

# Being an Independent MP: A lifetime journey and a station on the way

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## Introduction

The way I see the world – my standpoint as an Independent Member of Parliament representing the regional electorate of Indi in rural NE Victoria, is through a number of lenses. I am a daughter, aunt and sister, a business woman, community member, a farmer, and now politician. My electorate consists of a number of sophisticated inter-connected rural communities, with complex networks and where mutual obligations run deep. Wodonga, Wangaratta and Benalla are the main towns and the rural communities cluster around the rich agricultural valleys of the Goulburn, Broken, King, Ovens, Kiewa, Mitta, Dart and Murray rivers.

In this article I have tried to capture some of the environments and events that have helped shape my perspectives, beginning with some family and personal background, acknowledging three women who have inspired me, and concluding with a discussion about the job of being an Independent MP and how I am trying to be inclusive of community in this role.

## By way of background

From a very early age my siblings and I were encouraged to have opinions about politics. Our family lived on a dairy farm in NE Victoria in the post World War II 1950s. Community service and participation were essential ingredients in our family. My Mother and Father and many of my relatives were actively involved in the local dairy cooperative and church and women's groups. In our large Catholic family there was much discussion around the kitchen table about politics. One of my earliest memories of these conversations centres on the Democratic Labor Party, Bishop Mannix, and how the family would manage for all of us children to go to the nearest Catholic schools. At that time Catholic children were not entitled to a free bus service, and as a result my parents or my uncle had to stop their farm work at 7.30 in the morning and 4.30 in the afternoon to drive us 10 kms to the nearest state school bus. There was much celebration in our community in the 1960s when these bus rules changed.

My parents wanted all their children to be articulate and be able to stand up for themselves. They also expected us to protect our younger siblings from teasing and bullying. Words became our weapon of choice, and a strong network of family and friends became our safety net when things went wrong. Being immersed in rural living and country school buses, extended family conversations were my introduction to politics and to the lens of rural education and public transport.

There were many opportunities to refine my “political” skills during my student years at Monash University. Throughout the 1970s, it was a heady mix of the Whitlam years, the Vietnam War, Germaine Greer and gender politics. There were also wonderful opportunities

to study political theory, economics, history and experience international politics through the benefit of low cost travel and holiday work opportunities in the United Kingdom, Asia and Europe. I treasured these years of study, built strong friendships and appreciated the opportunity to learn to view the world through a lens that focused on economics.

My first full-time paid job was as a teacher with the Victorian Education Department. During this time the employment rules changed allowing married women to become permanent public servants. These changes gave me insight into how the gender lens could be applied to employment conditions and when linked to political will, how entrenched practices, even cultural attitudes could be changed.

Later in life, I decided to be a farmer and became active in agricultural politics. If the kitchen table had been an important training ground for debate and refining argument, agricultural politics from the 1980s to 2000 became my finishing school. At that time I was referred to as a “single woman farmer”, a woman who owned their own farm. I did not fit the mould as the definition of farmer was male and the language always “he”. Women were farmer’s wives. This was a challenging time in terms of personal identity. I saw myself as a “farmer” and fought hard to be acknowledged as such. The title “woman in agriculture” fitted more gently on my shoulders.

The mid 1980s were a time of great change in rural and regional Victoria and the Cain Labor Government, with support from Joan Kirner, Caroline Hogg and Kaye Setches, set up the Rural Women’s Network (RWN). This Network changed the way women living in regional Victoria saw themselves. Farming women built on the work of the RWN to establish a national organization: Australian Women in Agriculture. In 1994 we ran the first international conference of women in agriculture. The conference, at Melbourne University, had an amazing eclectic gathering of over 800 women from 35 countries. Women discussed and debated issues including agriculture, trade, farm succession, education, health, child care (and the lack of it) and the future of small rural communities. This conference held up a mirror that enabled rural women from all over the world to see themselves as people with a common interest in food; production, marketing, trade and importantly in the people who grew it and supported its production in the rural communities in which they lived. While we clearly saw each other, one of the things we found in common, was our lack of visibility to the rest of the world.

Becoming visible was a key theme for the work of Australian Women in Agriculture. As the inaugural Secretary, I eventually rose through the ranks to become President and this was the beginning of my agri-political career. Working with the media, government and farmers’ organizations, we women in agriculture became skilled in influencing, networking, developing strategies, understanding how the systems worked and proactively working to have women included in all aspects of agricultural decision making. We discovered the gender lens of agriculture.

Initially we naively believed all we had to do was make our case, be logical and clear in our argument and the male power brokers would say, “of course – let us include some women.” However, over the years as we learnt about power, influence and decision making, we began to understand the key message: numbers matter; getting elected matters. Women had to put themselves forward for election, and be elected to the Victorian Farmers’ Federation, the National Farmers’ Federation and to Parliament.

## Helpful theory

In my efforts to understand why it was that farming women's work was invisible, three particular women and their writings have given me inspiration, strategies and a theoretical base to better interpret what I was viewing through my variety of "lens". They are Marilyn Waring's *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* and Mary Crooks from the Victorian Women's Network and her work *Gender Lens*.

Marilyn Waring, a former New Zealand MP studied the gender bias that exists in the international accounting system when calculating national wealth through the Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product.

In the United Nations System of National Accounts women working at home on domestic duties are considered 'non-producers'. As a result, public policy, determined by these same accounting processes, inevitably overlook the importance of the work of half the world's population. Waring offers an explanation of the current economic systems of accounting and outlines ways to ensure that the significance of the environment and the labour contribution of women, receive the recognition they deserve. The processes to address these issues are not new. Marilyn Waring's work, National Accounts took place in the 1990's and her strategies for inclusion are well documented: count women, segregate data, build in processes for measuring impact, consult with the people who will be impacted, build in feedback loops, publish impact statements and engage with the people who will be impacted by decisions.

Writing *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan describes how psychology persistently and systematically misunderstood women, their motives, their moral commitments, the course of their psychological growth, and their special and unique view of what is important in life. Her analysis and descriptions rang equally true for agriculture.

Gilligan and Waring helped me and other women in the process of validating our experience as women in agriculture. For example, one phrase used as justification for refusing income insurance to a farming woman, was that she was a "sleeping partner non productive". Women in our group were totally shocked at the raw nature of this description. We were invisible because our work as women was, by definition, non productive. With Waring's support, we successfully campaigned in the 1990s for the national census to be more inclusive of women's work – productive and otherwise.

Through Gilligan's work, we came to appreciate the importance of using our own voices and to know that gender difference is a reality in our lives. She gave us permission to be different to men and to use our different voices to articulate our experience of life, to design strategies for creating our "agricultural gender agenda" which brought family, community, and the delivery of services, such as child care, to the agricultural political table.

These theories and insights gave members of Australian Women in Agriculture, including me, the background, strategies and knowledge to tackle the recognition question full on.

During the 1990s members of Australian Women in Agriculture learnt to understand the gender agenda. We joined the women's movement and became skilled at being "women" in agriculture and arguing about women in "agriculture". We went, in 1974, to the United Nations' Conference on Women in Beijing. We supported other countries to hold Women in Agriculture Conferences, we built businesses around leadership, participation and development. We honed our arguments and came to better understand the environment that

we had to operate in as agricultural women activists. We built businesses that developed the practical and leadership skills of women in agriculture. We networked. We collected data. We analyzed data. We measured impact and results. We insisted there be feedback loops to policy developers. We built processes for engagement and consultation. We knew we had to be “in the tent”. We needed to use our combined voices. We needed to design processes so that women’s work was counted and valued. We needed to vote. We needed to stand for elections. We needed to be sitting “at the table”.

The Victorian Women’s Trust had extensive experience in modeling inclusive processes for engaging with women, with young people, for all people really, to be part of a community conversation. Projects such as the “Purple Sage” and “Watermark” demonstrated how “kitchen table conversations” could be used to great effect. It was through the Trust and the work of Mary Crooks that I was introduced to the concept of “lens” as a way of interpreting world events. I have found it to be a very useful process and I regularly apply it in multiple settings. Depending on the issue, I put on rural lens, a woman’s lens, an economic lens, a justice lens and more recently a political lens. Sometimes I find that I have to wear more than one lens at a time.

## **Being a Member of Parliament**

Through my work with women in agriculture, I came to better understand the disadvantage experienced particularly by women and young people who live in rural and regional Australia. Clearly there was a role for Government to help balance and deliver appropriate and relevant services to people who needed them.

However, it was the young rural people who played a pivotal role in helping me understand the impact and consequences of Government policy. Through their eyes I could see the impact of mass migration by the young from regional Australia to the cities, the less than ideal educational outcomes, higher regional unemployment, mental health issues, and the impact of very poor public transport, phone and broadband services. They reminded me that what happens at the personal level is highly influenced by political decisions: that their experience of living in regional Australia, including the lack of services, needed political solutions and they wanted to be part of those solutions. The stories of these young rural people strongly influenced my decision to stand for election and to take their issues forward.

## **What do I see through my newly acquired political lens?**

Clearly, the majority of federal MPs are men. Leadership is male dominated and there is a hierarchical structure. I have to confess that the gender imbalance does not surprise me as I experienced similar gender ratios in agricultural politics. I feel I am working in a familiar environment.

Very early in my new job as a Member of Parliament, I was pleased and delighted when an older, experienced male politician offered to mentor me in parliamentary processes; an offer I greatly appreciated and readily accepted. I knew from my experiences in farmer organizations, how a detailed knowledge of the working environment is an essential ingredient to being effective. As a Parliamentarian, I needed to understand processes such as standing orders, private members’ bills and how to move amendments. This knowledge I knew was crucial as it would enable me to more effectively represent my community and to be an active participant in the parliamentary processes.

My first year in Parliament has been characterized by many examples such as this – where my colleagues from all parties have acted towards me with professionalism, kindness, thoughtfulness and in many instances friendship. I enjoy working in Parliament House and I like the people with whom I work. I enjoy the work and feel it is an honour and privilege to be able to represent my community and be of service to my electorate.

There are a number of areas where I feel I can make a useful contribution to policy. One is through cultivating a better understanding of how policy impacts on people who live in rural and regional Australia, especially women and young people.

When Treasurer Joe Hockey's first budget was released in May of 2014, I put on my regional and gender lens, and went looking for the budget impact statements. These documents, traditionally published with the budget, show how various measures impact on particular population groups. I suspected that some of the budget measures would land more heavily on rural women and young people, especially the changes to the post school education funding arrangements, particularly the Higher Education Loans Program (HELP) and the \$7 co-payment for visits to a Doctor.

Using the process of Parliament, particularly that of Question Time, I was able to bring to the attention of the Government, Opposition and the wider community that this year there had been no "budget impact statements" for rural and regional Australians nor for women. As an MP, I was able to call for this deficit to be addressed in future budgets.

### **An Independent MP: bringing the community with me**

I have always been a community worker. In all the work I have done, I have deeply appreciated the opportunity and sense of connectedness that can be achieved when individuals come together as a community. I also know the sense of privilege that comes from being a facilitator, when personal self-interest merges into community interest and when a group of people find solutions through feeling empowered to act on their issues.

Regardless of what role I am performing, I have always been a teacher and a keen learner. In a similar way to my community work, I love the rewards of learning. I deeply appreciate being part of communities coming together to learn. I have experienced first-hand the energy, the sense of empowerment, that comes with community learning, the unleashing of creativity, innovation, and the wonderful sense of achievement that comes from a community being able to solve its problems. Once you have had this experience it is very hard to go back to more traditional, single person and/or top-down authoritarian approaches.

One of my challenges as a Member of Parliament is how to bring community, and the benefits of community learning with me in my new role?

At a very deep level the philosophy that guides me is "The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination." John H Schaar 1928 – 2011

In the future I want to "walk the talk" of empowerment, of community learning and in a real sense be a catalyst for the changes I wish to see in our world. To do this, I need to make sure that the "how" of doing things is given equal attention to the "what" of the doing. I need to be open to and accepting of creating new pathways, to exploring new destinations and in doing so I appreciate that I must be inclusive of my community's need in my new role as an independent, female MP.

How am I going to bring the community with me to Canberra? How can I incorporate learning, and especially community learning into my work as a politician? These are two of the processes that are important to me in my role.

It has been and will continue to be a challenge, but it is one that I, my staff, and the community I represent are prepared to tackle. While there are few role models, and the (informal) job description does not exactly lend itself to community development, some strategies seem to be working.

We established the Indi Volunteers Program. Every week at least 6 and often 8 community members work as volunteers in Canberra and the electorate offices. They bring with them unique skills, knowledge and experience and add enormously to the ability of “the office” to do its work. We hold regular volunteer briefing sessions to outline the various tasks that need doing and the skills required to do them. More experienced staff act as mentors and through this process the volunteers and newer staff are gaining knowledge and practical experience about how the political system works, and importantly a sense of how they can be more active contributors in the political process.

We have established community reference groups. Issues in regional Australia are fast moving, dynamic and fluid. It is a real challenge to be across the details of every topic and issue. Forming “special interest reference groups” has been one strategy to help understand the changes that are occurring. Key people in the community, stake holders, experts and interested community members come together on a regular basis to provide advice, offer suggestions on strategies and keep the office on top of issues. Our Indi Telecommunications Reference Group for example, is doing a great deal of work around addressing mobile phone coverage and preparing the groundwork for the roll out of broadband.

One of my favourite reference groups is The Indi Makers Group. It is currently an all women’s group. They see their role as one of “making things: making things happen, making the world a better place, making people happy [and] making the community happy.” And as they “make”, they build community, they engage, they create belonging and they bring life to our value of community. The Makers have made beautiful furnishings for the mobile office – a refurbished bright orange caravan. They have made wreaths for ANZAC Day services. One of the members regularly makes delicious homemade cakes to share with colleagues and staff in Parliament House. The sharing of this unique morning tea is, I suspect and hope, helping to make Parliament more of a community. It brings a more inclusive, caring approach to the business of being an MP, one that is proudly female.

## Conclusion

When I look around at my colleagues sitting in Parliament, I see few rural women. I would like to see more of “us” as I believe our Parliament will be a better place when our voices, our perspectives, our experiences of life, our differences, form part of the national conversation.

When I look again at my colleagues, I see few Independent MPs. I would like to see more of “us” in both Houses; Independents with the ability to work constructively with the Government of the day and with the Opposition. Independents add value to the political debate by offering a different perspective, particularly as they often see issues through different and important lenses.

I would also like to see more women MPs as we too see the world through different lenses from our male counterparts.

Surely broader perspectives can only enhance our political debate.

## References

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