



ourcommunity.com.au

# Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration 2021

Presentation by

**Senator Penny Wong**

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne and online, Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Video and audio versions of this speech are available at  
[www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

## About the presentation

It took a pandemic for our State and Federal governments to admit that the JobSeeker payments weren't enough to live off, that homelessness needed to be (and could be) tackled, and that the level of insecure work in this country is hitting crisis point. Despite this, every solution has focused on the short-term, with an expectation that everything will just go back to normal once the pandemic ends. But we don't want to return to normal, we want change. Now is the time to have our voices heard. Now is the time to force our governments to do what is right.

## Senator Penny Wong

Can I first acknowledge the Wurundjeri Warrung as the traditional custodians of country, the country on which we meet today, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Can I thank Carol, for all her work to continue the Feminist Project. Thanks to Denis Moriarty and to all of the team who brought this conference together and who have initiated the Joan Kirner Oration a decade ago. It's a great honour to be invited here to give this oration and it is a particular honour to have Ron Kirner here with us.

Well, I love the title and the attitude of this conference. Communities in Control: think bigger, fix everything. It's ambitious, it's determined and it's courageous just like Joan. Joan understood, as do you, that change requires us to be all of these things. We often hear these days that there is an abounding sense of disempowerment, a sense that political engagement is pointless, but despair is a luxury those most vulnerable cannot afford and cynicism only ever serves the status quo. You see, it's only ever been up to us to make the world a better place. Last year we lost two of the great women activists of our times. Icons like Joan. Susan Ryan, a Labor sister to Joan and me, and Ruth Bader-Ginsburg. One of the things that we often miss when thinking of these women is they didn't necessarily set out to become what they ended up being. Ruth Bader-Ginsburg didn't set out to be a Supreme Court Justice, in fact the idea might have been preposterous to her younger self. What she did do was set about applying herself to the issues and causes that mattered to her and much of her contribution happened before she was on the court. A series of steps one foot in front of the other, each step an act of grit, humbly defying so much about what we assume is possible. Just like Joan.

When Joan Kirner got involved in a school parents club, she didn't do it to become Education Minister or eventually Premier. She, and these other women, and so many more, remind us that we cannot treat progress as only the work of great figures in history. It's never been up to a venerated few to make our world better. It is up to all of us. Because ultimately what

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

2



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

made all of these women great, and to paraphrase another activist, Arthur Ashe, was that they used what they knew, where they were, to do what they could.

Joan understood this and she always knew what she was up against and she always persisted and deployed every tool at her disposal. She was a friend and a mentor to so many of us. As well as changing our party and changing what we thought was possible, she taught us a lot. She taught me a lot. She thought bigger, beyond her immediate circumstances. She was able to imagine a world where structural barriers were removed and, even better, could chart the course to remove them and she knew the power of her own agency. She took control and refused to allow others to tell her the change she sought wasn't possible, particularly those who benefited from the status quo, like the blokes. And her contribution on policy, especially education and the environment, is lasting but changes in our culture are as important as changes to law and public policy and Joan insisted on changing culture. She did that in so many ways, by being who she was, through her work in Emily's List, through her work on affirmative action inside our party, by paving the way for others, including me.

So according to many who sit opposite me in the Senate, Mr. Morrison's frontbenchers and backbenchers alike, I'm a quota girl. 52, quota girl. And as much as anyone, I have Joan to thank for that, and amongst what I am most proud of in my political career is that I have tried to pay that forward. At the Labor Special Rules conference in 2002, just three months after I entered Parliament, my dear friend Sharon Jackson and I led a push to increase our affirmative action target, with Joan's support and backing. Joan, perhaps in her second most important musical contribution after subbing in for Joan Jett on *The Late Show*, joined with Sharon in organising an all-women purple sequined marching band for the day of the conference and we ended up winning an important victory on the way to 50/50 with the conference deciding that 40% of candidates for winnable seat had to be women. I will never forget, as part of those negotiations, paying a visit to a factional heavyweight. He blew his stack and I endured one of his familiar tirades and there might be a competition later to see if

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

3



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

you work out who it is, where I was told that my audacity in seeking this change, our audacity in seeking this change wasn't to his liking and I told him, "You misunderstand why I'm here. I'm not consulting you. I'm telling you where we're at". I should explain to you, I wasn't actually thinking about being recalcitrant, I was just like telling him how it was.

So, I take this trip down memory lane partly because it is a lane built by Joan Kirner but also because it is relevant to where Australian politics is right now. Joan Kirner helped change the composition of Australian Labor and so she helped change the Australian Labor Party. And while affirmative action was difficult to negotiate because ultimately it meant some people with power had to share it, there was less need for explanation as to why it mattered because Labor people do understand that inequality is so often structural. Whether that inequality is on the basis of gender, race or socio-economic factors or some combination, you see it persists until and unless we take steps to overcome it. Inequality exists not because of individual attributes but regardless of them.

It's something our political opponents don't understand and that's obvious every day. You can hear it in everything they say in the national conversation about women in Australia. You can hear it in their refusal to recognise that the structural inequality that results in the under-representation of women in Parliament can only be remedied by structural change and so their representation of women has stalled, and you can hear it in their double standards. They don't see anything wrong with the quota for National Party men and you can hear it in the words of so many of their people. Take Amanda Stoker. Now I wouldn't have brought her up, given that like the Fox News talking heads she mimics, her main purpose is to polemicise, precisely so she is talked about. It's an act as tired and as predictable as *The Young and the Restless*. That's a reference only for those of us who are a bit older – but another senator has been appointed by Mr Morrison to address his so-called women problem as the Assistant Minister for Women. Let me tell you some of the things she's said. She complains about skewed gender sensitivity training. In her first speech to the Senate, she described what she said were people "finding

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

4



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

some immutable characteristic like your sex or skin colour to justify being treated with a privilege over others or to claim some kind of special victimhood". She later went on to say, "The victim develops a sense of entitlement to elevated status and if not given, whether by government or others, it confirms victimhood". It's all imagined victimhood, you see.

I don't think I need to explain that, to this audience, that there are a whole range of ways in which people of colour, women, people with disability have less, experience less advantage. They don't imagine it. Women in Australia spend twice as much time on unpaid work as men and retire with about half the superannuation balance. Are we really to believe that seeking to specifically address the causes of this economic inequality would see women claim some kind of special victimhood? It is actually an argument which demonstrates the disdain for people who face disadvantage and it seeks to justify preserving structural barriers in a government doing nothing. And of course, this is a woman who has also campaigned against a woman's right to choose, a campaign she continues in her new role, and when I heard her – I'm going to quote something she said, and I imagined what Joan would have said. Senator Stoker said when asked where she stood on a woman's right to choose, "Any adult woman has the opportunity to choose in their behaviours every day of the week and there are probably 100 decisions one can take leading up to a point at which one finds oneself pregnant, that's the woman's right to choose".

Let's be clear. It's a word game deployed to deny women the right to choose, and it diminishes and disregards advocacy that has spanned over decades. Advocacy that I was so proud to be part of as Joan's friend and colleague but I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. We had seven budgets brought down by this government with no women's budget statement. We had budget measures last year focused on mentorship and we heard about the budget benefiting women because money was being spent on roads and women drive on roads too. Remember the one about – we were asking about the maternity services and the fact there weren't sufficient maternity services, so women were giving birth on the side of the Barton Highway and he said, "We put 150 million dollars into upgrading the

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

5



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

Barton Highway”. I still laugh when I think about it, it’s kind of – anyway, I’ll stop talking. Focus Penny! Focus on the speech!

Now, I’m glad that money has been found for childcare, although an insufficient amount, I think just enough to demonstrate the problem but not enough to actually fix it. And I’m glad money has been found for services helping women in crisis but those services for women in crisis have themselves been in financial crisis for some years. And I wish the government had not ignored a key recommendation of the *Respect at Work* report which would confirm that employers have a positive duty to keep their staff safe from sexual harassment. But you see fundamentally – and this is not a partisan point, it is a philosophical point – too many of our political opponents in the Liberal Party do not agree, do not believe that there are structural barriers faced by women and they don’t understand or believe it’s government’s job to remove those barriers. That would be, as Senator Stoker might say, indulging victimhood.

Well, how different was Joan Kirner? She understood. She believed that government had a role in shaping opportunity. She knew the role of government, the capacity of government to redress injustice and disadvantage and so do I and so do you. Last week’s budget was an opportunity to invest in a vision for our nation, an opportunity to build better, but regrettably, instead of harnessing the power of government to deliver the reform needed to make our economy and our society stronger, broader and more sustainable, there was a laundry list of political fixes. We have a trillion dollars of debt, but wages still go backwards and so little effort to address the disadvantage of so many Australians. I think we can build back better. We can seize this once in a century opportunity to reinvent our economy, to lift wages and make sure they keep rising. To invest in advanced manufacturing and skills and training with public TAFE at its heart, to provide affordable childcare, to address the housing crisis and to champion equality for women and to emerge as a renewable energy superpower. That is what a social justice agenda for Australia should look like in 2021.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

6



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

As Anthony Albanese likes to say, an economy should work for people, not the other way around. When too many Australians in this country who are counted as employed, who can't get enough hours to pay the bills, or can't count on regular hours - and there are too many Australians who are being exploited or underpaid or subjected to an unsafe environment, hostage to their insecure work - it is well past time for governments to crack down on the abuse of cowboy labour hire-firms. People who do the same work should get the same pay. So, we should do what Labor has called for, write job security in the Fair Work Act and properly define casual work. We should do what the Victorian government has already done but we should do it nationally, which is to criminalise wage theft.

These and so many other policies are all about ensuring Australians get a fair share of the prosperity the nation generates. And we should act on climate change because positive action on climate change and moving to net zero emissions by 2050 will create jobs, lower energy prices and lower emissions and part of what Anthony announced last week were new energy apprenticeships to train ten thousand young people for these new jobs. Jobs in renewable energy generation and renewables and manufacturing.

As you would know, one of the most acute social justice issues we face in this country is affordable housing. Young Australians worry they won't be able to afford a first home. Families struggle with the cost of living and the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness are older women. Last week Anthony, himself the beneficiary of social housing, committed Labor to a ten billion dollar off-budget Housing Australia Future Fund to build social and affordable housing now and into the future. It will create jobs, it will build homes and it will change lives and over the first five years it will build thirty thousand social and affordable houses including four thousand for women and children escaping domestic violence. It will invest in improving housing in remote indigenous communities. It will invest in crisis and transitional housing for women and children fleeing violence and older women on low incomes who are at risk of homelessness. And it will build housing and fund

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

7



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help

specialist services for veterans who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of the same.

This morning I had the privilege to be at Launch Housing East St Kilda and met with some of the women that service has helped to escape domestic violence situations, and as a result of the support they have received, these women are building a better future for themselves. Such inspiring women.

Labor's vision is about seizing the opportunity to build a better future, to improve living standards and promote fairness. These are genuine measures that tackle disadvantage, and we believe that government has a role in addressing structural inequality in great part because we understand inequality exists, but none of this is easy. Yes, we need ambition, but we also have to convince people who don't agree with us. At the last election we fell well short of a majority and we won't change the government without respecting where people are at and earning their trust because that's how change happens. That's how we write a new chapter.

Take Medicare. So beloved by Australians. You could easily forget that Labor governments had to build it twice – we had to win government twice to secure it. Joan Kirner knew as well as anyone that social justice meant little to people's lives as ideas alone. That it took governments with progressive agendas to make social justice a reality and she spent so much of her life creating that progressive agenda. So little change would become a reality if we are not able to secure government, which always requires convincing those who don't naturally agree with us. Think of some of the structural and transformational change in this country which has only happened because we were able to do that. The National Disability Insurance Scheme, Accessible Education, the Sex Discrimination Act, the Racial Discrimination Act, the Native Title Act, the apology to the Stolen Generations - these have all been years in the making and none would have happened without a Labor government. And there is so much left to do, including on our path to reconciliation and recognition with our First Nations peoples. I was so privileged to be in the Parliament for the National Apology. It was a moment of such great importance for our

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

8



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help



nation, and I close with this thought; I hope we can all be part of Australia achieving truth, treaty and voice. We in the Labor Party are committed to this as we all should be.

So, as you conclude this year's conference, I say to you heed the call to arms you yourselves have set out because as Joan's life and work demonstrated, change takes all of us. It takes all of our collective ambition, all of our collective determination, all of our collective courage to think big and to fix everything. Thank you very much.

**ENDS**

## **MORE INFORMATION**

For reports, audio, transcripts and video from the 2021 Communities in Control conference and from previous years, visit:

[www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2021 Communities in Control Conference convened by Our Community, May 2021 | [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

9



**Communities in Control**  
The conference. The movement.



**ourcommunity.com.au**  
Where not-for-profits go for help