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Senator for Queensland

Title : **The Career Journey – Old Girls As Mentors**

Event : **Clayfield College Careers Day**

Date : **April 23, 2009**

Location : **Stamford Plaza Hotel**

Contact : **Clayfield College**

Thinking about what to say today about *My Career Journey* took me back to my own decision making about what to do when I left school, how I felt about the future when I did Year 12 at Clayfield.

There wasn't much formal preparation then, nothing like days such as today, days to get you thinking about planning properly.

In fact when I finished school just on 40 years ago, the majority of women were simply looking for something to fill in the time until they got married, had children and stopped work. It was only a few years earlier that it had been law that women had to resign from the Queensland public service when they married.

I hasten to add that marriage and children were not the only ambition of the vast majority of Clayfield girls.

Back then Clayfield was a beacon of hope for the burgeoning feminists of Queensland. Clayfield was one of the very few girls' schools that offered science and advanced maths subjects and that encouraged us all to live, actually live, the school motto—*Lucent Lux Vestra*—Let Your Light Shine.

It's also probably worth mentioning that Clayfield has grown slightly. When I did Year 12, there were 42 students in the Year!

So I thought that today I would spend some time talking about the thought processes that I went through around leaving school, then talk about what I see as some of the turning points in my own career and along the way offer some completely gratuitous advice.

And I hope I've left time for plenty of questions.

I have to start by admitting that I'm not a very good example of someone who carefully planned and then undertook an orderly career path.

I'm in absolute awe of young women who do know exactly what they want to do, and then, do it.

The bare bones of my career path go—cadet journalist at *The Courier Mail*, political journalist at *The Sun News-Pictorial* newspaper in Melbourne, political journalist at *The Papua New Guinea Post Courier* in Port Moresby, media officer at Monash University during which time I had the first of my three children, then time out of the workforce living in London and having two more children, followed by freelance journalist in Melbourne and principal of my own PR business in Melbourne, a return to Brisbane in 1994 as sales manager of the family company, more recently working part-time as a company director whilst pursuing honorary positions in charity organisations and in the organisational wing of the Liberal Party; and since April 2007, as a senator for Queensland.

And along the way, I always continued to study. Firstly a Diploma of Journalism started at UQ and turned into an Arts Honours degree at Monash, a Graduate Diploma course from the Australian Institute of Company Directors and, most recently, a Masters of Business at QUT.

In retrospect, it seems preordained that I would stand here today as a Federal politician representing Queensland but my interest in being a politician is relatively new. I've always been interested in politics, but not in being a politician.

In Year 7, a teacher had complimented me by saying that my essays were so good that I should write for *The Women's Weekly*. I don't think he realised what he had started but, as I remember it, it's the only piece of career advice I got growing up. So I got into the habit of saying I wanted to be a journalist when anyone asked, more so I had something to actually say, rather than any burning ambition to be a journalist.

In the meantime, my Dad thought it would be quite good if I became a pharmacist, never mind that Chemistry was my worst subject at school. For him, I realised later, the main problem to be solved was how to ensure I didn't waste the education and experience I had gained once I got married, had children, and stopped working as all women inevitably would. As he saw it, if I had my own pharmacy I could appoint a manager to the shop when the "inevitable" happened and still have the business as an asset.

It would have been a great idea, if I'd had the remotest interest in pharmacy. And I'd be standing here today talking about a completely different path.

So two pieces of gratuitous advice: don't take on an occupation because it's what your parents want, unless it accords 100% with what you want; and base your career decisions on what you actually like doing, whether that's a subject at school or an outside activity.

I have a friend in Melbourne who's built a very successful business out of his schooldays fascination with the Army and with Army uniforms. He runs a very successful outdoors equipment business which includes supplying and manufacturing extreme weather equipment for the SAS and other organisations in Australia and overseas. And he has one of Australia's best collections of Australian Army uniforms, he's often asked to supply costumes for and, to advise on, historical Australian films and TV shows.

That's certainly not a career that you're going to find in any guide, but he still really enjoys going to work every day.

So, back to the beginning. There I was at just about the same stage you are in your journey and still without a clue what I was going to do and waiting for some career bolt of lightning to hit. It didn't.

In fact it wasn't until about halfway through Year 12 that I really started to see the question: "What are you going to do when you leave school?" as having any urgency. And given that no better idea had come up, I decided on journalism.

The next part of my career path is not one I'd recommend to anyone in today's job market.

When I left school, I applied for **one** job—as a cadet journalist at *The Courier Mail*—and got it. There were, I believe, about 30 applicants for nine positions that year so it's by no means the stupendous feat it would be today.

I didn't have any contacts in journalism but, at my grandfather's suggestion, I had written several letters to the Editor of *The Courier Mail*, Ted (later Sir Theodor) Bray and to the women's editor, the redoubtable Miss Patience Thoms, seeking their advice on how best to pursue a career in journalism. Both responded helpfully and I made sure that I referred to their comments during my job interview.

So my next piece of advice, if you don't have any contacts in your preferred career area, make some. No matter how senior they are, most people are human enough to be flattered by the fact that you admire them and their career path. So just write and ask, and I'd still recommend the written letter as the best way to initiate contact.

Back then there were no media degrees of any sort available in Australia. But *The Courier Mail* had developed and sponsored a Diploma of Journalism course within the Arts degree at UQ. It was the only tertiary-level journalism course in Australia.

So, a few months before my 17th birthday, I went off to The Courier's Bowen Hills office full of trepidation to start as a cadet journalist and to undertake a Diploma in Journalism.

It fairly quickly became clear that, although journalism was one of the more liberated professions at the time, women journalists were expected to take one of two paths, to settle into spinsterhood and a lifelong career reporting on "women's issues" or to stay a few years before leaving for marriage and children. There were almost no mothers working as journalists anywhere in Australia, there were very few mothers working anywhere.

At *The Courier-Mail*, I asked for, and surprisingly was given, the opportunity to work on the all-male subeditors' desk despite the misgivings of many of the subeditors about how I would cope with the, ahem, "robust language" the men were fond of using.

Again, in retrospect, this was one of the most important decisions I made in my career. I learnt that if you don't like the place that "the system" has given you, take a side step.

As a teenage cadet journalist, I didn't have a hope in hell of changing the ingrained attitudes of management at *The Courier-Mail*, but I could change my circumstances and, as it turned out, I was able to prove to management that the world as we knew it wouldn't come to end if a woman became a subeditor.

In fact, as one of my superiors on the subs desk happily informed me when the Editor apparently inquired if "I was just fooling around" he had stoutly defended me by saying that "I was as good as one of the boys". Very high praise indeed!

The sidestep strategy was one I used again when I went to work at *The Sun News-Pictorial* newspaper, now *The Herald-Sun*, in Melbourne in the 70s.

They really were having trouble working out what to do with a woman reporter like me, someone who didn't enjoy writing stories about lost kittens, sad children and sort-of-almost celebrities. When I asked if I could have a go at reporting State politics, a heavily male dominated domain, everyone heaved a sigh of relief and didn't worry too much about the "robust language".

Now I have to admit that almost all my moves out of Brisbane, to Melbourne, to Papua New Guinea, and to London where I did very little paid work, was dictated by my then-husband's career moves.

But I don't regret one of them. I got to have some fantastic experiences, from counting a very young Michael Somare, now Sir Michael Somare and the Prime Minister of PNG, among our friends, to attending a garden party for the Queen Mother at Buckingham

Palace. You may be interested to know that there's a flock of brolgas in the "back garden" at Buckingham Palace.

It was also during this time that I had my three children and had the opportunity to watch them grow, and the opportunity to continue tertiary studies.

I know that there is no way that I could have had a fulltime career, been a mother and a tertiary student. Some women can and I'm in awe of them.

I'm an unashamed feminist, have been all my life. And by feminist I mean someone who believes that women should have equality of opportunity, and that, providing that equality of opportunity is sometimes going to mean discriminating positively in favour of women.

By the time that most of you are in the workforce, Australia is very likely to have a universal paid parental leave scheme, making it that much easier financially to make the decision to have a career and a family.

But I passionately believe that we must offer women choices, choices so that you can have any combination of work and family that suits you and your circumstances.

As the now Governor-General Quentin Bryce has said: "Women can have it all, just not all at once." I heartily endorse that view.

And remember, even though it may not seem like it right now, you have plenty of time to go down as many career paths as you like.

With the ageing of the population and the greatly extended life spans we can expect in the future, it will be quite common for women to be continuing to work into their 70s and 80s by the time you reach those very, very distant milestones.

Now I'm going to skip over a lot of my career changes and talk about the most recent one as a politician.

Just one point I'd make here, coming back to Brisbane to work for our family company in the 90s was fantastic preparation for being a politician.

You see, our company manufactures products used primarily by plumbers and drainers, still very male dominated industries, just like politics.

As I said I've had a lifelong interest in politics. And I have a lot of difficulty in understanding people who say they're not interested in politics. I can certainly understand not being interested in a lot of the false dichotomies and trite abuse that

passes for political debate and political reporting in much of the Australian media, but I can't understand not being interested in politics itself.

Politics shapes almost everything about our lives—because it's politicians and the organisations that they establish that decide the foundation stones of our society. The basics of the curriculum that you study at school were decided by politicians. The level of resources that will be available at most of the universities you attend has originally been set by politicians. The basic hours you will work, and the conditions you will work in, have been developed by politicians. The sorts of houses you are allowed to build have been decided by politicians. Even what's considered a crime and what's not has been decided by politicians. Independent structures, such as the courts, have a lot of scope but ultimately they administer the laws that have been developed by politicians.

My main reason for getting involved in the organisational side of the Liberal Party in Queensland in the late 90's was to improve the number of women parliamentarians we had.

But I always saw myself as a businesswoman doing this from the backroom, not as the front woman.

The Queensland Liberals had a less than illustrious history when it came to electing women politicians at the Federal level, especially senators.

I am only the third Liberal woman senator elected in Queensland since Federation but I'm in some very august company, my predecessors were Dame Annabelle Rankin and Kathy Martin-Sullivan AO, who lives in retirement at the Gold Coast and has been generous with her time and advice to me.

I stood twice in unwinnable spots on the Queensland senate ticket. At that stage there were no vacancies for a Liberal senator in Queensland, all the current senators, all male, were relatively newly elected and not about to retire any time soon.

I was standing for the Senate as a role model for other women in the Party, as a seat-warmer if you like, so that when a vacancy came up in 6 to 9 years time, I would be in a position to mentor a woman into the job.

Then the unexpected happened. One of our Liberal senators resigned, creating a vacancy. I didn't immediately decide to nominate for the position, but I did eventually decide that, given my experience, I would be the best person for the job.

I still don't find it easy to say something like that, that I would be the best person for the job. It sounds far too boastful. But one thing I have learnt, in business and in politics, is that if you don't talk up your strengths, very few other people will do it for you.

As a gender, we women are often too modest for our own good and the research bears this out. The research says that, on average, men will apply for a promotion when they have 30% of the skills needed; women will wait till they have 70% of the skills.

We too often wait for promotion, instead of asking for it. We too often wait for someone to notice that we should get a pay rise, instead of asking for it.

It's one of the reasons that women doing the same work as men in Australia, on average, earn about 75 per cent of what the men do.

So to get off my soapbox and get back to my career, I nominated for that Senate vacancy. So did nine men.

When a vacancy for the Senate comes up unexpectedly between elections, it's known as a casual vacancy and it's filled by a ballot of preselectors from the same political party as the original senator. In my case, this was about 300 members of the Liberal Party.

I won that ballot of Liberal party members because I was seen as the most experienced candidate, the one who had been through the hard grind of working long hours as a candidate in previous elections knowing there was no prospect of success.

I had also made it my business to talk to everyone I could think of who could assist me to understand what I needed to tell the preselectors to get their support.

I knew I had the experience and the ability but I didn't know which experiences, which demonstrations of ability would most sway those voters. In other words, I did as much research as possible before I faced that particular "job interview".

And it's a job I'm very much enjoying. I get frustrated at times at how slowly change is made by governments, as opposed to private enterprise.

But, for one of the first times in my life, and you might find this a shameful admission, I have a career plan. It's set out in my first, or maiden, speech. I have a number of goals, firstly in business regulation; then, in disability, especially special education; and finally, in mentoring more women into Federal politics, through advocating for women and, particularly, through making parliamentary processes more family friendly.

I can't tick any of them off yet, but they have all grown out of my own personal set of values and I have made some advances on the first two. Changing how Parliament works is going to be the hard one.

So a few last pieces of gratuitous advice, consider yourselves very lucky to be young women in Australia right now. The world of work can be your oyster but it won't automatically open for you, having a plan is your best tool.

And if it's a lovely plump oyster, there will be plenty of people prepared to try to take it off you if they can.

Your self-advocacy, your intelligent belief in yourself, is your best defence.

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