

## 6. Balancing Life at Home and Away in the Australian Public Service<sup>1</sup>

Joanna Hewitt

*The daughter of a bank manager, Joanna Hewitt was educated in Perth and 'nearly every little town in Western Australia'. She joined the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1972 after completing an economics degree, but later took time off and went to the London School of Economics to undertake a masters degree. She rose through the ranks in Foreign Affairs to become Ambassador to the European Union and Belgium in 2000 before being named Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) in October 2004. Joanna Hewitt has faced several hurdles blocking her path, including a delayed posting to Stockholm in the mid-1970s because of her gender, and the challenges of balancing motherhood with a career as a senior public servant.*

It is a special honour for me to speak today, close to my point of departure from the Australian Public Service and my departure from Australia for the next three years.

My resignation takes effect a little earlier than I had expected, a few months short of my three-year term as Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF).

As some of you will know, I will be leaving with my fifteen-year-old son, Tom (and our golden retriever, Stella), to join my husband, Mark, who has been in Washington, DC, on posting since the beginning of this year.

It's a complicated business in any family to manage two careers and the needs of children (in our case, three) but it's even more complicated if overseas postings are part of the story. Having said that, I would add that complexity is not all bad. With a little bit of juggling, we have had wonderful opportunities to serve Australia in fascinating places as well as in the policy hub of Canberra.

In Mark's case, before we were married, he served in Canada and Israel. My early posting was in Sweden and I managed a detour through the United Kingdom after that to do my masters degree at the London School of Economics (LSE).

We both spent quite a few years in Canberra after those early postings and our marriage in 1987, then managed three and a half years in Paris when Mark

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<sup>1</sup> This valedictory address was presented at a function organised by the Australian Public Service Commission in April 2007.

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was at the embassy and I had a superb job in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Agriculture Directorate. Later, when I was appointed Ambassador in Brussels, Mark spent a couple of years as deputy at our embassy in Berlin. We commuted by plane every weekend, except one, in that time. But to return to the reason for my departure now from a job I have relished, as DAFF Secretary, the bottom line is that the commute across the Pacific is a far cry from a flit across Western Europe and four months apart is about all we are prepared to manage.

So, as I wrap up a career that started when I joined the then Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) as a trainee in 1972, I thought I would pick out a few of the issues and experiences that stand out for me. I will try to spare you the blow-by-blow career story. It would be long and tortuous and it's also quite unorthodox so in no way stands as a model for the aspirant secretaries in the audience. Also, a sage former DFAT boss of mine once told me the essence of a good speech was that it should end before the audience dares hope it might.

I will start, though, by telling you that I grew up in a family of four girls in rural Western Australia. Our dad worked in one of the big banks and we moved around the countryside regularly. It might have boosted my credibility as Secretary of the Agricultural Department to have been born in Denmark and lived in Harvey, Manjimup, Northam, Three Springs and Kojonup as well as Perth, but it certainly confused the Nordics when I was posted to Stockholm and my passport showed I was born in Denmark.

With hindsight, the rhythm of upping sticks every two or three years must have imprinted itself quite deeply when I think about the way I have changed jobs and continents.

In fact, I stumbled into international work. I did an economics honours degree at the University of Western Australia and had been thinking of a career in journalism. I was working part-time for the *West Australian* in my final two years at university but almost by accident I ran across the Department of Foreign Affairs' campus recruitment. After the rounds of testing and interviews, I was offered a place as a diplomatic trainee. I knew then it was exactly what I wanted to do.

As an aside, I would note that campus recruitment remains a hugely valuable part of our efforts to nurture and sustain the APS. At DFAT and DAFF, I have been thrilled and relieved every year to welcome fresh graduate recruits with stunning qualifications and impressive skills. In DAFF we have doubled the number of graduates we recruit since I have been Secretary and the results have been excellent.

I joined Foreign Affairs as one of 42 trainees, of whom eight were women. There was a bit of fuss about the fact that I was a married woman trainee and I was mortified after agreeing to do an interview with *The Australian* newspaper about this bold move by the department's management to see 'Joanna sets pace at Foreign Affairs' as the front-page headline the next day. (I note that at the time I was wearing what looks like a hippie headband and a long Indian cotton skirt for the photograph. There were none of the black tailored suits worn by today's smart women grads. The men in our day were also more creative dressers. Does anyone remember pastel safari suits?)

It took me a year longer to get out on my first posting than almost all of the other trainees because the *Public Service Act* had to be changed to allow 'an officer and his or her spouse' to be posted rather than 'an officer and his wife'. It seems almost incomprehensible today that the system could have been so inflexible but at the time I was not really upset or surprised. More extraordinarily, one of the other women trainees from my year was in the process of being divorced. The rather forceful head of management services of the day insisted that she not be posted until the divorce was final so that 'a woman of dubious marital status' was not representing Australia abroad. Even at the time, this seemed absurd, and if equal application of the policy to existing male staff of the department were made it would have made a serious dent in our overseas representation.

In any case, the posting was great at a time when Australia was rather enthralled by 'the Swedish model' in many policy fields, but perhaps especially at that time, in industrial relations. It was pretty obvious to me that a lot of the Swedish experience could not be readily translated directly to our more adversarial culture but I learned a lot and loved it, apart from the cold and dark.

I took a bit of time out after Stockholm to go to the LSE and finished my thesis two weeks before my first daughter, Francesca, was born. I was a bit anxious about returning to work a year later but once I was comfortable with the childcare arrangement, I found it worked pretty well. I do recall one of my women colleagues at DFAT about that time suggesting we lobby for a childcare centre to be set up in the department. I was so busy just managing the work and home stuff that I did not feel I had much time to spare on what I thought was a lost cause. I knew the climate would be hostile to the idea and to my shame I said I did not think it was worth wasting our energies. My colleague was on the right track and the childcare centre DFAT introduced about 20 years later has been a huge asset for the department as well as the staff who use it. But I suspect I was right about our slim prospects of success in the mid-1970s.

Just before my second daughter, Olivia, was born in 1979, I decided to leave the service for family reasons and resumed academic work, lecturing and writing

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at Griffith University in Queensland. I even embarked on a PhD but came to the conclusion part-way through that I was not really cut out for life as a scholar. The pull of public policy was strong.

I returned to Canberra in 1983—incidentally as a recently separated single mother, when my two girls were three and six years old. I could not go back to Foreign Affairs because it was possible to enter the department's policy ranks only as a trainee. I was offered re-entry at base level but I chose instead to join the Office of National Assessments (ONA) in the equivalent of an EL1 job. Again, this inflexibility seems bizarre in retrospect but proved to be a blessing in disguise.

I had some wonderful years after ONA at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (running the parliamentary briefing unit and speech writing) and later as Private Secretary in the Office of the Minister for Trade. I went on to my first SES job in the Industry Department and later moved to the Department of Trade. In these jobs, I grew hugely in my understanding of our system of government, the parliamentary and cabinet processes and the media. I had fabulous role models and mentors and a great sense that I could play a part in the contribution of the Public Service to national life. Big policy shifts like the floating of the dollar, important steps in tariff reform and the establishment of the Cairns Group made it a heady time to be working on trade and industry policy. There was a very lively sense that we were in a marketplace for ideas and I revelled in it all. I also seem to recall that in quiet weeks (and there were some then) we occasionally indulged in longer lunches than we could begin to imagine today.

I ended up back in my old home when the departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade were merged in the 1987 machinery-of-government changes. I think I was the only member of staff to have worked in both former departments and spent a certain amount of time as an interpreter across the divide. We talk today about the culture of organisations but, frankly, in the first year after the merger, DFAT was suffused with some bitter culture wars.

It was worth persisting. I am convinced that our combined foreign and trade policy arrangements give us a real edge internationally through national interest-focused diplomacy. Australia's extensive (and expensive) diplomatic network is geared up to push hard for our economic as well as our political and security interests in the world. A lot of the debilitating turf warfare of the past has been abandoned while we get on with the job. This is not common in foreign services, some of which in my experience are poorly equipped even to understand the interests of the countries they purport to represent. And although a lot of skilled diplomacy was conducted for Australia in the years before the merger, I clearly recall being present during a ministerial visit to a small European post

in the mid-1980s when the ambassador declined to answer a basic question from my boss, the Trade Minister of the day, John Dawkins, about the local economy. At full ambassadorial height (and pomposity), he declared that 'we don't do that sort of thing on the fifth floor of the embassy'. Fortunately for us all, the minister decided to be amused rather than infuriated. It simply could not happen today.

At the risk of breaking my own rule about brevity, I will say a bit about what later turned out to be the closer road to my DFAT appointment.

I was lured to the then Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) from DFAT in 1988. At the time, for family reasons, it seemed unlikely that postings were going to work and an opening came up as head of the Livestock and Pastoral Division in DPIE. Again, this was a great experience for me. I soaked up a lot of practical industry policy and industry politics and headed three separate divisions over my time there, dealing with issues as diverse as dismantling of the wool reserve price scheme, the establishment of Landcare and the early years of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations. Geoff Miller was the Secretary and set pretty exacting standards for 'first best' policy analysis. There was a comfortable, open atmosphere in the department and I had some wonderful colleagues, many of whom I have been working with again in DAFF.

It wasn't all beer and skittles. The worst part of that period was my work on forestry policy at the height of the battles between the environment movement and the forestry industry. It is hard to describe just how brutal and personal the politics of forestry were within the government itself and between interest groups. It was extremely difficult to do good work when the government was divided on the issues, and I seemed to spend some pretty unproductive hours just trying to keep to within striking distance of good practice. There was not a lot of interest in objective, evidence-based advice. On one of the worst days I remember having to listen politely to complaints from a wilderness group about the fact that jet trails could be seen in the sky over a national park in Western Australia while we were worrying about how many of the displaced forestry workers could really get jobs in eco-tourism. Relationships between the players in the departments, ministerial offices and the industry and environment groups were personalised and bitter and there was a lot more heat than light.

I had my work cut out for me persuading staff in my own division that it was worth persisting with good policy and practice. I would often get to a Friday evening and be able to think of nothing positive we had achieved except helping to prevent the worst from happening. We have made huge progress in these areas of our work now and the excellent rapport in today's DAFF/DEW joint team, which advises both ministers on natural resource management issues, is a model I could only have dreamed about in the late 1980s.

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It was a relief to move to DPIE's Corporate Policy Division in 1990 to handle the agricultural trade negotiations and broad industry policy advising. I loved my return to one of Australia's great battles—to bring agricultural trade squarely into the multilateral rules framework and to fight for access to the world's protected agricultural markets. It is an argument that has been under way for 50 years (since the Treaty of Rome and the inception of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy) and though we have made some strides that need to be acknowledged, including the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture and some reform in Europe, the pace has been dismal and over the past few years the debate in important developed and developing countries seems to have drifted dangerously. It is disturbing to hear a new wave of protectionist prescriptions just as misguided as the old being dressed up in euphemistic language, such as calls for 'policy space' for countries to manage the pace of change associated with globalisation.

This is not a fight Australia can afford to lose. We export two-thirds of our agricultural production and agriculture still represents nearly one-quarter of our total export profit. We understand that reform is a hard road through our experience at home. We have invested heavily in analysing the costs and benefits; indeed, analysts in DAFF, our Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) and DFAT know as much about the distorting farm programs of other countries as their own analysts. But in representational democracy you need enlightened leadership from governments and influential groups in industry and the media to make headway against vested interests. So it's back to the marketplace for ideas. And when we are trying to persuade governments and citizens in other countries that change of the sort we have been through would also be good for them, we really have our diplomatic work cut out for us.

I did a lot of this work at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the mid-1990s and later as Ambassador to Brussels. Sometimes, though, I despaired about the tone of Australian advocacy on agricultural policy reform. We are rightly enraged about the unfairness of distortions we face in world markets and we want to see big change, and quickly. It is important to remember when you are trying to persuade another party to do something they are reluctant to do—even if you can show them that it's good for us all—that you need to put a bit of effort into the tone and pitch of your message.

We can come across as blunt and blustering as well as passionate. I am sure this has been said of me as well as of lots of my colleagues. It's understandable, but not always effective. So while we continue to fight the good fight, we need to remind ourselves that the same basic truths apply in diplomacy whether you are right or wrong, whether your cause is just or not. We need to be clever, to

articulate our good arguments credibly and to understand and operate well in the context (or, as the trade negotiators say, the authorising environment) in which the debate has to be won.

After my stint at the OECD I was thrilled to be appointed Deputy Secretary at DFAT in 1996. I straddled work in lots of different areas over the next five years including the rather familiar trade policy and work in the United Nations on climate change and regional diplomacy. This included my role as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ambassador through the Asian financial crisis, difficulties in our relations with Malaysia during its year as APEC host following the imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim and the diplomacy in the margins of the Auckland APEC Leaders' meeting to get agreement to the Interfet force in East Timor. Another highlight of those years during a visit to Rangoon was the opportunity to meet and speak at some length with Burma's Democratic Party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest at her home. Sadly, not much has changed there.

For the first time in my career, I also took on responsibilities on the corporate side of the house, handling DFAT's staffing and finances during a tough period of budget cuts and downsizing. I led negotiations for the first two collective agreements and helped introduce more modern management arrangements. A little bit to my surprise, I found I also loved the management role and the positive rewards that came from working directly with colleagues to improve the way our department was run.

I sought out my ambassadorial appointment in Brussels, which also met all my expectations. It is a somewhat under-appreciated city and, despite the weather and reputation for bureaucracy, is a fascinating global capital abuzz with the activity of Europe's institutions and all those who seek to influence them. The weather is awful but the restaurants superb. The work was a mix of the familiar trade and agricultural policy along with broader foreign and security policy work as the European institutions expanded their reach into new fields. It was a stimulating professional environment and, despite the inward preoccupations of the day, particularly the focus on the enlargement of the European Union and attempts at negotiation of a new European Constitution, I found I could always get access to have Australian concerns heard, even if we could not always get the responses we were seeking. My work with NATO was also very interesting around the time of the commitment of troops to Iraq.

While it has not had a lot of attention at home, I was impressed by the achievement of the European Union's enlargement, which unfolded on my watch. I suspect the rest of the world has not really given due credit to the architects of this huge geopolitical move that has guaranteed the people of half

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a continent personal freedoms, the rule of law and a real prospect of prosperity after more than 50 years of authoritarian communist rule. If we could only see such bold and visionary steps in European agricultural reform!

My first assignment after returning from Brussels was to take over the World Trade Organisation (WTO) lead negotiator role at the failed WTO conference in Cancun. This was hardly propitious timing but I take some comfort from what we achieved in a WTO Framework Agreement in mid-2004. It cost me a large number of days in transit between Canberra and Geneva and at times I felt I was spending more time with my counterpart negotiators in the small group of countries at the heart of the process than with family or colleagues at home. I have every reason to keep a close eye on progress with the conclusion of the Doha Round.

My appointment as DAFF Secretary in October 2004 was a wonderful surprise. The portfolio suited my experience well and I was lucky already to know a good number of my colleagues and industry figures from my DPIE and trade policy days. I was rearing to have a go at leading one of the great departments and it has been a marvellous experience.

For the sector over this time, Dorothea Mackellar says it all. The drought has set a very harsh backdrop for Australian farmers and their resilience and grit in the face of the past five or six severe dry years deserve our respect. There will be tough times ahead even when we get rain because water storages are at such precariously low levels. But flooding rains have also been part of the story as Cyclone Larry showed. Climate variability is an inescapable feature of our continent and the emerging scientific consensus suggests we will have to cope with even more of it. The work we have already begun on developing better predictive and management tools for farmers will need to be taken much further.

It is true, as the Prime Minister has said, that agriculture is in the Australian psyche. But its important place in the Australian economy has been maintained through hard work and innovation, not sentiment alone. We know that the care of much of our landscape is in the hands of farmers and that the survival of vibrant rural Australian communities depends heavily on the fortunes of agricultural industries. It is also true that this cannot be guaranteed through policies of cossetting and protection that have failed everywhere they have been tried. Australia needs to retain its competitive focus and smart approach to agriculture. Without that eye to the markets we would be left with the museum agriculture of many OECD countries and that would not support our farm families or our export performance.

That's the end of my Agriculture Policy 101 snippet. These ideas have been at the centre of bipartisan agricultural policy in Australia for decades. We have

been lucky on the whole to have had thoughtful and responsible leadership in our farm organisations to help us avoid some of the policy pitfalls. Our approach is not always popular with the industries, and the constitutional split of responsibilities between federal and state governments has encouraged some unprepossessing politicking at times. On the whole, though, there has been a clear-eyed focus on what serves us best.

As Secretary, I have tried to nurture some of the great strengths of our service. In DAFF we have an extraordinary line-up of specialist talent ranging from plant biologists to veterinarians, from economists to ecologists and from generalist policy advisors to the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) operational staff at the front line. There's a great sense of purpose in the portfolio and a real empathy with our stakeholders, even on the occasions when our advice does not support farm industry proposals.

In this job, as in all the work I have done in the APS, I have been really grateful for the opportunity to be heard on the policy issues in play. Some of them have been difficult, as a scan of any week's rural media would confirm. Just think about wheat marketing or apple imports. It has always seemed to me that our system, which gives public servants a good chance to present arguments and engage with ministers, is about as good as it gets. I am deeply committed to the Westminster principles, which leave decision making to the elected government, except in specialist, technical areas where governments have chosen to vest authority in expert statutory bodies. It has sometimes been necessary for me to remind staff, especially some of our highly qualified expert colleagues, that in our democratic system the only right decision is the one the government takes. That does not mean we cannot present views and make recommendations. It does mean that we respect and implement as effectively as we can the decision that is made.

Forging relationships of trust with ministers is at the heart of effective government in Australia. In Canberra's tight environment we do have a great opportunity to do that. In my work, with lots of long international flights and exhausting all-night negotiating sessions, I have had more opportunity than many. I am grateful for this.

I will say a final word from a woman's perspective about life in Australia's Public Service. First, it was a real delight to be appointed Secretary in the talented company of the October 2004 group of Lynelle Briggs, Lisa Paul and Patricia Scott, joining the 'dean of the women secretaries group', Helen Williams, as well as Jane Halton.

I have been a bit stunned by recent debate about whether it really is possible to have both a career and a family and enjoy it all. I know I have been lucky. My

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three children have all been happy and healthy and have taken pleasure in our life overseas as well as at home. They seem to have coped well with all our juggling and work-related travel. I have sometimes wondered whether this is just my impression but my daughters cannot have thought it all bad. In fact, from the day we arrived in Paris when they were teenagers and made their first foray out onto the Champs Élysées, they have been committed internationalists as well as committed Australians. They have also chosen to work in public policy—both of them in international organisations, based in Jakarta and Geneva.

I owe much to my husband, Mark, who has been brilliant at sharing the load and making life outside work so much fun. This is even more obvious to me as I've managed more or less as a single parent again over these past few months. I will also owe a debt of gratitude to my sister, Ricky, who lived in Canberra when my girls were small and gave me wonderful support and companionship as well as being a very special aunt.

I also know that flexible work arrangements can help a lot. The public sector has led the wider economy in this area and has benefited greatly as a result in the quality and continuity of its staff. Not everyone approves but I hope we take a few more measured steps. It simply does not seem to me to be sensible, sustainable or necessary for women, or indeed parents, to have to choose between their children and their work.

I expect to be spending a bit more of my time on the home front with my son when I get to Washington. My daughters, incidentally, warn me that the idea of spending more quality time with mother is not necessarily appealing for a boy who is about to turn sixteen!

I leave my job with a sense of optimism about our service and the future of our country.

Australians have an instinct for directness and innovation that serves us well in government as in the wider society and economy. We are generally ready to look at the evidence on an issue and, when the case for change is clear, to face up to it. We are part of the 'new world' rather than the old.

I will be following the cut and thrust of Australian life from the other side of the Pacific with close interest. I'll really miss working with you. My colleagues in DAFF have been a wonderful and talented bunch. My secretary colleagues have been a great source of collegiality and professionalism, working across the dividing lines of portfolios in a constructive way wherever they can. I'll also miss the people in the farm organisations, the rural community groups and those who work with a passion for the rural environment. Thank you all for joining me this afternoon.