

Going 'Bush' – Joanna Hewitt, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Times have changed dramatically since the early seventies when Joanna Hewitt was a trainee in the Department of Foreign Affairs. At that time regulations were regulations and far be it for anyone to think that a bit of commonsense should apply. If the overseas determination referred to “the officer and his wife”, how could a married woman – even one recruited as a graduate foreign affairs trainee – be posted overseas? “Everything was driven by the Public Service Act,” Hewitt says. “To go out on my first posting I had to wait a whole year longer than the other trainees because I was married. It took a year to have that wording changed to refer to ‘his or her spouse’.”

Recounting her experiences as a woman who has risen through the public service ranks to head the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Hewitt is able to recall a number of instances when foolish rules blocked her path. Her first few years in the service followed a classic Foreign Affairs path – a posting to Stockholm in the mid-70s when everyone was fantastically interested in the Swedish economic model. But she left the service for three years when her children were very young and moved interstate.

“When I came back [in 1983] I wasn’t able to go back into Foreign Affairs. It had a fairly closed culture. It’s changed dramatically since. But in those days the only way, as a graduate, you could enter foreign affairs was if you came in as a Foreign Affairs trainee. You weren’t allowed to enter at any other point. They said, ‘We’d love to have you back, but the only way you could come back is if you came in as a graduate again.’ I remember speaking to the head of staffing who at that time was one of my fellow trainees from 1972 and he said, ‘I’m really embarrassed about this Joanna but we can’t do anything. It’s the rules.’” So Hewitt went briefly to the Office of National Assessments and then to the Prime Minister’s department.

A few years later, Hewitt was promoted into the Department of Trade, and had just settled into the job when the Foreign Affairs and Trade departments were amalgamated, returning her to her first department. Today, department heads have huge discretion to overcome the sort of barriers Hewitt encountered.

The daughter of a bank manager, Hewitt went to school in rural Western Australia and Perth. She says she lived in nearly every little town in Western Australia and went to eight or nine schools. “I think most farmers probably see their local branch bank manager as a friendly face,” she says. “I had friends at school who worked on farms. I spent a lot of time in shearing sheds and that

sort of thing, at weekend stays with school friends and I have a sense of the countryside." She joined Foreign Affairs after completing an Economics degree, but later took time off and went to the London School of Economics to undertake a Masters degree.

Few issues have divided the Australian Government more over the last twenty years than the harvesting of native forests. In 1988 Hewitt was right in the thick of it, managing the land resources division of the then Department of Primary Industries and Energy, at the height of the conflict. "It was at a time when we, the Primary Industries department, and the Environment department were at loggerheads, echoed in spades by the fact that the then ministers, Cook and Richardson, were often completely at odds with each other," she says. "It was a very, very tough thing to do because the stakes were so high. There wasn't that sense of common purpose across government that is a hallmark of how we operate today."

Hewitt says it is a pleasure to come back to the department and to work with a colleague like David Borthwick, the current head of the Department of the Environment and Heritage, and to have a joint team working on a lot of the natural resource management issues in a very harmonious way. "It's not that we always have exactly the same set of priorities ... but we're pretty close and where we can't reach agreement amongst ourselves we simply set out the differences in advice to ministers."

Of the past she says, "Oh, it was dreadful. Very high conflict, very narrow association of each portfolio with its stakeholders. Your own staff would see some terrible travesty, as we saw it, against good process or good evidence-based advice, being committed. You'd see some nonsense written down about something to do with the way the forest had been harvested, or the conservation values of a particular piece of forest, and the temptation was to fight fire with fire. I spent a whole year trying to really encourage my own staff not to match what they saw as an inappropriate way of going about the work with their own counter-balancing inappropriate behaviour."

The lesson Hewitt says she learned was how difficult it was to work well without the framework of good process. "If you don't employ good process to get the issues aired, articulated and decided, it's very, very difficult." If ministers are in serious conflict, the actions public servants can take are also limited. Today she says the catchphrase they use in her department is "evidence-based policy advice". This is why they have two specialist bureaus, the Bureau of Rural Science and the Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics. Policy people, who are much more caught up in the immediate, or the short to medium term, are able to draw on the bureaus' expertise.

The bureaus are not huge but "they've got some fantastically highly skilled and well regarded specialist scientists and economists and they make such a difference

to the quality of what you can contribute to government". DAFF and the Environment department now operate a joint team, located in the DAFF offices, to manage natural resource programs and produce policy advice to ministers. Asked about the different policy perspectives of the two departments Hewitt says, "We don't take the view of ... the industry come hell or high water but we do make sure that we understand their view. We sit down and look at the evidence and take into account, and are mindful of, and informed about, the impact on the industry of the particular course of action."

She says the Government has quite clearly articulated priorities in the environmental and resource management field. The industry groups now embrace the idea that they need to preserve the resource base for the future of the sector and the next generation in farming. The Regional Forest agreements now in place mean that the lines have been largely drawn. Hewitt says part of the debate in the wider community about preservation of forests was about "aesthetics and landscape". "So whether a harvesting process could be sustainable in a technical sense, or not, is important but does not always settle a dispute. The Government has drawn its lines. Every now and then there's pressure to re-draw them, as we saw around Tasmania during the last election, and those issues have to be worked through and resolved. But there's a very professional and very civilised spirit in which that's done now." Government processes are clear "and that's much more rewarding than the old battles which became very personal".

Hewitt says she learnt a huge amount from the experience of the late 80s "but I wouldn't say I enjoyed that very much". After 18 months she told her then department head, Geoff Miller, she would like to do international work.

DAFF today is a big, very diverse organisation. As Secretary, Hewitt sees the most important part of her role as setting a direction and "pulling the bits together". The department has a clear mission focussed on the agriculture and food sectors, expressed officially as being to support the profitability, sustainability and competitiveness of the sectors. This is done in a variety of ways with specialist functions and scientific streams.

Two thirds of DAFF, in both money and people terms, is the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) which has a significant presence in the regions. Specialist economic work is conducted by the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics which Hewitt describes as "a bit of a jewel in the crown". The department also conducts the standard functions of policy development and program delivery, with some quite large program activity. This includes spending on natural heritage, exceptional circumstances drought assistance and industry other programs.

Hewitt says DAFF has a huge number of external stakeholders. "When I came to the department from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I was quite struck by the intensity of the external contact," she says. "In DFAT the whole

world is your external environment. But here, although the agriculture sector is quite modestly supported by the Government – very modestly by any international comparisons –there’s a lot of connection between the sector and the business of government. The portfolio industries draw on statutory authorities to collect levies for their marketing and to collect levies for their research and development work, which the Government matches."

Although generally speaking government policy does not involve subsidises, much of the way in which policies are given effect requires government involvement. Hewitt nominates the competitiveness of the sector in the face of new global players in some industries like horticulture and management of bio-security as the priority challenges for the department. Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is responsible for nearly a quarter of Australia’s exports. To underpin their competitiveness, Hewitt says the department must work with the industries to make sure that the Government sets the right business environment in the most effective way it can. "Partly that’s undoing things, trying to reduce the regulatory burden and so on and partly it’s in the external world," she says.

"There’s a big contribution we can make on the trade side to win market access internationally. Agriculture is still one of the last areas where other governments have damaged the prospects for Australian producers in terms of market opportunities. Our terms of trade [the price of Australian exports relative to its imports] over the years have just kept falling so winning new markets is a way of offsetting lower real prices. That’s slow hard work."

Hewitt says the department aims to make sure that research and development policies are also set effectively to help keep Australian producers ahead of the declining terms of trade. In the bio-security field she says it is undeniably the case that Australia has done pretty well in preserving its very favourable quarantine status. But there is now a lot more pressure, partly because of the huge increase in the movement of people and goods across the borders.

The department recently ran a trial to test Australia’s preparedness for an avian influenza outbreak and Hewitt says they must be prepared for new disease or the re-emergence of some old ones, such as foot-and-mouth disease. Managing the bio-security challenge has to be done in a responsible manner, proportional to the risk. It should keep Australia’s favourable pest and disease status, but can’t be a "stop the world I want to get off" approach. "You can maintain a very low risk policy setting, but not zero, and that’s a very challenging thing to communicate and to set right in policy terms," she says. "It’s highly controversial. We get an awful lot of drama around issues as they arise."

In the year she has been in the job Hewitt has had the practical experience of managing work, across the jurisdictions, of a citrus canker outbreak in Queensland and the possibility that Australia might have had a disease affecting

pigs. She says Australia faces pressure from trading partners wanting liberalisation of its quarantine regime and pressure from domestic industries who are anxious about disease status and sometimes import competition. The challenge is to get it right when there is pressure from all sides.

Reforming regulations is another area where Hewitt believes her department can play a useful role. She says that, for example, Australia is successfully exporting primary agriculture commodities and some processed items such as wine, but could do better in processed food export and domestic markets. "If you have very conservative settings in the food standards side of things, it's a disincentive for companies to innovate and to try new things," she says. But she acknowledges there are real public health and safety issues to be dealt with.

Another area that is topical and controversial is the moratorium all states, except Queensland, have on allowing the commercialisation of genetically modified canola crops. She says internationally a lot of Australia's competitors have made the move to use GM canola. There are commercial advantages from the productivity performance of the modified crop and "when we look at the international markets for canola we don't see any disincentive or price discrimination between GM and non-GM canola".

Asked to nominate the regulatory knot she would most like to untie, she says one of the most difficult is in food regulation. The difficulty reflects Australia's constitutional make-up, where state governments have the primary responsibility to take action. "You're pulling together all the jurisdictions, and the health and agriculture portfolios have an interest in the way the standards are set ... On the whole the Australian Government ... has wanted to see a bit more streamlining, a bit more flexibility introduced into the way the standards are set – not to take any risks with human health by any means, but to be able to move a little more quickly."

In her first year in the job, Hewitt has been preoccupied with the Government's response to the drought and the debate over the rationale for support. "We hope we're now moving to a more positive phase in the climate cycle," she says but then adds, "It's still a very big issue for us." She recalls that when she was Ambassador in Brussels arguing Australia's case against European agricultural subsidies, she tried to explain to people in the European Commission that in Australia, farmers did not even bother knocking on the door for drought relief until they had had two failed seasons in a row. The policy setting was that support kicked-in during an event that was one in 20 to 25 years and, by definition, this was not the sort of event that could easily be planned for.

She says there is more debate about the support that is provided on the business side, subsidising interest rates and support for farm enterprises. She points out that this is all done with assets and income tests and is strictly constrained. On the welfare side – the payments that keep food on the table and kids clothed

and getting to school – support was only for a very limited period. “We’ve extended that period a bit in the last drought because it’s such an exceptionally long one. I think the welfare support is completely accepted. The business support is more debated ... we’re doing some work now through the Primary Industries Ministerial Council to look for, and try to get a better consensus, on the detail of drought policy for the future – hopefully for the next event rather than the one we’re just emerging from.”

Hewitt says staff in her department feel a sense of affinity with the sector. “There’s a tremendous sense of commitment to doing something important for the sector and for Australia,” she says. “DAFF people have a real sense of rapport with people in rural Australia ... I think there’s a great sense of purpose about the job ... people feel that they’re doing something that really matters.”

Overall, Hewitt’s career path in Foreign Affairs and the Primary Industries departments provided her with the ideal background to undertake her current role. But she says she was “not a career planner”. “I’ve always –with one exception – thoroughly enjoyed the work I’ve done and then something else has sort of presented itself and I’ve said, ‘oh, that would be interesting’, so I’ve gone on to it.” She says she probably spent more of her career on trade issues but she has worked in three divisions in primary industry, the livestock and pastoral, the land resources and the corporate policy.

After she was promoted from Deputy Secretary in DFAT to head DAFF she says she had to establish the personal contacts to enable her to be able to pick up the phone and talk to the key people in industry, peak bodies, research and development corporations and elsewhere. Today, two of her children are in their twenties, living and working overseas. But she still has a 14-year-old son living at home. She is in the office by 8 am most mornings and tries to get out by 7 pm. At weekends she works from home. “I’ve got a terminal at home and we work on Blackberries quite a lot ... it’s been brilliant actually.”

Because the portfolio has many stakeholders, she often has dinners to attend in the evening. “There’s an endless number of invitations. I try quite hard to limit it to two, maximum three a week,” she says. “I do very much encourage people to come and see me in the office if they can. But you do need to build up a certain rapport with industry and other people you’re working with.”

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