

AUSTRALIA

Once viewed as the “discovery” of European explorations in the seventeenth century, Australia, physically one of the largest nations on earth, is now recognised as the home of an ancient Aboriginal civilisation reaching back thousands of years. Its modern history has been dominated by the process of colonisation from the West in which Britain played a central role; even today, symbolic executive power in Australia remains vested in the British monarch, represented throughout the land by the Governor-General. In real political terms, however, Australia is an independent federal democracy whose constitutional features derive not only from British, but also from US political practice.

British contact with Australia dates back to the late seventeenth century but it was a century later, in 1770, that James Cook’s historic voyage launched Britain’s claim to the territory. The discovery of copper and gold in the mid-nineteenth century spurred colonisation and economic development and by 1860 settlers from Britain, including deportees, had formed the nuclei of what were to become Australia’s six constituent states. By the end of the century there were growing calls for federation. On January 1, 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed under a new constitution.

Federalism is central to the Australian system of government. While the central government, or Commonwealth, has control over such areas as defence, external relations, immigration and customs and excise, directly elected legislatures in the six States and two Territories handle a broad portfolio of residual powers.

At the federal level, legislative power is vested in a bicameral parliament, all of whose members are directly elected by universal adult suffrage. The lower house, or House of Representatives, comprises 148 members elected at least every three years on a constituency basis. What may have some bearing on the representation of women in parliament, however, is the mode of selection of members of the federal upper house, or Senate: each State sends a contingent of twelve representatives (two in the case of Territories) and these are elected by proportional representation through multi-member constituencies.

Since the 1920s, three political parties have dominated parliamentary elections: the Australian Labour Party, and, to the right of it, the Liberal Party and the National (or Country) Party. In the recent past, the Australian Labour Party held power from 1983 until its defeat in the 1996 general elections, when it was replaced by a Liberal-National Party coalition government headed by Liberal leader John Howard.

The past two decades have seen new parties enter the political arena, notably the Democrats and the Greens. Gender justice is under growing debate and there is also evidence of heightened sensitivity within Australia to the historical maltreatment and current plight of people of Aboriginal origin.

Women in Politics

Viewed historically, Australia emerges as a pioneer of women's political rights. White women gained the vote in the State of South Australia as early as 1894, and the 1902 Franchise Act which followed the establishment of the federal Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 gave white women the right to vote in national elections. Despite this headstart, however, Australia today is only marginally ahead of the global average with respect to women's representation in national and state parliaments.

Prior to the 1993 general elections, there were just 29 women in Australia's national parliament: 19 in the Senate (constituting 25 per cent of its membership) and 10 in the House of Representatives (7 per cent of membership). While the 1993 elections brought no change to the overall figure of 29 women national-level legislators, the general elections of 1996 saw this total rise to 44, or 19.6 per cent of total membership. In the lower house, women now constitute 15.5 per cent of members, while in the Senate the proportion of women legislators has risen to 30 per cent. However, a number of these women members occupy marginal seats and both major parties have drawn fire for their failure to select women candidates for safe seats. Two women hold cabinet rank in the Howard administration: Jocelyn Newman, Minister for Social Security and Minister assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women (profiled below); and Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

In party political terms, it has been the smaller parties that have performed most creditably in terms of the practice of gender equality. Three of the leaders the Democrats have had since the formation of the party in the late seventies have been women; one former leader is Senator Cheryl Kernot, profiled below. The 1996 elections saw a new party, the Australian Women's Party, make an unsuccessful bid for parliament in an effort to redress the imbalance between men and women in the national legislature. The party advocates achieving gender parity in parliament by having two candidates, a man and a woman, for each constituency.

Labour Party Governments of the 1970s and 1980s enacted legislation targeting sex discrimination and affirming equal employment opportunities for women. A key role was played by Senator Susan Ryan, a minister in the Bob Hawke administration generally regarded as a trail-blazer in the arena of women's rights. The party, now in opposition, has set itself the target of selecting women for at least one third of its total list of candidates by the year 2000.

SENATOR JOCELYN NEWMAN

Minister for Social Security

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women

It was while working as a lawyer and experiencing at first hand some of the difficulties faced by women in everyday life that Jocelyn Newman, one of contemporary Australia's most senior and respected women political figures, became interested in championing women's issues. She translated interest into action by becoming one of the founder members of the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972 and by being instrumental in the establishment of the first women's refuges in Tasmania. The mid-1980s saw her launch her own political career when she successfully contested for the federal Senate. Not long after, she attained front bench status as Shadow Minister handling defence and several other portfolios.

But perhaps the greatest challenge of her life came in 1994, when she was diagnosed as suffering from breast cancer. She went public with the news and stepped down from the shadow ministry to begin her battle with the disease. Two years later, she was back in parliament, once again as Shadow Minister of Defence. Then came the 1996 General Elections, the victory of the Liberal Party-National Party coalition and the appointment of Senator Newman as Minister for Social Security in the new government headed by John Howard. She was given an additional ministerial responsibility: that of helping the Prime Minister advance and promote the status of women.

Early Life

Jocelyn Newman (née Mullett) was born in Melbourne in 1937. After her school career there she enrolled at the University of Melbourne, where she read law and edited the student newspaper. Later, while on a blind date, she met Kevin Newman, a young army officer. "It was love at first sight" is how she recalls their first encounter. The couple married in 1961, and Jocelyn Newman embarked on her new life as an army wife. "I remember our first home, in Sydney, was so small that the guests at our first dinner party had to sit in rows on the floor, but we managed."

Kevin Newman's extended military service abroad (he served in both Malaya and Vietnam and was absent from Australia for a whole year at one stage) obliged his wife to develop resourcefulness and self-reliance as she raised their two young children. Looking back, she views this as an important, formative period of her life: "It was an experience I value very highly, and one which has served me well in my career as a politician, and even more so as a minister." She practised law in Canberra, Victoria and Tasmania and also gained experience in running businesses that included retailing, farming and tourism.

Entry into Politics

In 1972, Newman gave proof of her growing involvement in public affairs when she became a founder member of the Women's Electoral Lobby. Now living in Tasmania, she became active in a range of community concerns, including child protection, women's shelters and non-government education. Around this time, too, she applied for the job of women's adviser to the newly elected Labour government headed by Gough Whitlam. "I thought I could make a contribution to women's policy in Australia by advising the government, but the job went to someone else and I poured my energies into the community."

In 1975, her husband Kevin, by now active in the Liberal Party, was elected to the Federal Parliament. For a while he served as a minister in the Fraser government, and his political career clearly interested his intelligent lawyer wife. When ill-health forced Kevin to retire from politics in 1984, Jocelyn began considering a political career of her own. "In a sense it was the timing of it all which convinced me to make a run for a Senate vacancy in 1986. I was looking for a new challenge; one part of my life was coming to an end with the children having grown up. I saw an opportunity and decided to nominate for the vacancy, even though I never really expected to have a chance of winning." But win she did, defeating close to a dozen candidates for the Senate seat.

Once in parliament, Newman quickly established herself as a woman of energy and ability. A strong believer in the value of the parliamentary committee process, she became involved in a broad spectrum of areas, including foreign affairs, education and the arts, public interest disclosures, estimates and the scrutiny of bills. But from the start her knowledge and experience as the wife of a serving soldier steered her towards a special interest in defence matters; her maiden speech in fact addressed conditions of service within Australia's armed forces.

Rise to the Top

Two years after entering Parliament, Newman was elevated to the shadow front bench, where she handled the portfolio dealing with defence personnel. Later, she was entrusted with other areas of responsibility, including the status of women, the aged, and family and health.

It was not long after she assumed the shadow health portfolio that she faced a health crisis of her own. She had long been an active campaigner on breast cancer issues, having seen her grandmother, mother and sister all battle the disease. In May 1994, while in the midst of a national campaign to raise breast cancer awareness, she learnt that she, too, was in the grip of the familiar old enemy. "I was shattered that day," she remembers. "I suppose at that stage I thought I was on the way out. Couldn't see round corners."

She went public with the news and decided to step down from the shadow ministry. "The decision to go public with my breast cancer was not easy, but I felt I had a duty as a public figure to talk openly about the disease, in the hope it would encourage other women to come forward for testing."

After treatment, she returned to Parliament and went straight back into the Shadow Cabinet, holding the defence portfolio. Here she remained until the 1996 General Elections and the victory of the Liberal-National Party alliance. She was invited to join the government, but not in the defence post that might have been expected. "The Prime Minister rang me and said he wanted me to be Social Security Minister. I was a little surprised, but delighted to have his confidence for such an important job and, of course, I said "yes". Her long interest in women's issues brought a second ministerial portfolio: that of assisting the Prime Minister in enhancing the status of women.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Senator Newman is a strong advocate of incentives, as opposed to affirmative action or quotas, to bring more women into public life. As she puts it, "Simply trying to work the numbers rather than dealing directly with women themselves is not a recipe for success. I have always been a strong advocate for the encouragement of women of merit into politics, rather than any 'big stick' approach."

She believes that this policy of gentle encouragement lies behind the increase in women parliamentarians on the Coalition Government benches, pointing out that Coalition women MPs (58 per cent of women parliamentarians elected in 1996) now outnumber their Labour counterparts. "Women are still well behind men in terms of representation, but the trend is there and it is encouraging today's young women to consider a political career."

On questions of strategy, she favours mainstreaming women's issues rather than debating them with a small collective of interest groups at the top, observing that, "There are so many small organisations and individuals with something to contribute who may never have had their voice heard in Canberra because of a previous emphasis on dealing only with those at the top of the pyramid."

What factors does she identify as having played an important role in her own rise to political prominence? A supportive, politically shrewd husband has clearly been a major enabling element. As she puts it: "I have been very fortunate in my political career to have a husband who knows the ropes, having been a minister himself. Kevin has always been, and continues to be, my greatest supporter. He offers wonderful advice, but at the same time gives me the space to do the job."

Newman also believes the breadth of her professional experience, including the challenge of running a number of businesses, has helped equip her for a successful political career. Here, she emphasises the importance to would-be woman legislators of active community involvements. “Contributing to the good of a local community can be very satisfying, and of course it builds upon the skills needed in dealing with people.”

Among the personal qualities she identifies as essential for women contemplating a life in politics are determination, a positive outlook and a commitment to the pursuit of excellence. She emphasises, too, the importance of good communication skills, noting that “one can do an absolutely top-notch job on an issue, but if it is not properly communicated the results will not reflect the quality and effort put in.”

SENATOR CHERYL KERNOT

Member of Parliament (Labour Party)

Former Leader of the Australian Democrats

Cheryl Kernot discovered a talent for public speaking at an early age. “I always wanted to sing” she recalls, “But instead I could talk. I liked doing it. I felt confident giving speeches.” At secondary school she gained a reputation for her speaking skills, but it was not until she was well into her twenties that she became drawn into active politics.

She well remembers the circumstances. The occasion was a protest rally in Brisbane against the proposed introduction into the Queensland State Legislature of a draconian anti-abortion bill. When protestors gathered outside Parliament, the gates were closed in their faces to prevent them entering. An outraged Kernot telephoned her local MP and demanded that he arrange for her to watch the debate in progress. From the public gallery, she watched the abortion bill debated into the early hours of the morning. “I was struck by the absence of anybody articulating what I thought about the issue,” she recalls. “I was struck by the fact that these people were about to pass a law which was going to affect my life. And I was struck by the absence of women. It was like a bolt of lightning.”

Thoroughly shaken by the experience, Kernot volunteered to speak at a subsequent protest rally at Brisbane City Hall. Watching the all-male parliamentary debate on the abortion bill had made her acutely aware of the need for more female politicians. And it was obvious that the best way to make her opinions count was to get into Parliament herself.

Early Life

Cheryl Kernot was born into a working-class family in New South Wales in 1948. Her father held two jobs in order to bring home suffi-

cient income for the family of six (Cheryl had three sisters and a brother). There was a family tradition of political involvement; Cheryl's maternal grandfather had been a Labour Party organiser in the Hunter Valley coalfields. And both her parents were strong advocates of women's rights: "You can do anything you want to," they used to tell their three daughters.

Kernot performed strongly at school and later won a Commonwealth university scholarship to the University of Sydney, where she studied government. At university, she avoided taking any active role in student politics, perceiving herself as a country girl unfamiliar with big city ways. After obtaining a teaching diploma at Newcastle University, she embarked on a school teaching career in Sydney and Brisbane that would last from 1973 to 1987. She married in 1981, and her daughter, Sian, was born two years later.

Entry into Politics

Kernot, although active in her local community, had never been a member of a political party before she joined the Australian Democrats in 1979. The party had been formed two years earlier by Don Chipp, a disenchanted former Liberal Party Minister, who conceived it as a centrist force that would steer a course between the two political goliaths, the Liberal Party and the Labour Party. What especially attracted Kernot was what she saw as the Democrats' positive attitude to women, despite its lack of a formal quota system. She perceived the party as playing a pioneering role in getting women into politics: it was the first Australian political party, she has pointed out, to elect a woman leader, the first to elect a woman as national president and the first to have a woman in both leader and deputy-leader positions.

Kernot put in a decade's work for the Democrats before she won her seat in the Senate in the 1990 federal election. At different times, she held the unpaid positions of policy co-ordinator, newsletter editor, campaign director, State President and Deputy National President. In 1986, the party elected its first woman leader, Janine Haines, and Kernot derived encouragement in her rise up through the ranks from the sisterhood she found within the party.

The young politician faced her first electoral contest in 1980, when she stood for a seat in the State Parliament and garnered a creditable 12 per cent of the vote. In the 1984 Federal Election, she was listed fourth on the Democrats' Senate ticket, a position which gave her no chance of winning a seat. Finally, in 1989, she was elected to lead the Queensland Senate ticket. In the ensuing federal election of 1990, she was the only woman elected to the Senate from her state.

In the national Senate, Kernot developed her political skills further and gave clear indications of her leadership potential. In April 1993, she

was elected leader of the Australian Democrats through a nationwide ballot of party members in which she gained more than 80 per cent of the vote. In 1997, however, she made the decision to leave the Democrats and join the Labour Party.

Enabling Factors

Kernot looks back with gratitude to supportive parents who encouraged her to aim high and to high school teachers who awakened her to a wider world by kindling an interest in books and ideas. She notes her own inclination, from an early age, to be “a joiner and a do-er”, a trait that got her involved in a broad range of organised activity, from media education to the promotion of multiculturalism.

She also pays tribute to the support she received from the “woman-friendly” Democrats at key stages of her political career. In 1983, she recalls by way of example, she had to give up her seat on the Democrats’ Queensland Executive Committee when she and her husband went to Canada on a teaching exchange. When the couple returned, their infant daughter was just two weeks old and Kernot felt inclined to play a less active role in the party as she learned to cope with motherhood. But only a few weeks after her return, she got a call from the woman then heading the party’s Queensland division, who urged her to be nominated for re-election to the executive. “When I said, ‘I don’t know whether I can juggle it all,’” remembers Kernot, “she promised to make all the necessary flexible arrangements.” Soon executive meetings were being held at Kernot’s house so that she could breast-feed her baby.

Although hesitant about her return to politics at the time, Kernot is now thankful she was coaxed so quickly back into the mainstream. “That flexibility brought me back,” she says. “There was no problem.”

Regarding strategies for would-be women political leaders, she is clear that women with serious political aspirations should seek traditionally male-appropriated portfolios rather than be ghettoed into areas seen as “appropriate” for women. When she became the Democrats’ spokesperson on Treasury and Finance, her first reaction was one of panic: “I thought, ‘Oh, I’m not an economist.’ But so much of it is common sense, really. I haven’t found it daunting at all.”

As for the personal qualities she believes women in politics should nurture, diplomacy and a sense of humour figure prominently. It is also important, she argues, that women are not easily intimidated by the bluster and self-importance of male colleagues and opponents. Developing a thick skin is a basic survival strategy: “You have to realise that these things come and go. In politics, you’ve got to understand that a lot of it is a game. You can’t be too precious about it.”

LOIS O'DONOGHUE*High profile Aboriginal woman**Former Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission*

When she was two years old, Lois Donoghue, together with her three sisters, was taken away from her mother and sent to a children's home. The reason: her mother was Aboriginal and her father (whom she never knew) was white. In the Australia of the 1930s (and beyond), Lois was a "half-caste" whom the state decreed it had the right to separate not only from her mother but also from her entire Aboriginal cultural inheritance.

Twenty-seven years later, while stationed at the mining town of Coober Pedy, on the edge of the Pitjanjatjara tribal lands, Lois was reunited with her mother. As a nurse-cum-welfare officer working for the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, she had deliberately sought work in this remote region in the hopes of seeing her mother, Lily, again.

One day, while visiting the supermarket, she heard someone shout: "That's Lily's daughter!" In the group of people who had noticed her were her mother's sister and brother; they had spotted the family resemblance. They told Lois that her mother was at Oodnadatta, one thousand kilometres north-west of Adelaide. It took three months for Lois and her eldest sister, Eileen, to get there. Lily, who had heard they were coming, waited at the roadside every day for weeks "from first light in the morning until dark."

When the daughters at last arrived, Lily proudly introduced them around town but kept them away from the camp where she was living. "She realised we'd been brought up differently and didn't want us to see her poor conditions." Later, O'Donoghue took her mother south to meet her other children and her grandchildren.

Finding her mother brought home to O'Donoghue just what it meant to be the victim of racist policies, denied even the right to raise one's own children. "It was then that the jigsaw puzzle came together for me," she says. "It was really at that point that I resolved that promoting the Aboriginal cause was a full-time job for me. It was then that I decided that I was going to improve the conditions of my people."

Early Life

Lois O'Donoghue was born in August 1932 at the property Granite Downs at Indulkana in the outback of South Australia. Her mother, a Yunkunytjatjara woman, gave the new baby the Aboriginal name Lowitja. The baby was never to know her father, an Irish station manager.

When O'Donoghue was two, she and her two sisters were taken from their mother and placed in Colebrook, a home for children of mixed Aboriginal and European parentage. Located in the South Australian town

of Quorn in the Flinders Ranges 300 kilometres north of Adelaide, Colebrook was run by an organisation called the United Aborigines' Mission. "It was a really narrow, evangelistic type of mission," recalls O'Donoghue. "Hellfire and brimstone type of stuff. We were taken away because we were what they then called "half-castes". This experience was very common."

The Australian Federal Government recently instituted an inquiry into the practice of taking Aboriginal children away from their families, a practice that lasted for the greater part of this century.

In the home, Lowitja was renamed "Lois". She and the other children were not allowed to speak their own language or to ask questions about their parents and origins. But new children were always arriving and, in secret, they asked about their families and kept up with their Pitjantjatjara language. Lois found out that her mother's name was "Lily".

Looking back, O'Donoghue can now discern a positive side to this institutional life. "The discipline, I believe, stood me in very good stead for life. Children like us learned discipline and skills which enabled us to fight our way through the white system later in our lives." But the dominant reality of life at Colebrook was unreservedly negative; it was the absence of love, affection and any sense of the children as individuals in their own right. When asked by journalists and documentary filmmakers for a picture of herself as a child, O'Donoghue can only offer group photos. "They have to put a ring around me," she says with a wry laugh. "We weren't important as individuals."

In the home, her inclination to stand up against authority saw her labelled as a troublemaker. "I stood up for my sisters, took away the strap when they were being beaten. I used to do that because I couldn't stand it. One of my sisters was really quite badly treated."

O'Donoghue attended Quorn Primary School and later went on to a girls' technical high school, but there was no expectation that she would pursue a career. Boys in the home were expected to become stockmen, the girls domestic servants. When O'Donoghue turned sixteen, she was sent to a farming family where there were six children to look after.

But she had higher aspirations. She wanted to become a nurse.

Entry into Politics

O'Donoghue trained as a nurse at the South Coast District Hospital at Victor Harbour in South Australia from 1950-1953. She encountered her first major obstacle when she was denied entry to Royal Adelaide Hospital to further her training. "The reason I was denied entry was that I was Aboriginal. This was my take-off point. I was not prepared to accept this set-back."

Her response to the situation was instinctively political. She joined the Aboriginal Advancement League, then the only organisation involved in

Aboriginal rights. She lobbied members of the South Australian state parliament, spoke at a rally at Adelaide Town Hall, and confronted in person not only the matron of the hospital but also the State Premier.

This, it should be remembered, was 1953. It would only be in 1967 that white Australians would vote to recognise Aborigines as citizens. And their right to vote under the same conditions as other Australians would not be enacted until 1984. "In this period of my life," recalls O'Donoghue, "I realised there were principles worth fighting for. All we were doing was fighting for rights other Australians were taking for granted."

As a result of the publicity generated by the campaign, the hospital matron reversed her earlier decision and accepted O'Donoghue at the hospital in 1954. There the young nurse remained until 1961, when she accepted an invitation to join an Australian Baptist Mission team for two years in the Indian state of Assam. On her return to Australia, she joined the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs as a nurse-cum-welfare officer working in remote areas. Her plan was to regain contact with her mother.

Rise to the Top

After the emotional reunion with Lily, O'Donoghue stayed on in her job for a decade before moving to the Adelaide head office of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Here, and later in Canberra, she worked as a senior liaison officer. In 1975, she was the first Aboriginal to be appointed Regional Director of the new federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Two years later she left the job, frustrated by the constraints of bureaucratic functioning. But her work as a pioneer leader of her community would continue.

In 1977, O'Donoghue became founder chairperson of the National Aboriginal Conference. In 1980, she was a founder member of the Aboriginal Development Commission and served there as Commissioner from 1980-1984 and as Chairperson from November 1989 to March 1990. In South Australia, she has been on numerous committees concerned with Aboriginal rights and welfare; examples include the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, the Aboriginal Housing Board and the Aboriginal Advancement League.

In 1990, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was set up, with O'Donoghue as Chairperson. The new body replaced the Federal Government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs as well as the Aboriginal Development Commission. As Australia's premier policy-making body in indigenous affairs, it was conceived as a decentralised organisation, combining representative, policy-making and administrative elements and was designed to allow indigenous people to determine the administration of their own affairs. Unlike other govern-

mental departments, ATSIC is run by elected representatives. O'Donoghue remained Chairperson of it until her retirement from the post in 1997.

One area of special concern to her has been the Aboriginal struggle for land rights, waged over the past thirty years. An important landmark was the Mabo Judgement of 1992, in which the High Court upheld a claim by five Torres Strait islanders that they held native title to their land. The principle of *terra nullius* – the legal fiction that Australia was unoccupied prior to European settlement – was thereby overturned. In 1993, O'Donoghue was a member of the negotiating team involved in formulating the Federal Government's Native Title legislation.

Today, O'Donoghue is a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Indigenous Land Corporation, the National Australia Day Council and the Order of Australia Council. She also serves on the Board of Trustees of the United Nations' Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations. Her contribution to the cause of Australian Aboriginal peoples has been recognised through numerous awards, including Member, Order of Australia (AM) in 1977 and Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 1983. In contemporary Australia, she is often mentioned as a possible future Governor-General or, if the country becomes a republic, a future President.

Perspective on Women in Politics

O'Donoghue's experience as an Aboriginal woman fighting for the rights of her people has not led her towards any strong identification with women's issues as such or with the wider women's movement. "I find all that glass ceiling stuff, feminism, something that I've never been involved in," is how she puts it. "Aboriginal women don't like feminism, as such. I know it's been difficult for the women's movement to get Aboriginal women involved, because we don't particularly want to get involved. I was asked in the early days to be on many women's committees, like the National Women's Council. But I resisted them. I wouldn't be involved because I wanted to be involved in total issues, not just women's issues."

There is an Office of Indigenous Women within ATSIC, but O'Donoghue, no enthusiast, argues that such an office tends to marginalise women and women's issues. "But Aboriginal women fought so hard to get the Office of Indigenous Women that I wouldn't really want to be the person to close it down."

In essence, O'Donoghue sees herself as "Aboriginal first and female second." She does concede, however, that Aboriginal women experience unequal treatment within their own community. "Aboriginal males are very male chauvinist, and the young women find it very difficult coming through." The fact that her own status as a woman has not held her back

she attributes in part to the fact of her involvement in the Aboriginal rights movement from the very beginning.

Enabling Factors

O'Donoghue attributes her success as a political leader to certain traits of her personality rather than to the calculated adoption of particular strategies. At the same time, she recognises the scale of the empowerment she has derived from her community. As she says, "The support of my own people has always given me strength."

Her personal life, too, has helped sustain her high-flying public activism. She first met her husband, Gordon Smart, in 1962 when Smart was married with five children. She insisted that he fulfil his responsibilities to his family and it was not until seventeen years later, when his children had grown up, that she agreed to marry him, on condition he allowed her to continue with her career. "He was a man almost ready to retire by then, because he was ten years older than me," O'Donoghue says. "I was still wanting to work and get involved. And he was very supportive." Smart died in 1991. They had no children.

O'Donoghue believes that from early in her life she has adopted various coping strategies to deal with oppression and difficulty. "Like other members of my race, I have experienced discrimination and frustration. I have developed different ways of coping. I think I've always had a fairly positive attitude, and the only times I've ever felt really angry is when I think about what happened to my mother."

From the start she was feisty and determined. At Colebrook, she resolved neither to take punishment herself nor to allow other children to be physically chastised without challenge. "I wasn't going to be beaten. I wasn't going to be downtrodden, and I indicated that in the best way I could by fighting for my sisters and others. That was the only way I could do it there. It showed through, and I was seen as a very naughty girl, a troublemaker."

Then came her resolve not to become a domestic servant. "I had no great plans. But I was going to be as good as the next person. I was going to be something in life. And I knew when I started nursing that I could be as successful as some of my non-Aboriginal friends. I worked at it; I worked very hard."

With determination came perfectionism, a commitment to all-out effort. When O'Donoghue became a nurse she made sure her uniform was whiter, her shoes were shinier than anyone else's. While her friends relaxed by going to dances, she stayed behind in the nurses' home and went to bed early, believing she could not be distracted from the job at hand. "It wasn't in a pompous way," she recalls. "It was just that I was all the time striving, because if I didn't achieve, then the effect was that I was failing my people."

Her innate cheerfulness, too, has proved a valuable resource. Over her years in public life it has helped her develop diplomatic skills and a reputation as an adept negotiator. "I don't think of myself as having negotiating skills, but I do chair very difficult meetings and always manage to get a result, get people to calm down, get people contributing. I try to confront difficult situations with logic and humour."

Lois O'Donoghue, reviewing a life of achievement, can still feel humbled when talk turns to her as a prospective head of her nation. For the little Aboriginal girl from the South Australian outback, it seems an impossible journey. "That's when I think about my lowly birth," she says. "Unless we look back, we are never able to measure how far we've come. At times I am amazed when I contemplate the changes that have occurred in my lifetime."