

## 2. A Politician's View of Change

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I cannot speak for all politicians. They are as diverse a group as any, with different backgrounds, education and beliefs. But you enter politics because you want to change things.

Politicians want to make their electorate, state and country a better place. Most start wide-eyed and optimistic. The mechanisms of government and the sheer difficulty of bringing about change often produce disenchantment and cynicism. The impediments to delivering real change start with your own party and supporters. Then there is the media, our relatively short political cycle, the bureaucracy, and intolerance to any political leader's policy failure.

This is my story, and my experience of change in politics.

### Starting the journey

I bought my first pharmacy when I was 25 in the early 1980s. Back then lots of women were pharmacists but very few were owners. My first pharmacy was in a small suburban shopping centre in Canberra, one of those shopping centres that was under pressure from the ever-growing shopping malls and the expanding shopping hours of major supermarkets. More and more products that were traditionally pharmacy-only were 'going open' and being discounted in supermarkets, so smaller shopping centres were losing market share, and my pharmacy was losing many of its best-selling products to supermarkets. The question was what to do?

At this time, Canberra did not have self-government, even though it was the nation's capital. Decisions on things like planning and shopping hours were made by a federal minister who did not even live in Canberra and probably viewed the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) portfolio as a bit of a problem. The voters back in his or her electorate probably thought that doing good things for Canberra should not be a priority for their local member!

The ACT also did not have a branch of the Pharmacy Guild to represent local pharmacists. ACT pharmacists were part of the New South Wales branch, so ACT issues were virtually ignored.

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I thought that I could do something to change these things, which might have indicated a level of self-belief or maybe just naivety—actually it was probably a mixture of both. My father had taught me that you could not expect things to change if you sat back, did nothing and whinged. In fact, he often said you have no right to complain if you are not willing to get involved in making change happen.

So I became involved in the local pharmacy association, became chairperson and started advocating for an ACT branch of the Guild. I was also appointed to the board of the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry and some other groups working for a better deal for local businesses and for more local representation.

After a couple of failed attempts, an ACT branch of the Pharmacy Guild was finally established in 1988 (ACT self-government occurred in 1989). I became president of the ACT branch and the first woman to be a national vice-president of the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. Obviously, these things happened due to the work of a lot of people, but it really reinforced for me that people can make a difference if they have a good, credible story to tell and the commitment to work to deliver the required changes.

After one particular public meeting where I had been encouraging a reasonably large group of small retailers to get involved in a campaign to achieve a better deal from shopping mall owners, a group of Canberra businesspeople approached me and asked me to stand for the ACT Legislative Assembly.

They argued that if I was serious about wanting real change for Canberra businesses I should stand. My initial response was to say no—there were many better qualified people than me. But after much soul-searching, and with a belief that you have to practice what you preach, I decided to give politics a go.

As a small business owner and mother of two primary school children, I felt I had a reasonable understanding of the challenges facing working couples with children and mortgages. I also had a strong vision for a city that was business-friendly, one where kids could get a great education and would be able to get jobs in either the public or private sector, and a city that was financially sustainable. Like most people, I wanted a health system that was efficient and fair and not bogged down by unnecessary bureaucracy. Probably the most challenging part of the vision—I really wanted Australians to be proud of their national capital!

I also aspired to see Canberra as a socially progressive city that addressed issues such as the damage caused by illicit drugs and AIDS with evidence-based policies, not prejudice. In their business, pharmacists see more of drug users than many other people do. Soon after I bought my first pharmacy, I became involved in delivering the methadone program and the first needle-exchange program in Canberra. Through this I became acutely aware that Canberra needed

much better treatment for people unfortunate enough to be addicted to drugs, particularly heroin. To deliver real change and to save lives, it was important to stop treating people with an addiction as criminals, and start treating them as people with a medical problem. I learnt that for some people methadone did not work and they ended up back on heroin. Unfortunately, many of these people died as a result of the unpredictable quality of the illegal heroin they were using. The prevalence of AIDS among injecting drug users was also increasing, due to sharing of dirty needles.

I took these issues with me into politics. At least some of the solutions seemed obvious. AIDS was a serious problem and dirty needles and unprotected sex were causing the disease to spread, so giving heroin users clean needles would reduce infection rates, as would good access to information about safe sex and, of course, to condoms. Ensuring that brothels were legalised and subject to regular health checks would also help. Giving prescription heroin to people who had tried other programs to address their addiction seemed sensible if we were to save lives.

## Pre-selection

Exposure to the pre-selection process involved learning that real change is about convincing people who do not want to be convinced! At the ACT Liberal Party pre-selection for the Legislative Assembly, I was asked questions like:

- are you pro-choice? (my answer was yes)
- would you support a republic? (my answer was yes)
- would you push for drug law reform in the Legislative Assembly? (my answer was yes)
- do you support equal rights for same-sex couples? (my answer was yes).

I also explained my vision for a financially sustainable city that was well managed with a great education system and a vibrant private sector. And, surprisingly, the party pre-selected me. Many socially conservative party members said, 'I don't agree with her on some things, but at least we know what she believes in.'

To achieve change you have to be true to your values and belief structures, otherwise people will, understandably, not trust you. If I had told the pre-selectors that I shared their socially conservative views, I do not believe I would have been successful—they would have known I was putting a spin on the truth.

I was elected in 1992. In 1993 I became Leader of the Opposition.

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## Leading the opposition

Canberra has always been a Labor-voting town but it was also home for nearly 350,000 people who wanted a good health and education system and jobs for their kids. Importantly, they wanted a well-managed, financially sustainable city that was a good place to bring up their children. Exactly the things I had entered politics to help deliver for Canberra.

Bringing about change in politics is interesting, to say the least. People (and the media) often say they want politicians who are only about getting the job done, not about the 'spin'. The dumping of Ted Baillieu (who resigned in March 2013 as Premier of Victoria) shows how wrong that is!

Ted is a good bloke, a hard worker, honest with good values, *but* he is not a salesman. In my view, his problem was he did not sell his vision and agenda to his party colleagues or the electorate. You could say that he did not spend enough time concentrating on the spin. Some might say that former Prime Minister Julia Gillard suffered from the same problem. Delivering real change in politics is not just about good policy. It is about being able to sell it to parliament, the electorate and the media.

We had to have a clear, simple set of messages and policies that we were passionate about delivering. There is no doubt that the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle is important. Complicated messages are doomed to failure.

I really believe in the quote from General Colin Powell: 'Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt, to offer a solution everybody can understand.' I always thought that this was something to aspire to if we were to get people to share our vision and give us their vote.

Electors needed to know what we stood for—and even if there were some things they did not agree with, they were willing to support us because the overall direction was right for Canberra.

I did not ask my Liberal Party colleagues to support my socially progressive policies, but told them I was happy to give them a free vote. This allowed my party colleagues to cross the floor on things they felt strongly about, and avoided unnecessary splits in party unity on issues that were not core Liberal Party policy.

So once the party had a solid set of policies and vision, we set about selling them to the media. The media, in my view, does not like to change its prejudices. Its members have a pack mentality and preconceived views on many things,

and it takes *lots* of effort to change their collective minds! Not all journalists are like this, but I believe that most are. They did not see us as an alternative government.

To change this we decided we had to follow a simple rule. If we criticised the government in a press release or speech, we had to outline what we would do in government. It took six months but in the end the media were asking the Labor Party about our policy ideas. We were being reported as an alternative government.

To achieve change you have to communicate clearly and repeat your message time and time again. Some research suggests that people do not start absorbing a message until they have heard it at least seven times. And the message has to be credible, consistent and concise. We were elected in February 1995, forming a minority Liberal Government in the ACT Legislative Assembly. Now we had the opportunity to implement the changes we had promised.

## In government

I have to say, I had no idea just how hard it is to deliver change in government.

### Dealing with risk aversion

By its very nature, the public service is risk-averse and is therefore not quick to embrace new ideas. The challenge is to be clear about what you want and to set achievable goals with definite timelines. Sounds easy but it is not! Sir Humphrey (Appleby) was alive and well in some departments, and many of the things we wanted to do were described as 'courageous' and 'requiring more thought'. As a new and inexperienced government, we sometimes felt it was prudent to listen to this advice.

Myriad lobby groups give politicians often very conflicting advice. It is remarkable how many expert opinions there are backing up the different positions of these groups—and often these experts disagreed with each other! Listening to the community is important but the feedback is not homogenous. People only believe you have listened if you end up implementing the position they put forward. I remember at one point we had 293 different consultations under way and were being pilloried in *The Canberra Times* for not consulting.

To deliver positive change, we quickly had to learn how to separate self-interest from good policy. This was particularly the case in planning. Both from an environmental and a financial perspective, it was important that Canberra did not continue to grow and expand only in greenfield areas, creating more

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and more urban sprawl with the resulting infrastructure and environmental costs. The NIMBYs ('not in my back yard') outnumbered the BANANAs ('build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody'), but both groups were very vocal. This made it incredibly hard to get sustainable, affordable planning laws through the ACT's Legislative Assembly. The fact that the Federal Government retained dual planning responsibility in the so-called 'Parliamentary Triangle' (a central area of Canberra) and on major entry roads made the job even harder.

The problem of multiple authorities was highlighted when we decided that a square in front of the Canberra Theatre, between the Assembly building and the Canberra Museum and Gallery, needed upgrading. It was a big grey square with a fountain that leaked. We wanted a public area that was exciting and appropriate for such an important space. Well, after ACT Planning, the National Capital Authority and various community consultation groups had had their say and \$3 million had been spent, the ACT got a big grey square with a fountain that leaked! The various planning requirements and stakeholder group input had progressively removed all risk, innovation ... and excitement. We eventually fixed the leaking fountain.

It is important not to confuse committees, investigations and consultations with action. You will never have every possible bit of information or remove all the risk, so there is a time when it is important to go with your gut and 'just do it'.

Unfortunately, both the media and the public view government decisions that do not deliver desired outcomes very poorly. If a government supports a new initiative that does not work it will be on the front page of the paper, but the 200 that did work will not be reported. This can make politicians very risk-averse. It is often said that nobody ever got sacked for appointing IBM to do an IT project even if they ran over budget or over time, but if you contracted a local small or medium-sized business that did not deliver or (even worse) went broke, your job could be at risk.

## The art of negotiation and compromise

The problem, of course, with a minority government is that you have to have the numbers in parliament to deliver any legislative change. This requires continuous negotiation and sometimes compromise. If you lose votes on the floor of the parliament too often, the media and the public will see a government unable to deliver on promises—even though it is not its fault!

So finding compromise solutions is important. That said, it is important not to compromise on values, ethical standards and core policy positions. If you do, the media and the electorate will understandably question what the government stands for, and that leads to a loss of trust—death for any government.

At one stage in my time as ACT Chief Minister, two of the three independent members whose support I needed to pass the government's budget refused to pass it unless I agreed to amendments to abortion laws that would require women to see pictures of what a foetus looks like at 8–12 weeks (the most common time for abortions to take place) and to establish a 48-hour 'cooling off' period.

I finally agreed to their demands but have regretted it ever since. Although I did support the cooling-off period, I did not believe that the pictures were right or reasonable. I should have let them vote against the budget—who knows whether they would have carried out their threat. If the government had fallen over this issue, voters might have taken a dim view of two independents using their numbers to unseat a democratically elected government.

I was publicly committed to pro-choice, so what was I doing supporting these changes to the abortion laws? I should not have compromised on the issue.

## Key factors in dealing with some major policy challenges

The federal Howard Government was elected in 1996 and implemented significant change in the federal public service to address a large budget deficit. Canberra lost 9,000 jobs in 15 months. Unemployment went beyond 8 per cent and youth unemployment reached 40 per cent. The ACT experienced three consecutive quarters of negative growth, technically a recession. *The Canberra Times* ran front page stories of traffic jams of moving vans heading out of the city. Canberra had to change quickly.

We pulled together local business leaders and asked for help. The business community suggested that my government offer a small incentive to businesses that employed a young person and provided them with some training and experience. *The Canberra Times* committed to printing the names of participating companies, to publicly thank them. The aim of the program, Youth500, was to employ 500 young people for at least 12 months. Youth500 became Youth1000. Most Canberra businesses with the capacity to employ a young person did so—and the retention rate at 12 months was 85 per cent. This was achieved even though these businesses were doing it tough due to the federal cutbacks.

Canberra was under huge pressure, but Youth1000 showed that a shared goal can achieve great things and real change. Within two years, Canberra's unemployment rate was among the lowest in the country, growth was positive and 60 per cent of the workforce was in the private sector—a real change for a city that had traditionally been dominated by the public sector.

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Even with the risk involved, we progressed with our policy to reduce drug-related deaths. This involved supporting a heroin trial in the ACT based on some comprehensive research done at The Australian National University. We managed to get support for the trial through the Assembly because of the leadership of one of the independent members, Michael Moore.

Initially most Canberrans did not support the trial, but over time they came to understand that the trial was aimed at saving lives. Even people who did not support the trial gave us the benefit of the doubt and did not stop supporting the government when irresponsible newspaper reporting suggested that Canberra would have free heroin on every street corner!

This was a very controversial policy but it shows that you can achieve change, even unpopular change, if your position is consistent and people understand that you really believe in the change. The change must be evidence-based, involve credible research and be supported by experts in the field.

All change requires leadership, but the sort of social change required for the heroin trial described above needs broad-based leadership and support, not just from politicians but from the community and academia. Broad support is needed because of the power of the media and the adversarial nature of our parliamentary system. It is easier to run a 'shock horror' story than a well-researched, balanced one.

Even with a minority government, we managed to implement a range of reasonably controversial changes, from selling half of the local electricity and water utility (ACTEW) to legalising X-rated videos, brothels and non-commercial surrogacy, starting the redevelopment of Kingston foreshore, and rolling out Canberra's own broadband network.

We achieved these changes by ensuring the media understood what we were doing and why. We also consulted widely, to encourage support from major stakeholders wherever possible. We worked very closely with the crossbenchers as, unfortunately, it is rare in our political system for the opposition to support the government on any major change if it is possible to get political mileage by putting forward an opposing view.

## Policy failure and change fatigue

With new policy and change come some great successes, some average outcomes and a few failures. And the failures are seized on by both the opposition and the media. The media say that good news does not sell, so a feeding frenzy over a government initiative that has not worked is great copy.

The longer politicians are in power, the more things there will be that have not gone quite right—unless of course you do nothing. For me this started with the implosion of the old Canberra Hospital. This was an absolute tragedy with the death of a 12-year-old girl. There were multiple inquiries into what happened, with the final outcome being that the company doing the implosion got it wrong. The government was not found to be responsible, but at the end of the day, the buck stops at the top, as it should.

Events like this shake your confidence. You think you are doing the right thing—we embarked on an implosion of the hospital rather than a standard demolition to minimise the impact on the hospice that was next door to the hospital. The advice was that an implosion would mean that the worst of the demolition would be over in about eight weeks, compared with many months using traditional methods. After this event, it was hard not to become more risk-averse.

Then there was the redevelopment of Bruce (now Canberra) Stadium. We supported the redevelopment to make the stadium more appropriate and profitable for Raiders (rugby league) and Brumbies (rugby union) matches and so that Canberra could stage Olympic soccer (at the 2000 Sydney Olympics). The costs of the redevelopment blew out—as did the costs for two other stadiums being built at the same time: Olympic Stadium at Homebush in Sydney and Hindmarsh Stadium in Adelaide. The difference in Canberra was that we had a minority government with crossbenchers who had 'change fatigue'. With an increasing amount of mud sticking to the government and particularly to me as Chief Minister, the independent politicians were sick of justifying their support for changes the government wanted to make. As the government could not survive without the support of the crossbenchers and they had lost confidence in me, I resigned and handed the leadership to my deputy.

Change fatigue is a real thing in politics. With change comes risk and with risk comes the very real possibility of failure (or at least lack of success). I believe this is the reason many governments become increasingly risk-averse the longer they spend in office. This leads to more compromise and political leaders being seen as not standing for anything, a sure-fire formula for defeat at the polls.

Another reason for politicians being risk-averse is Australia's relatively short political cycle. The UK has five-year fixed terms—in Australia, we have three or four years, and the average term for a Federal Government is about two years and 10 months.

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This does not give politicians long to implement changes that have any detractors—just about all major changes. There is a view among politicians that if you cannot implement your agenda in your first 18 months, you will not have the ‘clear air’ to do it at all in your first term. Voters may then decide your first term is your last!

Change is the lifeblood of most politicians—it is why we aspire to office. We all want to make a positive difference in our communities. How we manage that change within our political parties, within our communities, with the media or within parliament will determine whether we are successful or not.

There is one truism in politics: ‘You never leave politics worried by the things you *did*, only by the things you did not do.’

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