

Speech of Lindsay Connor at the

Champagne Showing of Joan Kirner Portrait, Jessie Street National Women's Library

Thursday 7 April 2016

Members and friends of the Jessie Street Library and Emily's List.

I am sure there will be some here who knew Joan Kirner more intimately than I ever did; and maybe some who knew and worked with her over a longer period.

But I thank your two organisations for the invitation to join you here tonight which I gladly accepted, because I knew Joan at a formative period in what was to become a life of national significance.

I knew, admired and worked with Joan at a time in our country's history where she made an impact in the sphere of education that was significant in its own right, even had she not gone on to become a political leader.

As well as that, Joan and I were bonded forever because we happened – strangely – to share a moment in our national history around what is known as The Dismissal – but more of that later.

I first met Joan when we were both young mothers in what were heady days. These were the days of anti-Vietnam War rallies; of evolving doctrines of human rights; of women's lib and the emergence of the Women's Electoral Lobby as a political force; and the election of the Whitlam Labor Government.

I can't recall now when I first set eyes on this almost luminous woman – larger than life – it was probably at an education rally. Joan would then have been there in her capacity as President of the Victorian Federation of Parents and Citizens (P&C) Associations. This sense of Joan Kirner as a luminous presence is still there in the portrait we are seeing here tonight of her at the other end of her career.

Joan brought distinctive personal strengths to the struggle for advancement of public schooling in this country.

But first I want to speak about the times – about the hopes (and fears) that inspired the young Joan Kirner’s activism. Looking back, I can now see some of the forces that were at work.

Joan burst on to the scene heading a band of parents – largely women – who had become active, as I had, in the P&Cs of our local public schools. We were women who had often had the privilege of a full secondary education and of going on to university – a privilege we understood to have been generally denied our own parents, especially mothers.

Many of these parents had gone into teaching before becoming parents – they were informed, organised, articulate and bursting with aspirations for advancing society particularly through the education of our children – notice that I said ‘our’ advisedly and not ‘our own’.

Well educated and faced with a dearth of child care, our generation faced barriers in taking our rightful place in the mainstream workforce. Joan Kirner saw that we were a small army with the potential to organise meetings and rallies and to write policy documents that demanded action from a wealthy and advanced nation to give its children the very best schooling we could afford. The P&C movement in those years was a political training ground for many parents.

It may also have been significant in Joan’s life and career, in my view, that she grew up in the state of Victoria. I raised my family in Canberra and was active in the P&C movement there, but I was from New South Wales and could not help noticing that there was a much stronger tradition in Victoria than in my state of origin of local and community activism. Perhaps because of its convict origins, New South Wales had a more authoritarian than communitarian style (a tradition both of accepting and rejecting authority).

The P&C provided opportunities for the young Joan Kirner to hone her inherent negotiating skills. And to confront the challenges of our federal system. So different at times were the concerns and the culture of, say, the ACT and Western Australia parent organisations that superb diplomatic skills were required to reach consensus around key policies.

Joan had, in spades, one of the essential attributes of a successful politician. The woman was a powerhouse. I recall a weekend P&C conference held somewhere outside Melbourne during the 70s. Possibly Joan had by then become the national President of the Australian Council of State School

Organisations (ACSSO). She had planned for a small group of us to work after dinner to prepare ideas for the next day of the weekend conference. When she was summoned unexpectedly to an important meeting in Melbourne she instructed us to be ready to meet when she returned at around 9pm.

It was 11 pm when her car swung into the motel. I heard it from my room where I was too tired to even think of brainstorming. I am ashamed to say that I dived into bed and turned out the light and lay there guiltily pretending to be asleep when she knocked on my door. She found a couple of other hardy souls; they met into the wee small hours and then Joan burst forth again at the crack of dawn fresh and ready for action.

I remember that the Kirner family used to take part in that great Victorian tradition of moving their whole household down to the beach for a long summer camping holiday. And I certainly recall colleagues working in the Canberra ACSSO office relating how they received daily lists of ideas and instructions from Joan – largely illegible because the President wrote them while sitting on a camp stretcher.

Joan Kirner had a tough, strategic intelligence...she could work through from a basic principle to a workable strategy. She had a wonderful sense of priorities, so that she did not dissipate her energies on peripheral issues. She worked out her position and stated it clearly.

I well recall a meeting of the nation's education ministers – the then Australian Education Council - when she was the Victorian Minister for Education and I was there as a Commonwealth official. The issue of state differences in the teaching of handwriting was on the agenda. Having outlined the slight variations in the way the various states and territories taught children to write several letters of the alphabet, she remarked drily that a loop here or there was “not something I would die in a ditch about”.

Even if we had not been gathering here tonight, I would have been thinking about Joan in relation to our current political imbroglio. What pithy words might she have used to describe the actions of a Federal government prepared to conscript the students in public schools for use as guinea pigs in a hasty and politically-motivated experiment to fix deep-seated flaws in our dysfunctional federal system?

Joan did not indulge in the belief that the act of giving birth endowed every individual parent with significant or wise views about the purposes of

schooling or how the school system should operate. What she understood was that parents, collectively, constitute one group of citizens who are most likely to understand the needs of children and young people and to defend and advance their educational interests. For that reason, parents must be active participants in the formation of education policy and in the way it operates in schools; and work in partnership with the teaching profession. In a sense, she saw parents as both parents-and-citizens, coming together for the public good.

Joan Kirner had a profound influence on my life. Having seen her operate as a member of the Schools Commission was a huge advantage when I was later appointed to that body.

But I hope you will indulge me and let me tell you about the moment in history we shared and about which we spoke whenever we met, all too infrequently, in subsequent years.

Why I do not remember but on November 11, 1975, Joan Kirner was working with me at my place in O'Connor in the ACT on our large wooden table which was strewn with manila folders. She would have been ACSSO President at the time. Maybe she was there to save my having to get a babysitter to come in to the office to do whatever we were doing.

I had in my hand a folder marked 'Community Participation' when the phone rang. It was my delightful Aunt Nell ringing from Sydney. Her voice was choked with tears. "Oh, Lynds", she sobbed down the phone, "I know I'm a Liberal but what has happened is dreadful. The Governor-General has no right to dismiss Mr Whitlam – he is our elected Prime Minister".

Now I have to fill in some background here. Not only had I abandoned the Liberal-voting tradition of my extended family but I had married a journalist who was, at this time, the Press Secretary for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. I was almost certainly filled with a sense of my own self-importance as almost an insider to the dramas taking place in the National Parliament at this time. "No", I said in an authoritative voice designed to calm my aunt, but which was also quite patronising. Gesturing to Joan that I was dealing with a mad relative on the phone, I informed my aunt that she almost certainly had it wrong – otherwise I would have heard this shocking news from the horse's mouth of the Press Secretary himself. "No", she sobbed, "I just heard it on the radio". Well, as we now know, the Prime Minister went home to have lunch without having informed the Leader of the Government in the

Senate of his dismissal and news of this awful event did indeed reach my aunt, Joan Kirner and me before it reached him, his colleagues or his Press Secretary. The manila folders were pushed to one side and I got the baby up and out into the car and drove a highly agitated Joan to the ACSSO office.

We see Joan in the portrait here tonight opening doors. An apt metaphor for her life. She spent her life opening doors, going through them herself and keeping them open for others. I am thinking in particular of her establishment of Emily's List in Australia to support women candidates to follow in her footsteps. And, of course, Landcare is also one of her important legacies.

Only those who were much closer to Joan than I would know whether her life was one filled with happiness. Certainly, illness cast a dreadful shadow in her last years.

But what I do know is that Joan Kirner lived a deeply meaningful life and I hope and feel that this, along with her love of family and friends, must have brought her great personal satisfaction.

She always had a clear sense of purpose – she had work to do, goals to achieve for the advancement of individuals, communities and the society as a whole.

Her goals were based in strong values – a belief in the dignity and worth of her fellows – that took her life in positive directions. She had a healthy self-confidence that gave her a sense of agency and capacity to make worthwhile changes in the world.

For me, it was her energy and drive that marked Joan out from most of us who share her world view and her aspirations.