Chancellor, Professor Jennifer Westacott AO

Sydney Women's Fund - 2024 Saluting Sydney Women Lunch

Sydney Opera House | Wednesday 18 September 2024

Keynote Speech: Chancellor Professor Jennifer Westacott AO at 2024 Saluting Sydney Women Lunch

---

Thank you.

I too would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land – the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.
I particularly want to acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People here today.

Introduction

To say I am humbled to be the recipient of today's honour is an understatement.

I am almost lost for words. Almost.

Can I thank Tony for that warm introduction and for his unwavering support and friendship.

It is matched only by that of my partner Tess – who is here today – as well as my family Zahra and Amir.

Thank you to my many friends and colleagues who have come along.

And I'd like to thank the Sydney Women's Fund for all you do to make our city – and Australia – a better, gentler and more caring place.

The childhood context that shapes your future and themes.

Today, I want to begin, where it begins for all of us – our childhood.

Childhood shapes your future.

Psychiatrists have been obsessed with this for decades.

I won't give my own potted history but I will talk about the themes that have shaped my life and instilled in me my purpose, sense of justice and my mission in life.

As many of you know, I grew up in a public housing estate that was highly stigmatized.

My family were low income people, and our home was violent.

My parents had jobs, not careers.

It seemed that every bill, every rent payment, every major event like a birthday or Christmas was a struggle.

That no matter how hard they tried, for whatever set of reasons, they couldn't get ahead.

These unrelenting challenges built a sense of resentment and anger in my parents.

I know how destructive that can be, and I fear it will be a contagion in this country if we don't act.

We must address our failings towards middle and working Australians.

And we must do so with purpose, resolve and accountability.

At its core, we owe this to younger Australians, whose aspirations will be critical to turning the page.

I know, personally, how important that is.

Even from a young age, I was conscious to turn my back on resentment and to focus on making a positive contribution – not carrying a chip on the shoulder.

I grew up with an unshakable conviction that I wanted to do something positive about what I perceived as the great unfairness.
The great unfairness to those people who work hard, who try hard, but just can't get ahead.

Mentors in unexpected places

I was also fortunate to be surrounded by people who were the circuit breakers in my life.

They shared the same values and vision as me – reinforcing my sense of self and my purpose and mission.

To me, they were my mentors in unexpected places – my uncle on a fishing boat and my grandmother in our shared bedroom.

My uncle was a World War Two veteran.

He spent three years in Changi.

His stoic resilience, his bravery, his care for his mates, his service – all immeasurable.

Yet like so many other veterans, when he returned, he was abandoned by the government.

Technology had overtaken his career.

He found himself working on the wharves.

He too had a tremendous sense of injustice and unfairness but never – not once – did he show resentment or anger.

As a union organiser, he helped others, just as he had in Changi.

I would fish with him every Saturday and Sunday, listening to his stories, hearing his wisdom.

Just being alongside him, silently, was so deeply instructive. A lesson in patience, resolve and compassion.

My grandmother was a migrant from Scotland from a family of 13 kids.

She came to Australia with nothing – and she knew the pathway out was education.

She was the most educated, uneducated person I've ever met.

I shared a room with her pretty much throughout my teenage years.

Many people might say that was torture – but for me, it was a joy – that's not to say we didn't have the odd row.

But through osmosis and exchange, I gained a love of reading and inquiry.

My uncle and my gran taught me the power of using my talents.

They were my rocks.

They were my champions.

Against my father's wishes, they advocated for me to go to university.

My uncle spoke to my mother about compassion and kindness, conditioning her not to have an antibody reaction when she found out about my sexual preference many years later.

On his deathbed, he reminded me to be the person I wanted to be.

That rings true for all of us in this room today.

How I carried this through life

So, how have I carried those lessons through my life?

I won't list everything on my CV but I do want to highlight some of the achievements that demonstrate how I have lived my values.

I learned early – including from my parents – that hard work really matters.

Nothing comes to people like me, without striving for it and without grabbing at it.

Don't chase positions and titles for some type of hollow prestige.

Instead, be the change you seek.

Public sector career

If I go to my public sector career, let me start with my 14 years in the Department of Housing where I was driven to reform the experience I had living in public housing.

The Department had treated my family and neighbours like second class citizens.

My mother was terrified of a particular tenancy manager because he was a shocking bully. I suspect a serial harasser and just an awful character.

On the days he came to collect the rent, she would hide.

Some days because of her fear of him, some days because she didn't have the rent.

When I was at the Department of Housing, I met lots of people like him.

I vowed I would change that.

And we did.

As part of a superb team, I'm proud of the work we did to:

- drive tenant participation
- make large housing estates safer
- set up a community housing association movement
- hand over housing to Indigenous people
- upgrade large rundown and dangerous housing estates, and
- put things as basic as fences around high rise buildings in Waterloo so kids could play outside.

And I'm proud of the work we did to change the department's culture so people like my mother would never be frightened again.

Health Review

When I'm asked to give career advice, I always say:

- get out of your comfort zone
- do the really hard things, and
- back yourself.

When the then NSW Minister for Health, Craig Knowles asked me to undertake a major review of the health system – something I knew nothing about – I accepted the challenge.

With another great team in place, we embarked on a journey of inquiry, exploration and listening.

Our report fundamentally reformed the NSW health system, introducing changes that are now common place including:

- same day admissions, and
- day only surgery.

The report led to a huge change in health provision and a massive injection of funding.

This project taught me the big lessons which I carried through life:

- take big risks
- take the big jobs, and
- take on the things that seem too hard, but
- immerse yourself
- listen to the experts, and
- surround yourself with people who know what to do because your job is to give them a voice.

DOCS

It's exactly what I did at the Department of Community Services where we:

- introduced mandatory notifications, and
- better ways of treating people with disabilities.

I am proud to have started the process of changing the perceptions of that department – a department which is home to some of the nation's hardest working and most dedicated people.

To paraphrase Gandhi, the true measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

That organisation and the hard-working people in it protected the lives of so many vulnerable Australians.

Every day they work for those people who have no voice – particularly children.

To think that so many children wake up every day with nauseating fear is unforgivable and we must do more.

Education

I am proud to have been the first woman Secretary for Education in Victoria where we:

- focused on disadvantaged schools
- invested heavily into teacher training and quality, and
- drove big reforms to the VET sector which I continue to advocate for today.

Education is the great enabler, the great equaliser, and access to education remains my great mission in life.

Planning and infrastructure

I'm proud to have led the NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources where – again working with others – we did something amazing, we ended illegal land clearing in NSW.

We also delivered a plan for Sydney which included ideas for transport such as:

- A light rail going down George Street out to Kensington, and
- the Sydney Metro City line which has recently opened with a station at Barangaroo.

And working with Craig Knowles, John Howard and John Anderson, we created the system of water rights which allowed for water trading and gave water the value it needed.

I have briefly run through these public sector examples because to me public service is an honour and a privilege.

I encourage all of you – at some point in your life – to commit yourself to public service.

There is no greater platform for change than the public service.

Private sector KPMG

What I learned in the public sector positioned me for my private sector career in KPMG – where as a partner I also worked with some of the most talented, values-driven and ethical people who were constantly striving for excellence.

People who work every day for their clients.

It is my great joy to have returned there.

It was the only choice for me after leaving the Business Council of Australia where I was the longest serving chief executive.

Business Council

I'm proud that along with BCA presidents including Tony Shepherd and Tim Reed, who are here today, we shaped the economic narrative of Australia.

We produced multiple economic and policy reports, articulating that economic growth is the pathway to social inclusion.

I implore both sides of politics to closely review and undertake the reforms we set out in my final major report, Seize the Moment.

Because without change, I believe we are sleepwalking into lower living standards.

We must constantly remind ourselves – you cannot give, if you do not have.

You cannot succeed, if you cannot prosper.

It is the underlying truth that I learned as a child – meaningful work gives people:

- security
- purpose
- dignity, and
- the opportunity to allow them to reach their full potential.

I'm proud that at the BCA we advocated for the fundamentals of economic reform but also the key ingredients of a prosperous, decent society.

- We turned Paid Parental Leave, child care and women's advancement into an economic story.
- We ensured climate change became a story about Australia's economic future as well as the environment .
- We set out a centrist, practical pathway to achieve a net zero emissions economy.
- We backed a rise in the JobSeeker allowance.
- And we built alliances across the divide in the national interest.

I was honoured to work with some of the smartest, most courteous people I have ever met:

- the CEOs of Australia's largest companies, and
- the presidents of the BCA, who give up enormous amounts of time to advance the country's interests.

I always have a wry smile when I hear the criticisms of corporate leaders because the conversations I had with them – and I had many with them – were conversations about making the country better.

Today

So, this brings me to today.

Let me share a few thoughts.

<u>One: Live a life of purpose</u>

The first is to live a life of purpose.

Since, I've stepped down from the BCA, so many people say to me, 'why don't you retire and play golf?'

The simple reality is it would not fulfill me.

I wake up every morning driven by my mission of justice and fairness.

When I received my Order of Australia, the citation I was most proud of was the recognition of my work on equity – because this is what I have strived for all my life.

I was honoured to be named the first woman Chancellor of Western Sydney University, a university that embodies fairness and equity.

I'm honoured to be working with our new Vice-Chancellor George Williams to drive:

- new ways of learning and teaching
- research that has impact, and
- the transformation of Western Sydney into the economic and social powerhouse we know it can be.

We want to catapult our university so it produces:

- the most qualified
- work ready
- digitally enabled
- agile
- values-driven students who are committed to excellence in everything they do, and
- who will be the most sought after graduates in the country.

I'm proud to lead the Bradfield Development Authority which is driving the development of brand new city next to the first new international Australian airport in 100 years.

But most importantly, this is an opportunity to do the hard yards of creating the new industries and new jobs in advanced sectors which will be the lynchpin of turning around the great unfairness in Sydney's west.

The unfairness that for too long has seen the best jobs, the good jobs located in the northern and eastern parts of Sydney.

I am determined through my work at the university and Bradfield to turn this around.

I am proud to be chairing Studio Schools – a boarding house program in remote Northern Australia for Indigenous students which is seeing better results than state schools.

It sees 75 per cent of kids go onto further education or into a job – these statistics are not replicated anywhere else.

If only I could get governments to see the value in changing Indigenous education at a system level, not just one or two schools.

We would be able to:

- stop the national catastrophe of sending good money after bad systems, and
- stop the travesty of failing another generation of Indigenous young people.

I am going to do whatever I can to stop that from happening.

I'm proud to sit on the Board of Wesfarmers, which I have done since 2013.

This is one of Australia's great companies generating:

- wonderful services for its customers through its dedication to excellence and innovation
- tremendous opportunities for its employees, and
- huge value for its shareholders

I'm proud to chair Future Generation Global, which is pioneering new and creative models of philanthropy by using a traditional investment vehicle – then taking one per cent of those funds to plough into youth mental health and research.

I have previously served as the Chair of Mental Health Australia.

It is an area that I have a huge passion for because we continue to fail so many people.

You have to reflect that as we sit here and enjoy our lunch together, someone this morning has taken their life because they cannot see a way through.

I'm also proud to be the co-patron of Pride in Diversity because I believe inclusion and diversity are not woke.

They are fundamentally about:

- productivity
- the economics of good business, and
- fairness.

Take risks and ask questions

My second piece of advice is take risks and ask questions.

I knew nothing about water rights.

I knew nothing about the health system other than as a patient.

The point is – you have to develop an inquiring mind.

As I get older, I keep saying to myself, 'make sure you are asking more questions'.

Also don't ever worry about being afraid.

Yes fear can feel overwhelming – it has eaten me alive at various points of my life – but it can also be a great motivator.

It can drive the hunger for knowledge and the hunger to succeed.

So be afraid, but not too afraid to try.

Resilience

The third lesson is resilience.

The best way to deal with criticism – real burning criticism where you are traumatised or just plain irritated by the unfairness of it all – is when you ask yourself – did I live up to my values and beliefs?

I recently spoke out about hate speech and intolerance.

These forces erode our multicultural society; indeed, they erode our very sense of humanity. I simply can't walk away from this.

People and collaboration

The fourth piece of advice is to be surrounded by the people you love and great friends because they will get you through.

I am most proud of the collaborations I've had – not my individual accomplishments.

Leadership is a collective dynamic.

Be part of a winning team and never be afraid to be a small part of big things.

Conclusion

My final advice is to pursue excellence in everything you do.

I've just joined the board of the family based Canadian company ATCO.

It is at the cutting edge of new energy systems, hydrogen, batteries, and modular housing.

At my first meeting with them, I looked up at the wall and saw what the founder, the great Ron Southern said about excellence:

He said:

> ‘Going far beyond the call of duty. Doing more than others expect. This is what excellence is all about.
>
> ‘It comes from striving, maintaining the highest standards, looking after the smallest detail and going the extra mile.
>
> ‘Excellence means caring.
>
> ‘It means making a special effort to do more.’

Imagine if we all lived and worked by that creed, what a world we would have.
So, join me:

- in striving for excellence
- making room for kindness
- rejecting hate at every turn
- advancing equity, and
- never – never – giving up on fairness.

Thank you.

Sydney Women’s Fund, permission to publish 18 September 2024.