

The Inaugural Joan Kirner Oration: Neighbourhood Houses Victoria Conference: May 2016

Joan Kirner - A tribute by Kay Setches

I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, and respectfully recognise Elders past and present.

Thank you for inviting me to this important conference and to share some of the highlights of my friendship with Joan Kirner.

Joan was Victoria's first and only woman Premier. Up to then Victoria had 42 Premiers over 90 years.

Joan was the most amazing, capable, courageous, social justice minded person I have ever met.

I understand and celebrate that the people of neighborhood houses within Victoria are absolutely non party political. This is how it should be.

Effective ongoing engagement with community development of, and service to, their communities drives this great movement and has seen the continuing growth of community and learning centres across Victoria. Women and men and children coming together in safe places.

However, on preparing this speech I reflected that Joan's and my friendship has been firmly rooted in feminist views and within the Australian Labor Party, nurtured by our strong commitment to education, fairness, compassion, integrity and social justice.

I hasten to reassure you this is not a "paid political broadcast". It will sometimes be the reverse.

Joan was, and I am still, part of the ALP and we were the greatest fighters against the ingrained misogyny of the male dominated ALP. So I will be weaving in and out of our involvement within the ALP and the wider community. For our friendship, there is no other way.

Joan was a teacher in Ballarat prior to her marriage to Ron. We know when Joan enrolled her oldest child in the North Croydon Primary School and found he was to be in a class of 60, she famously said "Not my child" and her lifetime of activism within education and politics truly began.

She quickly became active in the parents movement and was elected President and then Executive Officer of the Victorian Federation of State Schools Parents' Association, later becoming the National Executive Officer.

Joan became widely known and respected for demanding justice for government schools and negotiated fiercely with state and federal governments. She was selected to become a member of the Australian Schools Commission, a Whitlam Government initiative.

I first met Joan when she was head of the Parents' Association and I was School Council President of the Boronia Technical School. We collaborated successfully on parent and school policy issues. This was in the late 1970s.

Then as now, many women working within the community - Joan in education, myself in women's refuges, could see to ensure real lasting positive reform we had to be where the formal decisions were made.

We wanted to sit where the men sit. (There were virtually no women in Parliament then). Where the people's money (taxes) are allocated as Budgets. Where laws are made. We wanted to be the legislators, not be legislated for. We wanted our bums on the leather seats of parliament.

For both of us that was within the ALP. Joan sought pre-selection for a safe Labor Upper House western suburbs seat, with an eight year term - and she got it by 1 vote! Thank God!

I was preselected by the ALP for the marginal Liberal seat of Ringwood and, in 1982; the Cain ALP Government won seats all around the State - including Ringwood. I was gob smacked. I barely knew where Parliament House was!

Joan wasn't! Such euphoria! After 27 years of Liberal Governments. Pauline Toner was elected as the first women Minister in Victoria history.

Joan and I were elected on the same day into different parliamentary houses, and we found ourselves on the ALP education committee. Two Alpha women, we circled each other cautiously for a while then threw our lots in together as a team. That team continued for 35 years

Those pioneering ALP women feminist MPs elected in 1982 and 1985 made a big impression on the Cain Government, which had been elected with one policy under women's affairs : to conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a Women's Information and Referral Exchange!

Of course, we did the feasibility and consulted with the women of Victoria and established WIRE which is still going strong.

Unheard of initiatives followed, including Criminal Violence in the Home legislation, Sexual Assault legislation, and of course the huge expansion of the Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre program.

Robert Fordham was the then Minister of Education and Joan, myself, Margaret Ray, Caroline Hogg, and other backbench women constantly formed a large thorn in his side.

When budget priorities were notionally allocated, we women would reposition neighbourhood houses and learning centres from about 20th priority up to 2nd, immediately following apprenticeships. Not even we Amazon women could displace apprenticeships! After all the ALP was formed by unions more than 100 earlier.

This hidden in house on-going tense political tussle meant that neighbourhood houses and learning centres actually got new funding almost every year.

We women worked closely with your then NHLC Association. This is the time of the wonderful "Big Sisters" who established the first neighbourhood houses. The wonderful feminist pioneers of Nunawading North Neighbourhood House, Mountain Women's Co-Operative, Diamond Valley Living and Learning Centre and others.

We moved from about 30 houses in 1982 to about 260 in 1992 when the Kirner Government was defeated by the Kennett Opposition.

After the successful return of the Cain Government in 1985, Joan and Caroline Hogg were elected the first ever women ministers in the Victorian Legislative Council. Joan was elected Minister for Conservation Forests and Lands and Caroline Minister for Community Services.

Caroline and Joan developed their already close friendship into a political and personal support team as the only women in cabinet. A cigarette paper couldn't separate them on any issue. My God, they punched above their combined weight. Each of them retained and further developed their relationships with neighbourhood houses and learning centres, no matter their portfolios.

The ALP Women's Parliamentary Caucus would not shut up or let up on the need for more adequately funded neighbourhood houses. John Cain described we women MPs as relentless advocates for neighbourhood houses.

The Premier gave a reference "Women in the Home" to the then Victorian Women's Consultative Council. The resulting report cemented the need for, and worth of, neighbourhood houses to their communities and discussed how isolated women benefited enormously from the programs the houses offered.

This report vindicated and proved to the Premier and Government our long held beliefs of the economic need for neighbourhood houses to be paths to meaningful paid work for participants, then as now, overwhelmingly women. Joan Cain became an ardent and forceful advocate.

Joan moved from the Upper House to the seat of Williamstown at the 1988 election. Joan and Caroline were re-elected and Maureen Lyster and I were elected into the 1988 - 1992 cabinets.

Joan attained her life long ambition to become Minister for Education. Joan's memorable achievements include the introduction of the VCE; integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools and post secondary education for students with disabilities.

Joan's interest in adult education never waned. She was always available to speak to and support neighbourhood houses and learning centres.

Following John Cain's resignation in 1990, Joan was elected by the Parliamentary Labor Party as Premier. She and I worked closely on so many issues prior to and during that period, including the closure of Dickensian institutions for intellectually disabled people such as Caloola, and the introduction of mandatory reporting of child abuse.

During Cabinet meetings which, as Premier, Joan chaired, she and I just had to look across the table and we would know that a particular reform had to go ahead, no matter if Treasury said there wasn't any money. Money was always found.

It was a very hard time for Joan and the ALP Government, and the people of Victoria, given the financial collapses and recession in 1991. But in another way it was intoxicating to get so many things agreed and done.

Joan was depicted by the Herald Sun as a befuddled polka dot dress-wearing housewife with sweat emanating from her brow. Joan wasn't befuddled and never wore polka dots and she didn't sweat!

The media had no idea how to depict Joan as she was the first woman Premier. When she rang the editor of the now Herald Sun and asked why she was always depicted this way, he said it was because she was a woman and came from the Parents' Associations and it was all they could come up with!

Joan and I and others knew we were going to lose the 1992 election, my seat included, but we worked like hell nevertheless. Joan was indomitable.

When visiting a factory, TV news reports showed Joan walk headfirst into an unseen iron bar that nearly knocked her senseless. (As an aside I'm sure Jeff Kennett put it there!) Joan quickly recovered and kept walking and doing her job.

There was another memorable day at the Hepburn Springs Mineral Spa complex. To the surprised delight of the children in the pool, in front of TV cameras, Joan overbalanced and toppled head first, fully dressed, into the water. She climbed out laughing, dried off, donned a borrowed track suit and kept going.

Thank God Joan didn't need much sleep or, more likely, she resented time spent sleeping as time that was stolen from her. She would still be up at 1am, yawning, walking around her dining room table, with papers in messy piles, each with a hand written action sheet.

This was so she could be ready for the advisers and public servants, deputations and events the next day. The public servants knew they couldn't snow her!

Joan had a rule - after being briefed on infrastructure she would always ask "Why". The engineers could explain how but often couldn't explain why. Joan continually made the point that unless technical people understood the community benefit of a structure, the structure couldn't be correctly devised.

Joan was a warrior- a spear carrier - relentless and unswerving in the pursuit of justice for those without an effective voice, working alongside people in their communities. She fearlessly placed herself firmly in new and uncharted waters - not for personal glory or gain for herself - always to improve things for people.

Joan's legacy includes:

- The Flora and Fauna Guarantee- the first in Australia, which protected 700 endangered species
- Wombats being taken off the feral animals list. For this she received dozens of pictures, paintings and key rings of wombats, some made from pottery, others knitted, macramé, even plasticine! Wombats ended up everywhere as Joan donated 100s of wombat art to hospitals.
- Point Nepean National Park being saved - again and again

- Protection of Erinunda Plateau in East Gippsland and purchase and inclusion of Wonongatta Station
- The Victorian Women's Trust being financially independent
- The Queen Victoria Women's Centre building being preserved
- Conserving the Phillip Island Penguin colony, which was predicted to be wiped out by 2000 unless its habitat was protected. Now there are 28,000 pairs of breeding penguins on Philip Island and it is Victoria's biggest tourist attraction, worth millions to the Victorian economy.

And perhaps her longest lasting and most effective conservation initiative - Landcare.

Many of you here, I'm sure, can imagine, Joan as Minister for Conservation and Heather Mitchell of the National Party and the President of the Victorian Farmers Federation sitting at Heather's kitchen table working together to thrash out what became the Landcare Program.

There are now about 4000 Landcare groups in Australia and the program is operating in about 15 countries. Landcare has changed the farming face of our landscape, with tree planting, reduction in pest plants and animals, land erosion reduction and waterways improvement.

How lucky we were to be among those who knew her and walked alongside her. Joan was my friend, Premier and leader and colleague. We called ourselves sisters in crime. We schemed non stop on a daily basis!

How many feminist women, or indeed men, get to serve in a Cabinet with a strong feminist reforming Labor woman Premier? Alas, not many - yet!

We are allowed a few genuine wonders in life - that was one of mine.

Joan believed goals couldn't be achieved working alone but that everything and anything can be won if we work together.

When Joan left Parliament, she took on many challenges including Chair of Victoria's Ministerial Committee for Victorian Communities.

She also worked with Our Community for many years. In fact she learnt to use the iPad during this time. My goodness, her work output increased (as did mine) with her mastering of email.

One consolation of the iPad was that we were spared the daily effort of trying to decipher her shocking handwriting when it came through on the fax! Her writing has been described as the trail of a spider on crack!

Joan would not be jammed into having to choose between two good ideas. She would always say "we can have both ideas - now let's work out how".

In 1996, when we set up EMILY'S List, I said that although we knew a lot we didn't know about intensive fundraising. She dug her very elegant forefinger, with a red painted nail, into my chest and said "Well, sister, we just have to learn". And we did.

We raised millions over the next 19 years. We saw ALP women MPs in each parliament in Australia increase from a lowly 7% in 1994 to around 40% now. These women have and are still changing the face, but more importantly, the policies of the ALP. And many more women candidates are contesting seats.

Joan gifted us all with a special friendship, making each of us truly understand that this relationship was equal, authentic, highly valued and always exciting.

But her biggest gift was her vision, determination and clear understanding of how to bravely exercise power in so many instances.

Joan knew the difference between influence and power and when a choice was to be made she would always choose power - to get things done.

Prior to EMILY'S List beginning, Joan and I worked with many Labor women to gain the first Victorian ALP Affirmative Action rule to ensure that 35% of MPS would be women.

We figured that the party men could not stop us; we could fearlessly argue a case for AA by staking the claim, running a multi-faceted, fast moving internal and external party campaign and just keeping on going - we had nothing to lose! And everything to gain.

The ALP factional men were livid, and obstructive and desperate. They argued that candidates should be chosen on merit and AA wouldn't give us the best candidates.

We argued that male MPs and candidates did not contain 80 to 90% of merit. Their argument was so ridiculous, absurd and patently untrue that we won this argument hands down. However, they still quietly muttered and organised against AA to make it as hard for we Labor women as possible.

We also felt a need to protect and promote the incredibly talented young women coming up in the party. Women like Julia Gillard, Candy Broad, Jill Hennessey, Jacinta Allen and Jenny Mikakos.

We knew these young women could be punished for their bolshie attitudes and their political careers in the party could be damaged and curtailed. We former women MPs, brought on the arguments, but the young women bravely joined us in the campaigns.

Partly because of Joan's stature within and outside the party, and her tirelessly advocating we won the national affirmative action rule for women MPs in 1994. This rule meant women across Australia would make up 35% of ALP MPs by 2002. To our delight and amazement this fight within the party took less than two years.

Then, unbelievably, in 1996 the party ignored the AA rule and brazenly and outrageously only preselected one or two women candidates.

The pure white hot anger that Joan and I and other women experienced led to the establishment of EMILY'S List.

It was either the stupidest decision the ALP factional leaders ever made to ignore the National ALP AA rule in 1996 or it wasn't!

Because EMILY's List is arguably the best and biggest reform to the ALP in the last 50 years. The ALP needed EMILY's List and it got it!

ALP factional men didn't think we could get established or, if we did, we wouldn't last. Well, we did and we are stronger than ever. It was the best new initiative that pushed the ALP into preselecting women across factions.

The hand to hand trench combat to get 50% of women MPs started in 1993 and, last July, the ALP agreed that there would be 50% of women MPs by 2025.

In 2025, it will be 30 years since we started fighting towards this wonderful just outcome. This AA rule is known as "Joan's Rule" and she would have been so proud. Joan died in June 2015 - just a few weeks prior to the rule change.

The influence Joan had on, it seems to me, every tenth person in Victoria is profound and will be treasured and remembered. Joan worked with about two of these ten on so many amazing issues.

After Joan appeared as Joan Jett on The D Generation singing "I love rock and roll", she became a national sensation.

She couldn't go anywhere without people wanting to speak to her and congratulate her on her parliamentary career. Shopping with her was very slow, but great to see her so loved and appreciated.

Joan was one who believed in and worked for the inverted pyramid with everyone on the equal flat top of the pyramid, able to share, understand and cooperate with each other, always for the good of others.

We spoke about how important it was for us to savour every small and large victory. To make a meal of it! Champagne it!

How it is alright for women activists in any field to drop in and out of hard work. To rest and recharge, to ensure more mileage can be got from mind and body in the important, delicate, yet very robust, intellectual pursuit for social justice.

How lucky was I to have spent 35 years working, scheming and laughing with this extraordinary woman?

Joan was challenged by ill health over many years. When Joan was in hospital for the last time, I asked her what did she want done or finished? She said "nothing. I've had a good life".

I said bullshit! I suggested Landcare; children with disabilities into mainstream schools or EMILY's List!

Joan had a think, and said that Landcare was now national and international. She said that children with disabilities being in mainstream government schools was now the policy of all political parties.

It was still a work in progress, needing more funding, but that parents would take care of that over time.

She then said firmly that EMILY's List had to be placed on a safe financial footing and that the organisation had to ensure that gender gap research continued to be undertaken by women researchers so that women candidates are fully armed with accurate knowledge about what Australian women need and want from governments.

EMILY's List is working hard on this.

Joan was my "bestie", the friend you spoke with every day, sent email jokes, bemoaned the political landscape, celebrated election wins and wept over losses with, worried about family. The bestie that you bought gifts for, traded books and recipes with, stayed overnight with.

The only issue we never agreed on was the subject of cats. I'm a cat lover and Joan didn't like cats. Whenever she would come to our house, our cats would drape themselves all over Joan. The best I got was "well *your* cats aren't so bad!"

I always looked forward to the conversations. Oh, the intelligent conversations! The gossip!

Joan loved her husband Ron's curries, opera, shoes, roses, birds, good red wine, dogs, the Bombers, her family and outback camping with Ron. Oh how she will miss these!

Oh and she loved a cause, and there is no shortage of causes.

How she would have loved to see the outcome of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and the Andrews Government's "whole of Government" commitment to ending family violence.

Funding of more than \$500 million has been allocated to new initiatives to reduce and address family violence. Some of the neighbourhood houses represented here may be interested in this new initiative funding. Most of you won't be. Very difficult areas of community action.

I have read your survey and your 2015 state budget submission. The \$7 million that you asked for is a lot of money to you. In reality it is a drop in the ocean of the overall budget. I understand that you were advised that financial effort this year would be devoted to reducing family violence and you would have applauded.

However, I note that the expansion of neighbourhood houses has stalled and increasing coordination hours has stalled. Well, its time to revitalise this sector, time to plan a campaign that will see you pulled out of this stuck position.

You should be planning for the next state election, getting out of your houses and visiting your local MPs whatever the party, and saying, uncompromisingly, we want an expansion to this sector.

A cost of around \$2.50 per visit to a neighbourhood house is about as cheap as you can get. You should still be seen as the first port of call for individuals in your community who, if not gathered into programs and friendship of a house, will be costing government much more down the track.

Joan would be saying plan your campaign and go for it!

I still talk to Joan everyday - I figure that until she starts answering me audibly, I'm okay!

What would Joan Kirner have done will be the overriding question that we will ask ourselves when facing future situations where fortitude, creativity, integrity and courage are required - and there will be many of these. Because there always has been.

Joan will always be on our minds and in our hearts. More importantly, Joan will always be stiffening our backbones when needed.

I'll always thank Joan for the intoxicating, exciting ride, for the wonderful achievements, for her friendship and love.