

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA

“Politics is a living, breathing, important thing. It affects every part of our lives ... It’s not just the property of older men wearing suits.”

Australia’s Parliament House is an imposing building that blends well with Canberra, the nation’s bush capital. As I enter the large marble dominated lobby, the effect can be almost confronting, but the architecture still seems to instil well-proportioned degrees of respect, awe, even pride. Once past the main entrance, the building is a bewildering labyrinth of offices and suites; 22 kilometres of corridors, and I hope like mad the political staffer does not lose me because there is no way I will find the exit myself; indeed, it might be the only occasion I pray to be escorted from a building by security. Parliament House office accommodation is accorded on governmental pecking order and value. The governing party takes the best; ministers and opposition ministers inhabit the largest suites of offices; the press are forever complaining about the size of their quarters; and then come the minor parties and independents. Natasha Stott Despoja knows well what it is to have your suite reduced. She has known what it was to be leader of a party; she knows what it was to be with a party that was wooed by both major parties. But this is 2008. Her suite of three offices was once crowded with advisers and staff but shortly she will leave Parliament House and staff have been encouraged to accept other employment opportunities. It has been some time since major parties visited to lobby for support. The future of her Australian Democrats is bleak.

Natasha Jessica Stott Despoja was born on 9 September 1969, the daughter of Mario Despoja, an immigrant from Croatia, and Shirley Stott, Australian-born, of English heritage. The name Jessica was that of her grandmother, the ninth and last child of this branch of the Swinfield family. As a child Jessica stayed at home to care for a mother invalided by a stroke. She died when Natasha was two, was “strong, tactful, adored by her children; with a lovely voice and quiet charm but shy”. Jessica’s belief in rights and fairness for women was well demonstrated in the way she raised her daughter Shirley.

Her feminism showed in her wish for education and independence for her daughter. To eke out her war widow’s pension, she worked in a factory to send my mother to university. It was only her second paid job in life.

Though working in a motor parts factory was one of the few choices offered, having a paying job gave Jessica satisfaction and also ensured a brighter future for her daughter Shirley, “an educational opportunity that provided her with a chance to dream about a future where a woman's intellect was valued and her ability to lead assumed”.ⁱ Shirley attended a Sydney school which encouraged excellence and she chose journalism as a career. As a court reporter she “began to learn a lot more about what was done to women and how men were excused from it”, and “that the gender barrier and violence fitted together like a hinged tool to control women”. She also realised that, no matter how good she was at her job, “she would never get better jobs, because she wasn’t a man”. Following the birth of son Luke, Shirley and Mario divorced, and Shirley supported her two young children. It has been said of Shirley Stott Despoja that she was known for her “integrity and professionalism” and that:

Throughout the course of her professional and personal life, she has insisted upon standing up for herself, complaining about injustice and corruption and speaking out on behalf of others who didn’t have her opportunities, and can’t make themselves heard.ⁱⁱ

Natasha speaks fondly of her mother Shirley as “a wonderful role model, she’s a feisty, outspoken feminist, and very influential on my political development”. Shirley Stott was 80 per cent hearing impaired and wore two hearing aids. This is not something Natasha discusses freely. It is nonetheless feasible that this caused Natasha to grow up faster than most. Shirley certainly believed this to be

the case and in a 1996 interview she suggested that because she was not always “very frank about my hearing loss”, Natasha developed “early social skills”.ⁱⁱⁱ The admiration the daughter has for her mother is offered readily:

She brought up two kids single handedly from when my brother Luke was three and I was six. I find her even more extraordinary when I face the challenge of work and two children, with a loving supportive husband and two healthy incomes. I marvel at what she achieved.

There is the slightest of hesitations before Natasha adds, “I love her politics too, I love her brain ... she is my best friend”. One of her first real political events was being on her father’s shoulders at a Gough Whitlam rally. It is strange how life evolved; decades later she was on a first name basis with Whitlam. Natasha remembers the dismissal of the Whitlam Government by the Governor-General in November 1975, watching it on television, absorbing her parents’ outrage. Natasha remembers being taken to a “reclaim the night march” by Shirley. The acrimonious split of her parents also left an indelible impression.

We had nasty family court battles over custody, access and maintenance. It made me very conscious just how much maintenance defaulters are responsible for families living in poverty.^{iv}



Courtesy Natasha Stott Despoja

Growing up Natasha was encouraged to have a view on issues and perhaps the strongest imprint was the importance of education. “Education was the great equaliser, education would lead to greater opportunities, in terms of health, income, democracy.” Formal education alerted her to anomalies, to gender division:

Boys were encouraged to do maths and girls to consider other subjects. The boys were going to be fire-fighters, rocket scientists and other authority figures.^v

The options and role models for girls were different. It was a volatile mixture of journalism, feminism, politics and the influence of strong women and a few men, which nurtured Natasha Stott Despoja and would continue to sustain her.

In Grade Three at primary school, Natasha declared “girls can do anything boys can do, except boys can’t have babies”. There was a geographic move and Natasha began to attend the Pembroke School in the Adelaide suburb of Kensington Park.

The Pembroke philosophy includes:

We strive for excellence in tradition and innovation. We seek to prepare each student to actively participate in, and contribute to, our changing global society with leadership, wisdom and compassion, opening the door to a journey of lifelong learning.^{vi}

In the second half of the 1980s Pembroke introduced teddy-bear making as an extra-curriculum activity. The completed bears would be sent to charities. Natasha’s interests lay in less cuddly and more hardcore areas.

She was involved in student representation at the school and her efforts resulted in the founding of South Australia’s first state-wide student representative council. She entered the University of Adelaide to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree. Her interest in politics heightened: “I just loved the camaraderie of student politics, particularly all the women’s groups”. By 1991 she was President of the University of Adelaide Students’ Association and serving as the state women’s officer for the National Union of Students in South Australia.

Natasha knew where her destiny lay but she had yet to affiliate herself to a party.

The Westminster form of politics Australia inherited from the United Kingdom is hinged on two major parties and their monopoly of governance. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was Australia's oldest political party. It was formed in the 1890s and was represented in the first federal parliament elected in 1901. There had been great upheaval and splits in 1917, 1931 and 1955 which lost voter support and ensured Labor Party parliamentarians remained on the opposition benches. In the last century the ALP governed at the federal level only 28 years. In 1991, the year Natasha was President of the University of Adelaide Students' Association, and then graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, her nation's prime minister of eight years, Bob Hawke, was deposed by Paul Keating.

The Australian Liberal Party had also undergone periodic structural changes and debilitating splits. Originally known as the Nationalist Party and then the United Australian Party, the Liberal Party was formed by Robert Gordon Menzies in 1944. To maintain its position of power the Liberal Party governed as "the Coalition" with the other centre right party known originally as the Australian Country Party (1921–1975) and then the National Country Party of Australia.

Neither the ALP nor the Coalition seemed a good fit for Natasha, and she was uncomfortable with the same old, same old, bipolar nature of Australian politics. There needed to be a more invigorated political approach and she hoped that this might come from the Australian Democrats.

I was like many younger Australians — quite disillusioned, a bit cynical about the major parties, disappointed and angry about the Labor Party decision to re-introduce tertiary fees.

She watched and listened and it seemed to her that the only party that had "maintained its principles as far as I was concerned" and "had stayed true to its policy of federally financed and accessible education was the Democrats".

On 24 March 1977 the charismatic former Liberal Party Minister, Don Chipp, had resigned from his party with the words:

I have become disenchanted with party politics as they are practised in this country and with the pressure groups which have an undue influence on the major political parties. The parties seem to polarise on almost every issue, sometimes seemingly just for the sake of it, and I wonder if the ordinary voter is not becoming sick and tired of the vested interests which unduly influence political parties and yearns for the emergence of a third political force, representing middle-of-the-road policies which would owe allegiance to no outside pressure group.^{vii}

The comment resonated through an Australian society still reeling from the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Government. Chipp was invited to attend a meeting of more than 3,000 disaffected voters who filled Perth Town Hall to overflowing. A resolution was passed to form a centre-line party and Don Chipp, amid resounding applause, was asked to lead. The name “Australian Democrats” was the most preferred among the 56 names suggested. In 1977 Democrat Janine Haines filled a South Australian Senate position left by retiring Steele Hall. Strangely Janine Haines was not the endorsed candidate for the 1977 federal election.