

Pioneering women still fighting the good fight



Powerbrokers all... (from left) Christine Christian, Jillian Broadbent, Imelda Roche, Ila Buttrose, Barbara Cail and Wendy McCarthy have all served as president of Chief Executive Women

JAMES GROCHER

EXCLUSIVE There's still a long way to go for women to reach the top

LISA MACNAMARA
GENDER DIVERSITY

BETWEEN them they have careers spanning four decades, with 25 chairmanships, 50 directorships, five Orders of Australia, three university chancellorships and one Australian of the Year.

Wendy McCarthy, Ila Buttrose, Jillian Broadbent, Barbara Cail, Imelda Roche and Christine Christian have all been trailblazers for Australian women in

public companies and small business, spanning the top echelons of publishing, finance, banking, health, academia and politics.

But despite the repeated calls on gender diversity and the well-promoted company targets to put more women on boards and into chief and executive positions, the achievements of McCarthy and co are still seen as an aberration in Australia.

The six are linked through Chief Executive Women — the business group that each has presided over since it was established in the mid-1980s to educate and advance women into leadership positions. But as it approaches its 30th year the past presidents have joined forces to say enough with

the rhetoric on gender diversity and to call on those at the top to make some tangible changes.

McCarthy, who has a rich history of directorships on a range of government and corporate boards since the 80s, says while there are many paths to diversity, the most simple solution to fixing the poor rate of female representation is through fearless leadership.

"The awful thing is if they don't do it, someone will do it for them and they'll be forced, and it's a pity to go there," McCarthy says. "I think what will happen is there will be quotas, or people will start talking about penalties for boards that don't look like the communities they serve — and there's actually no need for that to happen. It

just requires sensible leadership." Australian of the Year Buttrose agrees, saying the low numbers of females in key roles can be easily corrected by proactive decision-making at the top.

"What does it take? It takes a chairman or a chairwoman to see this board is not representative of the people, we're trying to reach with our products. It's really a simple thing to do: 'I'm going to change the structure of the board,'" Buttrose says.

The comments come as new CEW president, former Dun & Bradstreet chief executive Christian says the organisation is now set on a more activist approach and will hold Australia's chairs and chief executives to account

when it comes to appointments. "They can talk for as long as they like about diversity and all the programs but at the end of the day the real test is when they appoint the women," Christian says. "It's the difference between those on highlighted CEOs and those that aren't."

Christian, who made her way up the ladder in the male-dominated world of finance and private equity, says while some gains have recently been made, the conversation has turned bland after hitting a peak.

"I think many chairmen and CEOs just roll their eyes and think 'here we go again' and 'we've got some reprieve now and we'll just go back to our normal ways' — but

change won't continue and it won't be sustainable unless we keep rocking the boat — and that's what we plan to do."

Since it was established by Barbara Cail in 1985, CEW has built a selective membership of some of the most senior women in the country to make up its 250-strong collective. Best known for its scholarship and mentoring programs, the group is now pushing at the top end, holding regular discussions with chief executives and their senior executive teams, including from BP Australia, ANZ and Woolworths. Many are also part of the "male champions of change" initiative established in 2010 by the Sex Discrimination

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Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick to drive the promotion of women.

McCarthy says while the "male champions" was a good step, evidence of what they were doing was now required.

"It's fine for them to be photographed together and smile and talk about what they're doing but I want to see the hard evidence of how many executives they're pulling through the system and sponsoring and mentoring, and I want to see how many people are changing on their boards," she says. "But at least they're putting their names on the line to say they support it and some of them wouldn't have been in that place before to try and create change — but they've got to do it."

The latest calls come as the statistics for Australian women stagnate at dire levels, as appointments lag while more women opt out of the system to raise families or start their own businesses.

Since 2000, women have made up about 60 per cent of all university graduates while there are only seven female chief executives of companies in the ASX 200, representing 3.5 per cent of the index. Women also make up 6 per cent of executive line-management positions — often crucial for promotions to the highest ranks — and in the boardrooms of the top 200 companies, there are 1260 male board directors versus 177 females.

Quotas to boost the numbers at both the board and senior executive levels polarise those in the CEW, as they do in the wider community, as many women want to be appointed on merit alone.

Broadbent, who until three weeks ago was the longest serving member of the Reserve Bank board along with a string of other directorships including at Coca-

Cola Amatil and ASX Ltd, believes a blend of internal quotas and targets is required.

"Some companies have put their own targets on . . . and that's a good start but you probably need to give it some more time to run because it's only when we get 30 per cent . . . that you get two dynamics that are very positive: one, women don't think they're different any more, and two, gradually men moderate their behaviour in the mixed company," she says.

But Broadbent believes women will not achieve chief executive roles without retaining them in senior executive ranks, while board representation — which sits at about 15 per cent — is less of a concern. "Boards could easily have 30 per cent (women) without it being too much of an effort," she says. "But we need more at senior executive level because they can make more of an impact."

There have been a number of stops and starts for gender diversity over the years. The issue was pushed in the 90s, particularly after former Westpac CEO Bob Joss questioned the lack of diversity in business while strong advocates including Anne Summers, Pru Goward and Eva Cox highlighted the challenges facing women.

At 74, Cail still mentors a number of businesswomen. She grew CEW after she started her own publishing company in the late 70s that saw her launch *Portfolio* — a revolutionary magazine for the "independent working woman" that had started to emerge. She says while the numbers for women have slowly improved along with recent support from some "male champions", little has changed when it comes to the wider field of male gatekeepers. "I'm being quite cynical — but it's cosmetic," Cail says.

"(Those in charge) will talk the talk. They know precisely how to

say, yes we agree with equal opportunity and gender equity, because it's the right thing to do — it's politically correct — but if you scratch the surface and you start eroding the power base, you can see it's very much a veneer."

For Buttrose, there is too much political correctness — and it is now killing the debate.

"Captains of industry, whether they are men or women, don't speak any more because of political correctness; they're terrified of Twitter, they don't want to cause a stir, they don't want to be controversial. They don't want to upset

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ITA BUTTROSE

anybody, and sometimes you've just got to," she says.

As editor of *Cleo* magazine and *The Australian Women's Weekly*, as well as the first female editor-in-chief of the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs*, her iconic status spanned her professional achievements and her status as a voice for Australian women throughout the 70s and 80s. "I think women have lost their voice — it was a strong (women's) movement; we spoke out and spoke with feeling about where we were and where we wanted to get to — and now I think the debate in this country at all levels has been stifled by political correctness."

Roche, who in 1968 started a business with husband Bill that would grow into the highly successful Nutrimetics empire, points to women's tendency to hold back from self-promotion, unlike their male peers who "expect a support

network primarily of women".

"Society generally, both men and women, need to condition their educated daughters to believe they are entitled to expect the same opportunities as their sons and to truly promote a level playing field of partnership between men and women," the 79-year-old says. "Leadership should be determined by aptitude, skills and talent, not by gender. We should be ever mindful of the fact that 50 per cent of the intelligence quota of the human race has been invested in its women, so it is not just the attitudes and confidence level of women that need to change, very definitely there needs to be a change in the attitudes of men."

The women spoke of the need for more confidence among women in taking risks to step up to opportunities — an echo of themes outlined in the recent book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg. Buttrose says it also rests on employers to understand the tendency to hold back.

"You have to understand that sometimes you have to give a woman an extra shove, because they will wait; they feel they'll be recognised if they're a good worker; it's inherent in our make-up," Buttrose says.

McCarthy says that women and men should not be penalised for taking time out to have children. Buttrose says the pressures of work, now considered to be 24/7, also need to be addressed by management, including making the workplace more family-friendly.

"It's a simple argument: if you're the boss and you want to change your workplace and make it truly family friendly, you can do it," Buttrose says. "Nobody stops anybody in management doing these things . . . they've just got to have the guts."