

A black and white portrait of Margaret Reynolds, a woman with short, dark hair, wearing a dark jacket with a fur collar over a light-colored top. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

*From the
Hawke government
to the UN,
a life committed
to change...*

Living
Politics

Margaret Reynolds

FOREWORD BY CARMEN LAWRENCE

so it seemed logical to send a strong message about the location of my state headquarters. Decentralisation of government was of major importance to those two-thirds of Queenslanders who lived beyond the urban fringes of Brisbane. But in Canberra public servants were amazed that a minister would choose to locate so far from the centre of decision making.

However, I also had my political eye on that all-important 1989 state election, when Queenslanders would have the choice to change government for the first time in thirty-two years. I knew my decision would not only send a significant symbolic message, but would also provide a Labor presence in several state electorates.

Within weeks of my appointment I was placed in an acting ministerial capacity to represent Mick Young in cabinet. As he left for overseas commitments Mick gave just one instruction: 'Don't let those bastards touch my budget.' I was terrified I would fail him. How could I possibly argue against the Treasurer, Paul Keating, or Finance Minister, Peter Walsh, if they were to suggest 'rationalising' expenditure? Walking into the cabinet room for the first time was an overwhelming experience because my male colleagues had all sat together for four years, so knew the language and routine of national decision making. Unfortunately for me, neither Susan Ryan nor Ros Kelly was present that day so I entered feeling very isolated as the lone woman.

I expected serious analysis and discussion about the most effective strategy to be adopted. I assumed my colleagues would be thoughtful, as the weight of responsibility rested on their shoulders. I had sat up late into the night studying my cabinet papers and rehearsing arguments to protect Mick's budget should there be any assault from Treasury or Finance. I was prepared to be overwhelmed but impressed within this charged atmosphere of principled debate and allocation of the nation's resources. Instead

I found a noisy group of overgrown schoolboys jostling for attention and trying to outbid each other as the major carve-up of the 1987–88 Budget was finalised. Bob Hawke presided over this meeting with a calm demeanour of authority. I soon learned that when he lit a cigar it was the signal for argument to cease as he summed up the debate, nodded to a couple of protagonists and announced the general consensus to be recorded for posterity. Fortunately, the Immigration budget was not targeted that day so my first experience of cabinet passed without incident.

Not long after this meeting, I was phoned in my Townsville office by a senior Immigration official anxious to get my signature on a cabinet document. He insisted my attendance was unnecessary, but in the absence of Mick Young my authorisation was essential. The document was couriered north and I discovered a major policy paper. I phoned to check the status of the document because it had to be signed and returned immediately. I may have been a naïve new minister, but I was not prepared to sign a document I had not read.

The Canberra official was distinctly irritated and obviously worried the cabinet time frame may not be met because a nervous minister refused to accept his advice. Furthermore, there was the uncertainty about unfamiliar air-freight services from North Queensland to Canberra. I finally scrutinised this urgent cabinet paper and discovered some complex and far-reaching policy shifts in determining family reunion and working holiday visas. There was also comment on refugee policy which, at the time, meant little to me. However, it was clear that an attempt was being made to push through some significant policy shift changes while Mick Young was overseas.

I had no hesitation in signing beside the 'Not Approved' option, adding a note to the effect that this paper required the urgent attention of Minister Young before being submitted to cabinet.

Mysteriously, this paper seemed to disappear and, although I cannot now confirm all its policy directions, it appears likely that it did not surface in that form for several years. It was an important lesson for me in realising I had to use my own judgment as a new minister or I could find myself being used by a bureaucracy with its own agenda. It also demonstrated how easily bad policy can be pushed past a busy minister.

Life as a minister in those early months was marked by constant decision making. Not all decisions were momentous ones but people expected a minister to have an opinion on day-to-day functions of the office. Which policy? How many? Who to invite? When would an appointment be made? Where would an event take place? Some decisions required many hours of reading before final signature. There were decisions about routine procedures, staffing, new policy initiatives, inter-government protocols, political crises and of course the ongoing battle to secure funding. Everyone arriving in my office required me to make up my mind quickly so the wheels of government could roll on smoothly. But I wanted time – time to think and reflect on the best course of action, time to take advice from outside the inner circle of my staff and the bureaucracy.

I soon learned that ministers are time poor – every waking moment is scheduled and an army of inquisitors are programmed to demand instant attention. However, ministers are also protected to a large extent by solicitous staff who screen phone calls from overly demanding media or constituents. Staff become very protective of the minister and will spring to their defence when critics question whether policy or practice is being managed according to Westminster tradition. I was lucky to have a team of very supportive, capable staff who organised and briefed me, trying to put some order into the general chaos of a minister's life. Many critics of ministerial decision making have little