



Snake Bird, Warren Reservoir, South Australia

ASSET MANAGEMENT AS A QUEST

1984-1993

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Chapter Four: My Story - Moving On

Public service advice

When I started in the public service, I had been given a piece of advice which I thought - and still think - is sound. I was advised to spend about 2 to 2.5 years in three different agencies, and then decide whether I wanted to remain in the public service or move on. The two-year period was considered the optimal time for me to give what I could give and to learn what I needed to learn.

But good advice or not, I really enjoyed my work with the EWS and did not want to leave, so when the two year mark arrived I compromised and applied for a one year secondment to the Public Accounts Committee. When the interview was due, however - and I had deferred it for as long as possible - I wanted to change my mind.

Now this may sound sexist, and it is, but at that time - and maybe still today - if you were male you could simply say you had changed your mind and it would be accepted, but if you were female, the more likely response would be 'She simply doesn't know her mind' and it would have been a mark against me. Still, I reasoned, how hard can it be to simply fail an interview, and that's what I decided to do. On the day of the interview I dressed down. Flat shoes. No makeup.

How not to fail an interview

That interview would have to be the weirdest I have ever taken. The interview panel comprised the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and one of his Committee members, the Committee Secretary, the Speaker of the House and his clerk. The Speaker of the House introduced everyone to me and then picked up a newspaper and disappeared behind it for the rest of the hour and was seen and heard no more.

I was polite and answered questions as intelligently as I could, until the committee member asked me how much work I did on programmed performance budgeting (PPB). Quite frankly, I did nothing and said so. The fellow coloured up immediately and it was clear that he had had a hand in getting the program adopted. "Do you mean to say that the EWS is not taking PPB seriously?" he demanded.

I told him that there were two answers to his question. I then spoke of the assiduous work carried out by my colleagues in this area and, when he was breathing normally again, I reminded him that I had said there were two answers.

By this time he was interested to know what the second answer was so I told him. "You realise, I suppose, that PPB cannot do what it is claimed to be able to do?" And he was off again! It was mean of me, but I told him of the problems that had been experienced interstate wherever it had been applied, and why we lacked both the data and the motivations for it to work.

That rather set the tone for the interview after that and now instead of polite questions, I was being challenged. Good. Things were going as intended.

The Chairman asked me the difference between efficiency and effectiveness and whether the PAC was effective. I said, with a smile, if he would tell me his criteria for effectiveness I would be able to answer his question. I had taken a punt that he wouldn't have had any criteria and he hadn't.

By this time he knew I was playing with him and I thought that should have been sufficient to scratch my name off the list. But my answer seemed to pique his interest. "Tell me," he said, "what do you think we should be doing?"

And that was when the wheels came off my plan to get rejected

I told him that there were two important problems that some parliamentary body should be looking at, and if it was not them, I didn't know who it could be. Now they were all interested.

I told him that through our Treasury, the South Australian Government Financing Authority had been very successful at acquiring funds (at a time of restriction through the Commonwealth Government's Global Loan Limits) because they were offering attractive high rates. However, this put the onus on them to now find borrowers who would pay them even higher rates, and that had put us into a high risk zone.

The other issue was that of our ageing infrastructure and our unpreparedness for future renewal. I told them that, as the Public Accounts Committee, it was their responsibility to be aware of these consequences of government spending but they had absolutely no idea of how much they would be up for, nor when such infrastructure renewal spending would fall due; no-one did.

The Committee chose to explore the debt issue for the remainder of the session and we didn't come back to the renewal issue again. Even so, I had the distinct impression that I had failed at the simple act of failing an interview and this was confirmed when, the following morning, my boss was informed that I had been chosen. There was just one last opportunity to get myself out from under as they wanted to have a longer conversation with me that morning in Parliament House.

At this meeting I told them that I knew absolutely nothing about politics and would not even recognise the eminent members that I passed in the House. Talk about digging a deeper hole!

Too late, I realised that ignorance is a good substitute for impartiality in a bipartisan committee researcher.

My research had shown me that the PAC's practice before me was to do small investigations that I referred to as 'pinging' exercises, such as identifying and penalising low level officers for the misuse of government cars. This was of no interest to me.

I told them that I would not investigate the EWS. Fair enough, they said. Moreover I will not investigate the Agriculture Department. This puzzled them. Why not? I explained that I had, over the past 18 months, built a good rapport within this department, rapport that was very useful for the government work that I was doing in irrigation pricing and water transfers and that I did not want to ruin it for the sake of a one-year secondment. OK. they said.

Damn! What could I do now?

An opportunity too good to refuse

Then a very interesting change took place. I realised that they did not have any of the traditional pinging exercises in mind for me, but that I was in fact being offered a chance to take the infrastructure renewal work that I had done for the EWS and to expand this to cover all the major infrastructure holdings in the State.

"Can you do this in one year?" they asked.

I thought this highly unlikely but what I actually said was “I will give it a go.” It ended up taking two and a quarter years.

Any academic researcher will appreciate the enormous opportunity that this presented - to do a research project of my own choosing, to be paid very well for doing it, and to be supported by the Committee’s Royal Commission powers that would ensure I could get all the information I wanted. I stopped trying to get myself out from under and said “Yes!”

There was an additional benefit that I did not recognise at the time, and that was the ability to get the results of the work out into the wider world with the credibility that comes from parliamentary reports.

Why had the Committee decided to depart from tradition and do a research project? Well, of course, they were intrigued and the idea of doing something more significant than their usual exercises was attractive.

It also happened that the Committee was headed up not only by a very intelligent Chairman but also an extremely capable Secretary and I suspect that the Secretary, with whom I had spoken before applying for the position, had had a word with the committee to get them onside with doing a research project.

Then there was the timing. A new election was due within about six months and the government members (who were the majority on the committee) did not want any government failings to be brought up in the media in the lead up to the election. The fact that I would be unable to produce anything before the election was thus in my favour.

Had I been more successful at failing interviews, I would have missed out on the opportunity to take the ‘back-of-the envelope’ calculations I had been working at and to develop the information base that would be needed if the Parliament and Government were to take future renewal seriously.

As a side issue, I later learnt that, after the interview, the Speaker of the House came out from behind his newspaper and said, “We’ll have her! If she is asked to stick the knife in, she will only ask ‘how far?’” I think he was referring to my exchange with the committee member over PPB. I like to think that the Chairman had a more charitable reason for choosing me, and since he later offered me the position of his Chief of Staff when he was made Minister for Energy, maybe he did.

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