Guest Speaker Address at Brisbane Girls Grammar School Father-Daughter Dinner 20 August 2008

Guest Speaker Dr Dale Spender

I have thought quite a lot about talking to you tonight - because I certainly don’t want to deliver a sermon! And while some might think that it is a good opportunity to tell fathers a thing or two about life for the ladies in the twenty-first century - I want to talk to the girls - of Brisbane Girls Grammar School.

I’m sure you all get told often enough about how privileged you are - how lucky to be living in this country that ‘punches above its weight in Olympic medals’; and that you are all regularly informed that you are extremely fortunate to be attending one of the best schools in Australia - or even - one of the best in the world. And this is all true!

But what you might not know is just how many other daughters - who were far less fortunate - put so much of their lives into ensuring that you would take for granted these privileges that they fought for.

All the things I would really like to talk about would probably take - at least a week! - but I have to settle for about twenty minutes. So I have decided just to tell you two short stories: – one about a nineteenth century daughter, Maria Edgeworth – and another about a twentieth century daughter – Christabel Pankhurst.

Both of them did their duty as their fathers saw it.

This will give you some idea of the father - daughter traditions that are your inheritance as daughters of the twenty-first century.

And of course you can’t talk about a nineteenth century daughter - without talking about the father - fathers played such a dominating role in daughters’ lives.

Maria Edgeworth: 1768 -1849

Unlike many other fathers of his day, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (who was educated at university) was interested in inventions - and education: or more precisely - in moulding minds!

This was partly because he had four wives and twenty-two children: (death in childbirth was a stark reality of the time). Maria was the oldest daughter, and her father’s fourth wife (and her third stepmother) was much younger than Maria was!

Maria liked to write - and this made her the major source of family entertainment: (she wrote stories to be read around the fire at night). She was also the source of educational materials for the experimental school that her father set up for all her brothers and sisters. (Had to do something with them….)

As the eldest daughter, Maria was obliged to do her duty by her father. Her life was confined to the family. And while she wrote for the family circle - extensive as it was - and helped her father with his education articles - all was OK.
But Maria wanted to write novels. This led to heated arguments with her father and his friends. In the wider world it was still the case that public writing was considered completely inappropriate for women.

No ‘lady’ could earn her living without ruining her reputation, whether she gained her money from selling her body or selling her literary skills, the disapproval about earning money was much the same.

Which is why women who did write, did so often anonymously. Apart from marriage, writing was the only occupation open to them even when it wasn’t approved of; but many of them did it secretly – and they often couldn’t claim either authorship - or the money from the publisher!

In the nineteenth century women were not allowed to own property. Even when they earned money - it was usually paid to the men who controlled their lives - fathers or husbands.

There was one famous case – that of Caroline Norton (1808 - 1877) whose husband was a drunkard and a wife beater, who left her and took off with her children (they were also owned by the father).

To support herself she started writing – but her husband, as was his right, took the money for that as well. This prompted her to write a pamphlet detailing all his abusive habits. On the front of it she wrote – LET HIM CLAIM COPYRIGHT TO THIS! (We don’t know if he did!)

Caroline Norton drew attention to women’s disempowered status: no property, no vote, no education or professional occupations - completely dependent on the goodwill of men. Fathers, brothers, husbands, sons.

This is if course why women had to learn to manage men; it stood to reason that the better a man felt - the better life the women had. This is why women were taught to be pleasing and agreeable. And Maria was no exception.

In all the biographies of Maria Edgeworth (who became one of the most successful of English novelists) a common criticism of her was that she was always seeking her father’s approval, as if somehow this was a character defect rather than a survival skill.

(The survival skills of twenty-first century daughters are very different – as I am sure you appreciate!)

Maria was groomed to be her father’s literary assistant, he called it a partnership – but we wouldn’t be so sure about that today. He encouraged her to write educational stuff and to promote his ideas. (And her set of reading books for young children - Henry and Luce - make Janet and John look very silly).

At one stage Richard ‘pressured’ Maria to write a book - supposedly authored by him - on a topic he thought was very important: a study of vocational education for boys!

She didn’t want to do it: in fact she couldn’t think of anything worse. It was a massive task - and it had to be written in ‘masculine’ style of course.

Then when she finished it, she was riddled with anxiety – worried that her work wouldn’t be good enough! To her friend Sophy she wrote that she was so distressed - because ‘consider, my father’s credit is entirely at stake’

Maria didn’t even own her words. But she had done her duty. When her father was named as author - neither of them questioned the arrangement.
(No issues about plagiarism in those days!)

But she didn’t follow her father’s precepts entirely. When she wasn’t writing for her father or teaching the children – Maria Edgeworth did manage to write some extraordinary novels under very restricted conditions.

She could not appear to be doing any serious work as such occupation would have been most unbecoming and unattractive in a woman. She had to hide the fact that she was putting in long hours on her novels, and to pretend that when she wasn’t helping her father - she was simply decorative.

She needed to look pleasing - to be agreeable - to always be ready to listen and to be sympathetic to the man of the house.

But it wasn’t just finding the time for writing (and being womanly) that was her problem. For her novels to be convincing, she had to find out more about the wider world. For this she relied on accounts from her friends.

She was forever asking them for details about people, places, events - manners and social occasions; she kept on at her brothers to provide information about their professions, along with their opinions on issues of the day.

Maria Edgeworth did not marry; her father wanted her at home. Yet marriage was the major preoccupation in her novels because it was the only approved career for women at the time.

Understandably, she gave as much serious consideration to women’s career management in the nineteenth century as you would get for your careers today. A woman’s entire life - living - leisure - learning - liberty - depended on making the right decision. That is, on finding, ‘catching’ and marrying the right man.

And there could be no career changes. No excuses that it didn’t work out and so you would look out for another opportunity. Divorce was just about unknown.

If Maria Edgeworth were to be around today – she wouldn’t have seen her duty as abandoning the world and staying with her father – through all the wives! She would no doubt be one of the most talented girls at BGGS: and think of the opportunities – that may or may not have included marriage - that she would delight in.

As it was she managed to write some of the best novels in the English language and which were widely acclaimed then; she was paid the unprecedented sum of £2,000 for a single work! Not that she had the choice on how to spend it. Or not until her father died.

Twentieth Century Christabel Pankhurst

Richard Pankhurst was a barrister who took on unpopular political causes - and didn’t make much money. His wife Emmeline (born in 1858) had been asking awkward questions from a very early age and was considered somewhat ‘disagreeable’ - I usually find that’s another word for an independent woman.
When, as a child, her father treated the education of her brothers with grave concern and dismissed the education of girls as ‘the art of making home attractive’ – she knew there was something wrong.

‘It used to puzzle me why I was under such a particular obligation to make home attractive for my brothers,’ she said. ‘We were on excellent terms of friendship but it was never suggested to them - as a duty - that they should make home attractive to me. Why not? Nobody seemed to know’.

You get the picture. Girls who want to know why they have to clean up the mess the boys make are trouble!

In my own case - it was why did I have to make my bed when my brother did not? There are thousands of variations on these questions that uppity girls can ask - and continue to ask. And which pinpoint the ongoing issue of unfair workloads in the home.

The Pankhurst’s had a very different relationship from the Edgeworth husband-and-many-wives. Much more one of equals. And while Mrs Pankhurst had an inferior education from that of her brothers – she nonetheless shared in the responsibility of breadwinning as a wife - and opened a shop.

There were four Pankhurst children; and the father was pretty much hands on, and seems to have wanted all of them to have a place in the world. He insisted that they had a duty to their fellow citizens. His message to the children was ‘If you do not work for others you will have not been worth the upbringing’.

Richard Pankhurst died early but his words were not lost on his daughter Christabel, who became a major force in the campaigns for VOTES FOR WOMEN. She didn’t get to go to university to start with, but she was the one who came up with the idea of passive resistance – a strategy that Gandhi acknowledged he had copied.

In 1905 when the Women’s Social and Political Union was formed, (with Christabel a major force), women had been ‘asking’ for the vote for more than 50 years- and there had been no progress. And women like Christabel wanted the vote - not as a symbol – but so they could DO something to change the position of women.

Women had to be able to influence parliament if they wanted to change the laws that so restricted women’s lives.

Parliament was all male of course. And when one brave member proposed that all barriers be removed and that the universities and the professions should be open to women - he was howled down. His colleagues were aghast; if you give women any choices other than marriage they said – they will refuse to be wives!

Twenty-first century daughters could well say – they were right!

(There were lots of dangers in an all male parliament - that represented only half of humanity! For example - the 1850 Act of Parliament –the House passed a law that man should stand for woman: and of course - there was no woman in the House to stand up and say - don’t be absurd – that’s as ridiculous as saying dog should stand for cat).
In the absence of any opposition – men decreed that man included woman – and you can work out what that has done for women’s invisibility and sense of self.)

But back to Christabel – who could have given countless reasons for why women must have the vote but who knew very well that they wouldn’t get it by asking men nicely. Not even their fathers - indeed, especially not their fathers in some circumstances - thought that it was a good idea. Many didn’t want to give away their monopoly on power. Others didn’t want their daughters indulging in unladylike behaviour.

Christabel decided that the only way women would get the vote - was to cause so much trouble - that it was easier for men to pass the law to share their power, than it was to continue to deny women’s rights.

So began the most amazing campaign of civil disobedience that sent members of parliament apoplectic – and disrupted society.

Women stood up at political meetings and demanded to know when the Liberal government would give women the vote: they were ejected - they came back - they resisted arrest - they went to jail. (Christabel was one of the first.)

Think of this – an Edwardian young lady – who hadn’t been to Brisbane Girls Grammar School – who had no serious education - because there was none for girls

- Who had no practice in public speaking
- Who defied every social rule when she stood up and publicly challenged the powerful men of her society
- Who went to jail!

To get the vote so that women would have the same educational - and the same life opportunities - as men.

So that women could be their own persons - owned by neither their fathers nor their husbands.

Her own father would have approved. Though maybe not of everything she organised – and did.

I have to tell you that many of the acts of civil disobedience that the women engaged in – they thoroughly enjoyed. There was the sheer delight of defiance…

The government decided to hold a census – to count who was present in every household on one particular night. The women organised huge sleep outs in parks, all night parties – including an all night roller skating marathon at Waldwick Skating Rink. When the census man called – the women weren’t there! ('We were very tired afterwards – but it as worth it!).

Many of the politicians called Christabel a witch. She was ‘inspiring women to obstruct the government and steal away their manhood by force of ridicule’ – and there was something in this.

Christabel did inspire thousands and thousands of women all over England to leave their fathers’ (and sometimes their husbands’) homes – and do their duty – by making public nuisances of themselves.
The gentlemen of England awoke one day to find that there was a message carved into golf greens all around the country: it said NO VOTES NO GOLF.

Her mother - Mrs Pankhurst (who always wore purple) chained herself to the railings of Downing Street:

A Pantechnicon Van (pulled by horses) drove into the courtyard of the House of Commons – and when the doors opened – a crowd of women rushed out and ran all over the place. They had to be found, rounded up, and packed of to jail in Holloway.

If you think security around George Bush is tight now – you should have seen the security around the PM – Mr Asquith – to protect him from the women. Not that it worked.

This is from the Sheffield Daily Telegraph in 1909

The methods for conveying Mr Asquith from the station were highly successful but not particularly English. The railway officials rigged up a platform adjacent to a sort of back door, and from that Mr Asquith was smuggled to the hotel as if he were a box of contraband goods. Time was when a British PM was proud to face the people – but no! It was surely a little undignified for a British PM to be making unexpected entrances and exits like a trap door artist in a Christmas pantomime

Asquith was pretty well terrified of the women. He was confronted by them everywhere he went – he couldn’t escape the placards and the protests: VOTES FOR WOMEN.

- They popped up in front of him in church pews
- They planted hundreds of VforW flags in his garden
- They climbed the walls of his castle and appeared at his dining room window – inviting him to their next meeting.

The presentation of debutantes at court was cancelled because all these demure looking young women curtsied to their majesties – and then handed them votes for women pamphlets.

West End theatres were closed because it was not just pamphlets that came fluttering down from the ceiling – young women were tasting freedom by swinging from the rafters and shouting slogans above the voices of the actors.

Mr Asquith declared that there was no evidence that women wanted the vote – his wife certainly didn’t. So the women decided to show him up. To prove him wrong - they planned the biggest gathering ever – in Hyde Park.

Mrs Drummond – the general – who trained the women in martial arts – hired a boat (well decorated with Votes for Women signs) and she took it alongside the Houses of Parliament where the gentlemen were - ‘taking tea on the terrace’; with a loud hailer she urged them to come to the meeting on Sunday – she told them not to be afraid -- they wouldn’t be arrested.

The MPs went ballistic! Was no place sacred they demanded to know?

The women were successful - the Votes for Women March was the biggest gathering Britain had ever seen. (This still stands)
But it wasn’t all fun and games as these women put their lives on the line, to push their fathers into giving up their exclusive rights and to vote - to give women votes.

The women were brutally man handled at rallies - they were sent to jail. When they went on hunger strike – they were force fed. The health of many was severely threatened.

But their efforts are one reason that women enjoy the status they do today – even though it is far from being the equality that many of those twentieth century women had in mind a hundred years ago.

**Conclusion**

Maria Edgeworth’s father considered his daughter’s duty was to him. Christabel’s father insisted that her duty was to her fellow citizens. Today’s daughters have inherited this tradition - and are expected to have a duty to family – and to community.

It’s a lot of responsibility –but it is only a start for today’s daughters.

Sons are still expected to do well at school – and in college – and at the workplace. But this expectation has now also been added to the role of the daughters.

Sons are expected to be financially independent – to be a breadwinner -- but most women now are also urged to earn their own living – even to support their own children.

**It’s a lot of work.**

In many households daughters are sharing in the duty of providing for home and children – but sons aren’t doing their share of the emotional work which is so time consuming! Nor are they doing their share when it comes to the huge burden of housework.

Many adult males still want the power of being served - of being waited on; some at best are prepared to help in the house – but they often want to be thanked for their efforts - another sign that they have not as yet given up their male rights to having a home made attractive for them.

It’s the same theme that bothered Emmeline Pankhurst as a girl nearly 150 years ago. Long before the vote was won, long before women were encouraged to cease being financially dependent on men.

Of course daughters were not only urged to become educated, to have careers and make homes attractive –but they are also still expected to look good – to be agreeable to men.

You only have to observe the way the press hands out penalties to women who don’t wear the right dresses - to understand that there is a double standard. And that women have to put much more effort into ‘appearances’ while so many men can get away with saying/wearing just about anything. (All those grey suits: why doesn’t the press complain about them?).

Keeping up appearances is another factor in making women’s lives hard work.

When all those thousands of women fought for the vote, so that they could change the laws and organise a fair deal for daughters – they didn’t realise that every gain that women would make would be an add-on.
That daughters would not be allowed to discard their traditional roles in family and society that they would not be released from the responsibility to make the home attractive for men, that paid work and career paths would be added to women’s existing duties. So that in today’s world – it really is the case that women’s work will never be done.

And this is where twenty-first century fathers come in.

Daughters need to be reminded - by their fathers - that they have a duty towards themselves. That women have a right to a reasonable workload - and that fathers will be their allies in helping them achieve a more equitable quality of life.

In the nineteenth century, young men went to fathers to seek the hand in marriage of daughters. Fathers asked them could they provide? Would they be able to keep the daughter in the manner to which she had become accustomed? These were the important questions of the time.

But they are not the sort of questions fathers should be asking today - if men are again to give up their exclusive power and share the workload then fathers must ask prospective partners

• Can you change a nappy
• What is your attitude to towels – do they belong on the bathroom floor or on the towel rack?
• Do you pick up things as you go – or leave them for someone else to pick up?
• Can you cook
• Can you find your socks, the mint sauce, or the washing powder – or do you still have boy vision and expect someone else to find them for you?
• Do you just want to do the vacuum cleaning – on Saturday morning - which makes a noise, disrupts the household and is so visible that everyone is forced to notice you contribution - and to thank you?

Or will you do the invisibles – which make up most of the drudgery of housework – and which are a greater limitation and burden in women’s lives than were some of the restrictions on daughters of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

It would be difficult to argue that daughters today have any more control over their time – or time for themselves - than daughters did in Maria Edgeworth’s day; indeed, it is likely that daughters today work even harder!

Many of the fathers here tonight are important members of the community: captains of industry – policy makers - decision takers – movers and shakers. The people who have the power to make a difference in the lives of their daughters.

In the twenty first century, women have less sleep, work longer hours, earn less money, have babies and feed them, and make homes ‘attractive’.

When you add to this their responsibility to fix water wastage, global warming, to campaign for better child care, end homelessness, as well as sexual harassment and domestic violence – you can see that it is just too big a job or them to do alone.
Fathers of the twenty first century need to lend a helping hand to ensure that daughters have a life of their own!

Fathers once voted to give up their power and privileges so that their wives and daughters could have a better life: maybe its time for them to consider doing it again. Before women decide that they are getting nowhere by asking nicely…. 

And consider following in the footsteps of daughters past.