

**Security in a Disrupted World—  
Speech by Leader of the Opposition in  
the Senate the Hon. Penny Wong,<sup>1</sup>  
Women and National Security  
Conference Dinner,  
Canberra, 4 April 2017**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this inaugural Women and National Security Conference. It's a pleasure to be here, but it is even more gratifying to see a conference of this calibre focused on such an important issue.

I have always believed that our institutions should seek to reflect the diversity of our community. So you might well be expecting me to bemoan the fact that there are still too few women inhabiting the secret cloisters of the national intelligence and security community, particularly in senior positions. And you might expect me to issue yet another appeal for a concerted attack on the glass ceiling.

You might also be expecting me to offer you all further encouragement in tackling the somewhat clubby character of the intelligence and security community which remains predominantly a male preserve.

There is no doubt that we need more women in the security business; equally, we need more women in leadership positions. So, more strength to your arm, collectively and individually, in your pursuit of equality.

But what I want to focus on tonight is why women are so important in enabling our national intelligence and security community to meet the challenges that uncertain times bring with them.

In other words, I want to consider equality with a focus on the 'why' rather than the 'what'.

At one level, the rationale for more equal representation in the national security space is similar to that offered in the political and management spheres. As the 2014 UN Women's Australian National Committee's Conference on Gender Equality in Business noted, a more inclusive leadership cohort can improve performance, bringing a diversity of experience and perspective to both problem identification and decision-

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making. More generally, there is a growing recognition of the relationship between gender equality and community well-being.

Professor Valerie Hudson, who is here with us tonight, and whom you heard earlier today, is perhaps the leading authority on this topic.

As Professor Hudson wrote in her 2012 book *Sex and World Peace*,

the very best predictor of a state's peacefulness is not its level of wealth, its level of democracy, or its ethno-religious identity ... it is how well its women are treated.

There is intrinsic merit in greater engagement by women in our national security institutions, and a stronger focus on women when identifying the collective problems we face and the solutions we help generate. My emphasis tonight, however, is that the times and circumstances we face make that cultural shift, in both personnel and perspective, even more vital.

I've previously made the point that we live in more than interesting times. Indeed, I've suggested that the circumstances we confront go beyond uncertainty, or even discontinuity, and that this period is best characterised as one of disruption.

Whatever nomenclature one uses, I suspect we might find broad agreement around this central proposition—that we are unlikely to successfully deal with today's problems by simply replaying our past responses.

There is a need for a careful reconsideration of what security is fundamentally about and whether our national responses to security issues are the most appropriate for uncertain times.

The paradigm change that may be necessary in our approach to security questions is only possible if the security community itself undergoes rejuvenation and transformation. One of the best ways to generate fresh thinking and innovation in any business is to ensure that gender equality and ethnic diversity are put to work to drive change.

Much of our public discourse and visible signs of our national security efforts focus on 'hard' responses such as CCTVs, bollards, static barriers and armed guards. There is no doubt that these responses are necessary. The question is whether they are sufficient. As important as these may be, are we thinking sufficiently broadly both about security risks and the way in which we respond to them? Should we elevate our discussion of the values we seek to preserve as an open and inclusive society—equality, cooperation, tolerance and compassion?

Do we need to remind ourselves more persistently that we will not succeed or become safer by closing ourselves off from each other or from the world?

Security challenges are best met working with others rather than turning inwards. And history reminds us of the risks that inward-looking, disengaged societies pose—risks of misunderstanding, tension and conflict.

Senator Hanson's recent foray is a reminder of the risks we face. Her call to ban Muslim immigration was rightly condemned by the Prime Minister as doing exactly what the terrorists want.

Now I don't claim expertise on these issues. You are all in a much better position than I to evaluate the various security measures that governments have mandated. And you are no doubt in a better position than I to assess whether the language we use to talk about security issues deals with them accurately and intelligently. I shall return to that issue in a moment.

What I can say, however, is that the concept of security for most Australians would also encompass economic and financial security, affordable health care, job and income security, quality childcare and the promise of a dignified retirement.

In other words, 'security' has a much broader connotation than the more threat-based protective and response concepts on which a lot of public policy concentrates. This in no way diminishes the work that you all do.

But what it might suggest is that a broader understanding of what security means for the general populace and where it impacts on people's lives may in turn expand the range of tools at your disposal and the effectiveness of the programs you design and implement.

The philologists among you would already know that the words 'security' and 'sinecure' derive from the same linguistic origin—*sine* meaning 'without' and *cura* meaning 'care'. Far from having connotations of sanction and punishment, the word originally brought with it the sense of being without care or worry. Disrupted times, however, bring with them a raft of cares and worries. The French economist Thomas Piketty has identified economic inequality as a principal cause of the political instability currently infecting Europe—the Brexit vote and its currently unforeseeable consequences, the rise of radical parties on both the left and the right, the resurgence of nationalism in countries like Austria, Hungary and Poland, and the politics of exclusion on religious and racial grounds.

Into this mix come historical grievances driven in more or less equal parts by colonialism on the one hand and its collapse on the other. The picture becomes even more bleak when we see political leaders who reject the operating rules by which the international system has worked for the past seventy years, the emergence of new international players that want to impose new operating rules, and all of this rendered even more toxic by the emergence of nihilist ideologies that advocate death rather than tolerance.

Many of you would be familiar with the impact that discontinuity can have on complex systems. But complex systems generally have sufficient resilience to manage discontinuities, to bounce back relatively quickly. Indeed, many of the security features inbuilt into complex systems are specifically designed to deal with discontinuity.

But as I have said, the uncertain times into which we are currently heading are less characterised by discontinuity than they are by a much more destructive phenomenon—disruption. As you know, disruptive changes can generate existential threats. Disruptive technologies have allowed Amazon and Kindle to challenge the very existence of the book trade as it was. Disruptive business models like Uber and Airbnb threaten current structures and practices in the taxi and hotel industries, with real implications for working conditions and income streams for those who work in those industries.

Disruption is at the centre of the malaise that we see globally. Political and economic disruption are the main drivers of strategic disruption. It is that form of disruption that is undermining the confidence of people everywhere, generating care, worry and, more alarmingly, fear. And fear is particularly dangerous because it prompts irrational and dangerous actions.

It is a curious fact, however, that disruption can generate a critically important reaction, and that is innovation.

More than a decade ago, the American political theorist Philip Bobbitt published *The Shield of Achilles*. Bobbitt deals with that most disruptive of all human activities—war. His thesis is essentially that war generates substantial constitutional change as people recoil from the destruction and horror that war inevitably brings.

His analysis of the relationship between war and constitutionality may be contested. But what is pretty incontestable is that disruption is best addressed by innovation. And that is the challenge, I think, that faces all of us in the security domain.

You would all be aware of the call by many international commentators for governments to deal with the ‘root causes’ of the various forms of politically motivated violence presently affecting the global community. Of course, few of those commentators actually identify what those ‘root causes’ are.

But what we do know is that the so-called ‘root causes’ lie at the intersection of the economic, social, cultural, ethnic and ideological forces that lend movement and colour to human collective activity. And the agent who acts at the intersection of these forces is always an individual person.

In a very thoughtful opinion piece published in the UK *Guardian* a couple of weeks ago, the novelist and former security specialist Nicholas Searle cautioned against rhetoric as a component of security policy.

Sweeping terms like ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ cannot alone explain the breakdown of law and order across the Middle East, nor radical groups that have spread their tentacles into Europe, North America, South and South-East Asia, Africa and even Australia. It is interesting to note that the incoming National Security Advisor in the Trump administration, General H. R. McMaster, has also counselled against the use of terms such as ‘Islamic terrorism’.

Politically motivated violence is a form of criminal activity. It needs to be dealt with as such. And as an international phenomenon, politically motivated violence will best be contained and eliminated when nations, some of which are Muslim, work collaboratively to address the broad security needs of the communities in which the perpetrators live.

That kind of collaboration depends for its success on the ability to address the human security needs that condition fear and violence. That kind of collaboration will also serve to identify, detain and prosecute those who undertake politically motivated violence.

As Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said recently,

we have a solemn responsibility to counter that argument of the extremists, of the extreme right and the extremists in the Middle East who say that being a Muslim citizen of this democracy is incompatible with their faith. We need to counter that argument, not amplify it. It is our job, our duty, to foster a more inclusive, a more respectful, a more egalitarian Australia. We do not just tolerate diversity; we embrace diversity. We do not just acknowledge multiculturalism; we embrace multiculturalism—as a bipartisan achievement and as a shared priority.

Recognition that language has consequences was at the heart of the success of the Northern Ireland peace deal.

Nicholas Searle commented on the highly deliberate and painstaking efforts that led eventually to the 1998 Good Friday agreement that ended political violence in Northern Ireland.

Careful timing, nuanced language and emotional gearing on all sides enabled the moment to be won.

This is exactly what should inspire all of you in your professional efforts in the national security domain.

Rejuvenation and regeneration should always be front of mind for those who lead high-performing organisations. Subtlety and nuance in both policy and

operations are most likely to be effective when organisations are truly representative of the communities they serve.

Open communities have the strength of inclusion. Closed communities have the spectre of fear.

Conferences such as this, and people like all of you in this audience tonight, provide the critical wherewithal that keeps our national security community ahead of the serious problems it is designed to address.