

BOYS' CLUBS UNDER SIEGE

A new taskforce is determined to get more women into the boardrooms of Australian public companies. **By Jacqui Walker**

Mandatory quotas for women on the boards of public companies is one of the issues to be examined by a new lobby group of prominent business people — men and women. They have responded to the slow pace of getting women into Australian boardrooms by joining a taskforce that will seek to increase women's participation in business leadership.

One thorny issue for debate will be about setting aside positions on boards for women, as is about to happen in Norway. The taskforce's goals have won the backing of Women Chiefs of Enterprise and the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

But any suggestion of a quota makes many business people recoil. For example, Paul Little, the managing director of Toll Holdings, which has no female board member, did not want to comment. Nor did Don Mercer, the chairman of Orica, which has one woman on its board.

Beverley Honig, chief executive of the busi-

ness consultancy Honeylight Enterprises, will chair the taskforce, tentatively named Boards Australia. It may have an advisory committee. Honig expects chairmen and chairwomen of blue-chip companies to join.

Honig is on the boards of the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce and Virtual Health Technologies, and was a finalist in the Telstra Business Woman of The Year Awards in 1997. She says the taskforce will be more than a think-tank. "The real impetus of this is to make things happen. It will investigate the possibilities and achieve outcomes for women in Australian boardrooms" — showing that, with the right people and the right impetus, change can happen.

She faces a formidable task. The 2002 Australian Census of Women in Leadership found that Australian companies lag well behind the United States in appointing women to senior jobs. More than half (54%) of Australia's top 200 companies have no woman in an executive management position. And women hold 8.2% of board directorships, compared with 12.4% in the US.

At March 31, 2002, 46.7% of the top 152 companies, by market capitalisation, on the Australian Stock Exchange, did not have a women director.

Fiona Krautil is the federal director of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, which conducted the 2002 census and is collecting information for the next one. She says last year's survey established the issue of poor representation of women in business leadership. "Until then, there was much denial that we even had an issue." Krautil does not expect a big improvement in this year's survey results, which will be published

in October. "In Australia, we have sat on the same number for the past 10 years. If we get a half or 1% increase, we will have done well."

But Krautil has been encouraged this year by many more senior business people being prepared to speak publicly about the issue. "We have to have the debate in this country about what we are going to do about it. We have to have the quota debate, because it is the debate that will get people's attention."

Norway is leading the way on this issue. Its parliament is expected soon to pass legislation to force the largest publicly traded companies to increase the percentage of women on boards. Six hundred big companies would be required to increase the ratio to 40% by July 2005, with penalties applying in 2007. At the start of 2003, 8.4% of board members in those companies were women.

Business groups in Norway are arguing that the quotas would be unrealistic and counterproductive, according to a report in *The New York Times*. And the companies are arguing that government should keep out of private business. Nevertheless, the companies are taking the threat of compulsion seriously, and there is some evidence that the number of women on boards has already increased since the Government first proposed the quota.

Although Krautil believes that quotas would be unpopular with many Australians in business, she supports what is happening in Norway because it is making some people wonder, "Is this what we have to do here?"

The Australian Institute of Company Directors supports the taskforce but its chief executive, John Hall, says he would not support quotas because they might result in tokenism.

The idea for the Boards Australia taskforce sprang from the responses of women to a directors' briefing held by the institute in June. One of the facilitators there, Jan Elsner, a director of the business consultancy A Woman's Place, says: "Now is the time for [the debate] to be informed and raised to the next level, with a recognition that what we have been doing has not been working." ●



CHRIS PEARSE

GET ON BOARD

1 A taskforce is being set up to find ways

to improve women's participation in business leadership.

2 On the agenda will be quotas for women on public company boards.

3 Australian women hold 8.2% of directorships, compared with 12.4% in the United States, according to the 2002 Australian Census of Women in Leadership. Little change is expected this year.

BEVERLEY HONIG:
We can make things happen