

Born to Run

Hillary Clinton and the New Agenda

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Illustration Kerrie Leishman



If ever a person was *born to run* for the White House then it is Hillary Rodham Clinton.

I'm not sure if Bruce Springsteen's song "Born to Run" will stick to the campaign like Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" did to Bill Clinton's extraordinary 1991 Presidential campaign in which he beat George Bush Snr and became the youngest President since JFK to win the White House. But if there was ever a slogan for Hillary Clinton's announcement today then it is *born to run*.

In 1996 I wrote an article about Hillary Clinton that was published in *The Australian*. After the article was published I introduced Hillary to Joan Kirner and several members of Emilys List. It was a memorable moment in the dullness of the Howard era.

But events were to subsume the Clintons as well. After winning a second term the ill discipline and sheer stupidity of the Monica Lewinsky affair must have brought Hillary to the brink of total despair. Apart from anything else there was so much to achieve that was lost.

The whole catastrophe might have destroyed lesser folk.

Yet in 2000 HRC was there again. She licked her wounds and continued. After Daniel Moynihan retired she stood as Senator for the state of New York. She was the first First Lady to ever stand for office and she faced immense obstacles in that campaign. Her listening tour of upstate New York in which she did the equivalent of door knocking every house in her electorate has become renowned. But it was characteristic of her and the work she did in Arkansas when the young Bill Clinton was governor.

That campaign was important, it showed Hillary moving out of her husband's shadow and her time in the Senate were very rewarding. She gained confidence. She consolidated and built up the resources she needed around her. But she also started to think about all of the things that were not achieved in the last years of her husband's Presidency and things beyond it. In the early 2000s it was clear that Hillary was not going to become a career Senator. Perhaps it was the ignominy of that last period in the White House or maybe it was the confidence she gained in New York that gave her inspiration to think about

standing for President in her own right.

In 2008 Hillary confronted the first seriously electable African American Democratic nominee in Barak Obama. The two candidates split the Democrats apart. It is important to understand that 2008 Democratic nomination process was unprecedented. 34 million Americans participated in the nomination process, 17 million Americans voted for Clinton and 17 million for Obama. Obama finally won the contest Clinton had won 1,640 pledged delegates to Obama's 1,763, Clinton had 286 superdelegates to Obama's 395, Again a lesser person might have slipped off into a happy retirement or a life outside public office, not Hillary Rodham Clinton. A lesser person might have dwelled on some of the bitterness of the Democratic nomination process. not HRC, and nor to his credit did Barak Obama,

Obama appointed Clinton Secretary of State and in January 2009 Clinton took up that position. I think reluctantly. She did not seek to stay on in the office in Obama's second term of office. Even Hillary Clinton at this stage was looking forward to a time away from politics. But there is something about HRC. Even when she is not running she is running. She has never stopped thinking about tomorrow.

There were some uncharacteristic glitches in her time as Secretary of State. She used her personal email address and server while leading the State Department. She was quite hawkish in her role and advocated the policy of walking quietly with a big stick. But nothing goes past Hillary Clinton and everyone knows, including her bitter enemies, that she learns as she goes.

Many are saying that Hillary Clinton's Democratic nomination is there for her if she wants it. There is talk that she will have an easy ride into the main Presidential race. But no nomination for President is easy. You have to be more than born to run you have to be seasoned, mature, ready and passionate.

I think for Hillary it is about going back to the promise of 1996 to the start of Clinton's second term of office. Michael Lind wrote at that time: "American conservatism is dead... Its remnants are like fragments of a comet that

continue in their destructive course even after the comet has been disintegrated”.

Hubris brought Bill Clinton down at that time when he had the possibility of really changing America for the better.

If Hillary Clinton becomes the first woman President of the United States it will be about going back to that promise of a better America. But she will have to be earthier and more realistic than she has ever been before. Winning office will be an enormous challenge. We can expect the strong African American vote to stand behind her. We can expect a strong woman's vote. But the major constituency that Hillary now needs is the working, middle class who have endured comparatively hard times. She will have to convince them that being President is more than just about winning an historic victory for women.

The way that I think Hillary Clinton will go is to move the women's movement into a new dimension. She will redefine the women's movement as being about more than equality but about a new agenda in which the environment, enlightened capitalism and social and cultural diversity and progress is all. A woman as President will bring a new perspective and new solutions to problems new and old. This is what America and the world needs. Certainly I hope old politics as we know it changes forever with the candidature of Hillary Rodham Clinton for President. That is what she must aspire to do, nothing less than creating a new model of politics seems an appropriate challenge for the inexhaustible HRC. She must find a new way of talking to America and to the world.

*My original, unedited article from 1996 was as follows:*

*“I write these words looking out through the windows of the White House at the city of Washington in all its beauty and squalor, promise and despair. In the shadow of great power, so many feel powerless.”*

*Hillary Clinton, 1996.*

I

*One of the most senior American social democratic thinkers in the USA told me in Washington recently that the thing Australian Labor politicians had most to learn from the Clintons was “how to speak to women”.*

*I saw his point, as anyone would.*

*For all Bill Clinton's reputation as a rake, women vote for him en masse. In 1992 it was arguably women who pushed him over the line against Bush. In 1996 there was at times a massive 30% gap in the women's vote between Clinton and Dole.*

*Perhaps the clearest reason why there was such a massive gap in this Presidential election was because the Christian Coalition captured the Republican party and insisted that abortion under all circumstances should be outlawed.*

*But there is, as my Democrat friend so accurately pointed out, much more to it than that, especially in a country with such a strong, puritanical religious belt.*

*Clinton's electoral platform was from many, many angles, a women's document. Every dimension of the policy from economics to foreign policy was written for women, as well as for men. That sounds trite, and I don't mean to suggest that the Clinton agenda, welfare reformism included, meets with the wholesale approval of women's organisations.*

*Rather, the policies, the advertisements and the campaign itself are written with women centrally in mind. There was a women's dimension to almost all of the policies and make up of the mainstream documents, speeches and announcements of the Clinton campaign.*

*Women read, thought about and planned Clinton's campaign in its element. There was no special section on women. Women's voices, thoughts, perspectives ran through everything.*

*In other words there was a level of inclusiveness that simply does not exist in Australian political campaigns - with the grand exception of the notable Kennett versus Kirner election in Victoria when Joan Kirner added her own special flair and vision to the Labor campaign.*

II



*At the heart of all this was Hillary Clinton. Her ideas pervaded the Clinton policy agenda during the election.*

*Most people see her book *It Takes A Village* as a way of evading the virulent anti-feminist criticism that she has attracted as first lady, and if you only looked at the cover and the vaseline-lensed pictures in the liner notes, you'd be inclined to agree.*

*But there is a special ethic to Hillary Clinton, and now ITAV is on the best seller list, many Americans are discovering something they had not seen before, and if not in the woman herself, then in the policies and ideas of the Presidential campaign.*

*When Bill Clinton was elected governor of Arkansas in 1978 at the tender age of 32, he was thrown out of office just two years later in 1980, and in the Reagan Republican backlash against Democrats, one of the things his enemies attacked was the fact that Hillary did not change her name to Clinton. Two years later he was re-elected, and in the lead up to the election Hillary had quietly changed her name.*

*Over the next term she transformed herself from being an extreme negative to being, in the words of David Osborne, "more popular than her husband".*

*But it was not by adopting the role of the traditional politicians wife.*

*Because of her experience as a lawyer for the Childrens Defense Fund, and as a past veteran of the Mc Govern presidential campaign and the Watergate impeachment committee, after her husband's re-election, Hillary became chair of the most difficult committee in Arkansas - the committee to recommend new standards for teacher accreditation.*

*With a one year timetable for legislation, she took her committee on the road and held hearings in all 75 of Arkansas' counties. Over ten thousand people turned up at the hearings, and they gave a loud and clear mandate to raise teachers salaries and weed out incompetent teachers. Standards were so poor that it was said at the time that "Principals in many Arkansas schools would often ask teacher applicants to write a paragraph about their educational philosophy, just to see if they could write". In the face of trenchant opposition, Hillary Clinton paved the way for new tax revenue*

*to pay for increased teachers salaries, new standards and stricter employment guidelines and performance criteria.*

*It is this mixture of social justice and tough accountability that makes Hillary enigmatic for liberals and conservatives alike.*

### III

*It Takes A Village extends the philosophy that she espoused back in Arkansas in 1982 and at the centre of everything is children and their interactions with the community: "What gets kids learning is not a test, but the expectations of their teachers and schools and the efforts made by their teachers and their schools". In the new book she argues "Children exist in the world as in the family. ..Each of us plays a part in a child's life."*

*Over eighteen highly strategic chapters the Clinton policy framework is set out in a sort of personal manual come, political manifesto: the political and moral habits of highly effective parents. For Australians - women and men - the book's personal and moral brow beating is heavy going at times, for Americans, well, it probably hits the mark for large numbers of baby boomer parents.*

*But there is something extraordinary about Hillary Clinton. She has synthesised feminist ideas within mainstream policy discourse, has compromised where necessary but she never gives up. She proclaims a number of immediate political goals and philosophies, such as:*

*- widening the concept of child rearing to enable men to play a more active role "the village has a long way to go to accommodate {men and women's} diverse and changing roles both in the working world and at home";*

*- fighting for decent child care. Quoting one woman's view Clinton observes: "Child care is a disgrace in this country. On the one hand its too expensive for many women considering their salaries, on the other hand, it does not provide the child care provider a decent wage. Locating good child care is a nightmare".*

*- creating a more active fostering and adoption culture for children, while at the same time, being more aware of the importance of keeping children in their families through tighter family support policies ;*

*- asserting the primacy of family, community and socio-economic development over 'geneticists' like Murray and Hernstein who in their book *The Bell Curve* 1994 put forward racial inferiority as an explanation for social inequality (Hillary argues that "This*

view is politically convenient: if nothing can alter intellectual potential nothing need be offered to those who being life with few resources or fewer favourable environments". )

- national comprehensive prenatal care, infant care, child care and family planning;
- creating a public culture which gives more time to children especially in their first years of life, comprehensive immunisation for all two year olds and accessible and affordable national health insurance, instilling problem solving capacity in children, Family and Medical Leave for parents who have to look after a child or relative;
- creating higher expectations of students and schools, choice amongst public schools, creating a more critical view of television violence and its impact on children;
- finally she believes in a stronger model of corporate citizenship and in the need to consistently reinvent government and its agencies.

None of this is very novel. Indeed my wife remarked that Hillary Clinton has simply re-written the basic first principles of feminism for men to finally catch up. But that is precisely the point. She has main-streamed many women's issues to the point where the political culture must either consciously or unconsciously deal with them. They cannot be ignored.

#### IV

I don't think there has been an ALP Federal Campaign manifesto which put Domestic Violence up as a major national issue. Certainly there are policies and action has been taken in government to an extent that Hillary Clinton would be envious of. But it has never been a major campaign issue. The 1996 Democrat campaign document states: "When it strikes, nothing is a more dangerous threat to the safety of our families than domestic violence, because it is a threat from within. Unfortunately violence against women is not stranger to America, but a dangerous intruder we must work together to drive from our homes. We know that domestic violence is not a "family problem" or a "women's problem". It is America's problem, and we must all fight it".

I can't remember an ALP campaign manifesto where 'a woman's right to choose', teen pregnancy, child support, in-

vestment in women's business, gun control and community policing were purposefully made major electoral issues. The 1996 Democratic Party National Manifesto explicitly makes them big issues, and on current polls, big vote winners for the Clintons.

What becomes clear is that a lot of the thinking, and centrality of women's perspectives within the campaign, is Hillary Clinton's doing. Ideas from *It Takes A Village* are spliced throughout the Democratic Campaign document.

The tone is not to espouse market forces but to try to heal some of the wounds and to ease some of the uncertainty that has emerged in American society in the 1990s. She quotes the 1950 text *The Lost City* to the effect that:

"The unfettered free market has been the most radically disruptive force in American life in the last generation, busting up neighbourhoods and communities, and eroding traditional standards of social life and personal conduct..."

At the end of her book and no doubt reflecting on the pain that she has endured at the hands of the media, Hillary Clinton writes:

"In times of profound and overwhelming social change like the present, ..extreme views hold out the appeal of simplicity. By ignoring the complexity of the forces that shape our personal and collective circumstances, they offer us scapegoats. Yet they fail to provide a viable pathway from the cold war to the global village".

Against this, Hillary Clinton's eye is on the main game: pathways to a more progressive future, and when the real history of November 1996 and the Clinton Presidency is written, she will feature prominently and well.

Sources: *It Takes A Village*, David Osborne, *Laboratories of Democracy*, 1990, pp. 92-94, Clinton campaign documents, interviews with Sidney Blumenthal, Jamie Ruben

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