words for what he really means – that social justice is over; that welfare is over.

But welfare means what it says. It is our human conscience at work promoting wellness and fairness for all.

It is our jobs at conferences like this to build a lasting alliances and an unbreakable consensus to defend social justice, welfare and inclusion from roll back. There is no-one else to do this work. There is Just-Us.

Joan Kirner and Julia Gillard provide a vision of a different style of leadership – collaborative, consultative and compassionate; aimed at building people up not taking them down.

We all have to walk in their shoes. No matter how big or small our feet may be.