In the last few months, the question of equal pay for men and women has been brought before the public eye. The Labor Party has said quite categorically that it will use every means in its power to institute equal pay for men and women. The State Labor Member, Mr. Shepherd, has said this in his field and Dr. Evatt has pledged himself to it in the Federal field.

The Federal Government, however, has taken the view that decisions of this kind should be left to the traditional wage tribunals of the State or the Federal Courts. There are sound reasons for this in that these tribunals have the most experience behind them in matters of this kind.

Nevertheless, in the statements that have appeared in the press, I believe it true to say that the question of equal pay for men and women has not been fully examined and that there are many factors which must be taken into consideration before people can make up their minds whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.

Briefly, I would like to mention one or two of these.

As a starting point I would like to take a statement that Dr. Evatt made at a meeting at St. Kilda on Monday, 19th May. He said - "If the work done by a woman is of equal value to that done by a man she should be paid the same, but if the work is less valuable, then the principle does not apply." Now, if we take this statement on its value it quite clearly does not mean equal pay for men and equal pay for women. It means equal pay for work of equal value and that is quite a different thing and introduces a principle which could cut right across all existing wage structures. Equal pay for work of equal value. Now Dr. Evatt is quite clearly saying that if a woman can perform as much work of a particular kind as a man, then she shall get the same wage as a man. If she performs less work than the man, she will get a smaller wage than the man.

However, if we are going to be true to the principle we must carry the comparison further. If we agree with Dr. Evatt's statement, we should also say that if a woman was capable of doing more of a particular kind of work than a man, she should get a higher wage than the man because that is what equal pay for work of equal value means. If this principle were applied to the wage relationships between men and women, what logical
reason would there be for not applying it to people of the same sex to the wage relationships between women and separately again to the wage relationships between men.

Let me give you an example, at the present moment there is a bricklayers award of so much a week for permanent employees. It is a fixed weekly wage but if you introduce the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, then you would be paying bricklayers so much for each 50 or 100 bricks laid which is of course straight out incentive payment based on the amount of work which men carry out. Traditionally Labor has been opposed to a widespread adoption of this kind of incentive payment. They have fought for the steady and permanent weekly wage. When taken to its logical conclusion therefore, Dr. Evatt’s proposal seems to cut across the traditional Labor stand on these matters.

I would like to quote Dr. Evatt’s statement again. He said - "If the work done by a woman is of equal value to that done by a man she should be paid the same and if the women’s work is less valuable than the principle does not apply." This statement opens up a completely new principle in wage relationship not only between men and women but between different men doing the same kind of work. I am not sure, at this stage of Australia’s development, that it would be a wise principle.

There are other considerations which must be borne in mind in this relationship of pay between men and women. The man is traditionally the bread-winner. It is his job to provide for his wife and his family and I believe it is essential for a man’s responsibility that he be allowed to do so. If we are going to introduce the kind of principle that Dr. Evatt mentioned, then we must consider how this may affect the traditional relationship between a man and a woman in bringing up a family. If a woman can earn as much or more than the husband, then the whole family relationship could well be upset. It could encourage the woman to go out to work instead of looking after her family which is something that only women, and not men, can do.

I hope I have said enough to show that this question is not an easy one, that many difficulties are involved and that we can only come to a just decision in these matters after a long and extremely careful examination. That is why the Federal Government believes that the traditional wage tribunals or Arbitration Court (with an experience in these matters, which goes back to the Federation itself) is the best agency and is the best means for solving these problems and for coming to some solution about them.

25/7/1958.