

Remembering Joan Kirner

The last thing Joan Kirner would want is to be put on a pedestal. Nonetheless she did have that cheeky smile and raise of the eyebrows which said to you: Why not? I think that sense of cheek is something that we Australians know and appreciate. Its why I think she was a saint for many Australians. She had those qualities which we love. She never saw herself as more important than anybody else. She had a genuine interest in learning from talking to people.

Joan and I gave a bit of cheek in 1996 when the Clintons visited Australia for the first time. All of the ground work had been done by Paul Keating and Don Russell and others. But when the Clintons did arrive the Howards were in the Lodge. I had played a small role in the Clinton Keating dialogues in this period and I got the message that Hillary Rodham Clinton wanted to meet Australia's feminists, women's organisations leaders and political leaders. Hillary was able to give a memorable address at the Opera House. But afterwards the new Prime Minister's Office had arranged for the First Lady to meet with members of John and Janette Howard's family and their associates.

Well something had to be done didnt it. A room was booked at the Opera House and of course I colluded with Joan to organise for several leaders and whoever we could gather to be there. The meeting took place and it was a memorable one. There would be far greater occasions in the future when official meetings and communications would take place. Joan's young protege Julia Gillard would one day be Prime Minister and she would work closely with Hillary Clinton. But that day in the Opera House had just the amount of fun and games that made it a memorable occasion. Joan got such a kick out of it and we all went away with a spring in our step.

These were momentous times for Hillary Clinton as well. She had great plans that were thwarted by later events. I dont think we knew that the excitement and adventure that had been part and parcel of our lives through the 1980s and 1990s would give way to the numbness of the 2000s.

Joan had this spark that was inspiring. She made public life interesting and alive. She had this way of deflating official procedures and protocols. She would stand dutifully not wanting to rock the boat, but when you looked at her she had this special gleam in her eye that said "Go on"!

There was a time when the Evatt Foundation of which Joan was a Vice President and I Executive Director dared to be very bold. Amongst other things we had the audacity to plan for research and policy centres in Sydney and Melbourne. It rocked the board. I did not have the wisdom to manage the situation and we locked ourselves into an un-necessarily divisive show-down between those who wanted to expand and those who didnt. Joan was a key figure. She carried a quite large number of proxy votes in her hand bag on the day the matter was to be decided. The Board room doors were shut and Joan had left her bag outside the room. Our opponents would not let her get her bag to exercise the proxy votes. The situation ended up in stalemate, a 50/50 result. I was bitterly disappointed. But I looked at Joan and she had

that look of sympathy and yet her main point to me was 'Peter things should never reach divisions like this.' It was a big lesson in my life and to this day I wonder whether she left that bag outside the room on purpose. Joan did not want to win unless she won the right way and with everyone on board. It was the difference between political machines and human beings.

Joan was a great person, too humble and unassuming in many ways. Of all the important people I had to deal with Joan was the easiest to talk to and to work with. One she let you in, that was it. Part of it though was Ron. When I needed Joan it was always Ron who answered the phone at home. What a remarkable partnership! Did they keep each other down to earth and grounded? laughing through thick and thin? I can only guess. It must have been like that. I always looked forward to calling the Kirner household. There was always an interesting thing to learn. There was always the Essendon Football Club to talk about. Joan always wanted to know how someone was faring. A colleague, a protege or a friend.

I last saw Joan in Shepp. It was Paul Briggs' mothers funeral. Of course she was there. I remember her holding court in the coffee shop that we called Paul's office. We hadn't seen each other in years. She looked at me with that wry smile. "What trouble have you been up to?" "Lots as usual." "Good", she said.

Well will we remember Joan Kirner - a great woman of Australian values - Saint Joan of Williamstown.

Peter Botsman

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Joan Kirner, former Premier of Victoria and Evatt Foundation Vice-President, and Mary Easson, Labor member for the federal seat of Lowe. Both addressed



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