

Taking the 'Hospital Pass' – Jane Halton, Department of Health and Ageing

Jane Halton ran into former Prime Minister Bob Hawke at a dinner reception for the Queen in Canberra. “Where did I first meet you?” Hawke asked. “Don’t you remember?” For Halton it was a memorable experience. As a director in the Finance department and eight months pregnant she was summoned to attend an Expenditure Review Committee of the Cabinet. Historically, Finance officers have exposure to Cabinet processes at a more junior level than officers in other departments. When an item they are involved with is listed for consideration, they go and sit next to the Minister for Finance. “I think it was the first time that I went in this role and Hawke was in the room,” Halton says. “The doors to the Cabinet room weigh an absolute tonne so there I was with about eight months worth of baby, first having to haul on these doors to try and open them, and then walking in. I was wearing a bright red dress. I can still remember Bob Hawke stubbing out his cigar in a sort of irritated action and just watching my stomach come up the room.”

This was one of many such Cabinet experiences for Halton – not all of them pleasant. Finance, with its reputation for critically assessing ministerial proposals, often faced a hostile reception and Halton recalls the grillings. She says it was a good experience attending the meetings because they gave her an understanding of what government was concerned about. “You have to know your stuff and you learn not to be intimidated,” she says. “I still remember an exchange with Graham Richardson [former Hawke-Keating minister] which had him sort of leaning out – he was on the same side of the table –and looking down the table and shouting at me with absolute intensity because something he had said was not right and we’d been obliged to point it out.”

Did these experiences make Halton tough? “I think you had to have a confidence about what you did and didn’t know,” she says. “It made me very aware that you had to be clear of the facts to the greatest extent possible ... with Cabinet, if you didn’t know, you had to say, ‘I don’t know’ because the one thing you could never do was mislead people. And if you did mislead people you had to go back and correct, very quickly. Did it toughen you up? I think it does actually.” Halton then adds that there is no second chance in making a case. The best case had to be put in the first instance.

Language in these exchanges can be fairly robust but Halton recalls that her first finance minister, Peter Walsh was from the old school. “I remember the first time I went up to Walshie’s office, sitting in the ante room and I could hear

this stream of language. Every word you can think of was being conjuncted with every other. Really his facility for use of the four letter word was truly amazing. And I can remember the door opening and somebody saying, 'Ah. Minister I'd like you to meet Jane Halton' and I walked in and we then had this very robust conversation about something which he was quite cranky about. He did not use one improper word, not even one modest, almost swear word. Nothing. So as soon as I walked in the room the language improved." She says Walsh was excellent to work with and had very strong views. "He had a couple of particular passions where I think he could go from idiosyncrasy to one-eyed. But he was very open to a debate and you could put to him the facts and have the argument with him."

The experience with Walsh may have been good training for Halton who would find herself 15 years later working as deputy secretary under Max-the-axe – Max Moore-Wilton, the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. "Max is a character," Halton says. "I actually very much enjoyed working with Max. People used to say to me, 'Don't you find Max scary? Don't you find him difficult?' because Max has a formidable intellect and he's very quick.' And I say to people who ask, 'No. Not compared to my father,' because that kind of quick intellect and that kind of quick intellectual debate is something we had at the dinner table and that style was very familiar to me. So Max and I always got on very well." Halton says if she had a point of view she found that she could always argue the case with Moore-Wilton and if she had a factual base or a good argument, he would shift his position. "But you had to be able to argue your case," she says.

It was in her period as Deputy Secretary of PM&C that Halton hit the headlines over her role as convener of the People Smuggling Taskforce in the Children Overboard Affair. What happened has been the subject of parliamentary examination and is now a matter of public record. In brief, Halton says that while she was chairing a meeting of the Taskforce a call came in from a senior defence member on that committee saying that children had been thrown overboard from an asylum seekers' boat known as SIEV 4. "I took that call and I relayed that back to the meeting," she says. "What I didn't know was that one of the other people in that meeting actually pushed back from the table and told Minister Ruddock [the Immigration minister] about what had just been relayed to us ... I didn't know that," she says. The next day the issue was front page news.

Halton says that, "when we read things in the media we don't necessarily know where it's come from ... Now it's a matter of record that there was a brief that was provided to Government which included that statement [that children had been thrown overboard] which was cleared by senior defence people as being accurate. And the reasons why the facts did not become clear until much later

and the record corrected, are also a matter of record.” She says she has learnt from this experience that, “first, it’s very difficult when you’re working under a great deal of time pressure – which this was – to actually sit and consider what appeared at the time minor or peripheral snippets of information and understand their implications. When things were moving incredibly quickly it needed someone to step up and say very clearly, ‘We think there’s a problem with that’. The facts of the matter which may be perfectly clear with hindsight, may not be at all clear at the time.”

She adds that there are also crucial lessons for record keeping, which she impresses on her department. She says the question of who is responsible in a committee, or taskforce situation, is an interesting one. “Essentially, and one of the things I said in my evidence, was that the committee was not a decision making body. It wasn’t. It was an information sharing body and it was a way of collating information and providing that information in a coherent fashion. But it did not supplant the role of the individual agencies.”

By way of example in her portfolio she says the Department of Health and Ageing is working in a whole-of-government way on petrol sniffing. “Police, health services, employment services, family and community services and across state and federal boundaries are all needed to tackle this problem ... We have got everyone in this tent, which is right and proper. But at the end of the day, whose responsibility is addiction? Mine! And I know that. So I’m very conscious that we in this department don’t try and shift our core responsibility on these sorts of issues.” On the ground on any particular day others, such as the police, have to deal with the situation. Halton says, for example, that if there are bylaws that prohibit trafficking in fuel in a community where the non-sniffable petrol, Opal, had been introduced it would be the job of the local police to enforce the law. Her department, on the other hand, was dealing with the issue of the availability of Opal.

“While the Australian Government has made a huge commitment to the rollout of Opal fuel, we are actually constrained by the production capacity of the fuel company,” she says. All the communities that had asked for Opal had got it but its introduction is not that simple. “If you want to put Opal in a roadhouse and Opal is made by one company and the roadhouse uses another company, what are you going to do about the fuel card that people bring in to that station? You’ve got to work through all those sorts of issues. It’s not that simple.” The department was working through these issues one by one.

Despite her experience in the Children Overboard affair, Halton remains a strong supporter of the system of parliamentary scrutiny. “I have a strong view that we have an incredibly robust democracy and public service,” she says. “We have an incorrupt public service ... this department is very open to scrutiny. I don’t object to the scrutiny we get from committees.” She says she has discussed

this issue with some of those who grilled her over Children Overboard and expressed her support for the process. "That said, it's not a personally pleasant thing to go through," she says. "One of the most difficult things in the public service is being a public face, because we don't seek the limelight. That's not why we do these jobs. If I wanted to be a public face, I would not be a public servant." Being in the limelight is an uncharacteristic role, and being a public servant leaves no right of response. "You don't comment." The limelight also had an impact on her family as journalists staked out her house at a time when her boys were 12 and 8 years old.

Halton may be the nearest thing we have to superwoman. On the morning of her first day as head of the Health in January 2002, she led an aerobics class at Deakin Health spa. At that time, the mother of two was at the centre of the Children Overboard inquiry, the hottest media and parliamentary story of the day. Her cross examination continued for months after she took over at Health. As if heading up a department was not enough, Halton still cooked her family's nightly meals and prepared lunches for her two boys, now aged 16 and 12. The affair gave Halton a public profile that public servants generally seek to avoid and saw her described as "tart", "forceful", "hardworking" and "combative."

Today running the Health department, Halton says her department's challenge is to maintain the good health that the vast majority of Australians enjoy. "Our fundamental challenge is to work on a system that delivers great outcomes for all Australians ... we've got to make sure that we maintain that position. We have a good health system, we get it at a reasonable cost on any comparison ... we have great science, research, great access to world leading technology ... Our challenges are to maintain that position, make sure of our funding arrangements and continue access to practitioner services, particularly in rural and remote areas ... It's also important to tackle the problems we have with people who don't have the same level of outcomes – indigenous people are the clearest example."

Halton says there is a real passion inside the department about tackling issues of indigenous health. Our challenges for the future include major reforms in mental health and the ongoing developments in electronic health. This includes the development of technology that means people do not have to repeat all their details every time they go and see a medical practitioner. "What happens if you get run over by a bus in Bourke Street in Melbourne and the hospital doesn't know who you are and you are incapable of telling them? How do we get your medical records quickly in that sort of emergency situation? Do they know that you might be allergic to penicillin or something else? "

Regional responsibilities are also taken seriously with the department contributing expertise and funding for health services in the South Pacific and the Asia Pacific region. Helping to build the capacity of the region to handle the

threats of such things as avian influenza and HIV/AIDS will help both the region and Australia. The big issue is the possible avian influenza pandemic where the department must make sure that Australia is well positioned against something which is uncertain and relatively unknown. "I am delighted that we are recognised as world leaders in our pandemic preparedness and response plans," Halton says. "I'm told that regularly by the head of the WHO and by people who come out of the UN in New York."

She also draws attention to the potential threat of a terrorist attack using biological agents, for which the department is well prepared. On ageing issues she says she was really pleased when the Treasurer took the issue up because it had been a boutique issue – something Health worried about and the pensions people worried about because they could see the bill mounting. But with the demographic change inevitable, Australia needed to think about the issue. There was a need to improve productivity and participation, and provide quality and flexible services for the future.

There is no doubt Halton is tough. You have to be a woman who has risen to head a department at age 42 – the youngest head in the service at that time. Halton came to Canberra as a 13 year old in 1973, when her father was appointed head of the Department of Transport. Her father, a United Kingdom industrialist, had taken his family to Canada in 1969, where he worked as a bureaucrat for almost five years. Halton's early years were spent living in a farmer's cottage outside a tiny village called Rangeworthy. "As a small child I lived in a very rural environment in a tiny cottage," she says. "You had to walk up a very long lane, even to get to the main road and then you could walk into the village where I went to school." The small two room primary school had a series of tables where children of similar ages gathered and where Halton learnt to read and write.

Halton's father worked in aviation on projects like the Bloodhound rocket. One of her early memories is sneaking into the factory underneath a blanket on the floor of the back of the car to see the Concorde aircraft's nose going up and down. Canberra was a big adventure. The family moved into Hughes and Halton went to Deakin High School. "That was a terrible shock to the system because I had to wear a school uniform and I'd avoided school uniforms in my earlier academic career." Halton says she was "appalled" because the summer uniform was a "disgrace" and the winter uniform was "ghastly". "I just refused to wear it ... I wore summer uniform the whole time, just with a jumper over the top. I was extremely stubborn." When teachers suggested she might be cold she responded that, "compared with Canada this is quite warm thank-you very much".

Halton went on to Phillip College and today finds that her oldest son, who has just gone to Narrabundah, is being taught by a couple of teachers who actually

taught her and her husband. (Uniform rebelling runs in the family. Her oldest son almost steadfastly refused to wear a uniform through his high school career. Halton says she “had a little sympathy for him”). At college Halton was on the debating team and was also keen on sport. As a child she had danced a lot and in Canada she took up skating and skiing. When she went to university she played volleyball and squash. For 20 years, up until her first day as head of the Department of Health she had taught aerobics. When she is in Canberra Halton tends to get to work at about 9 am, unless she has an early meeting. Often she does not go home until 7.30 pm. “We eat late,” she says. “I would tend to cook while they’re home and we try to convene the family over the dinner table.” To the suggestion that she is performing a 1950s conventional housewife role as well as heading a department she says, “No, you misunderstand the role my husband plays in all this. He generally takes half, or more than half of the load. But I like cooking.”

Halton toyed with doing a number of things at university but ended up doing a double major honours degree in psychology. On graduation she went to the Australian Bureau of Statistics for a short period but then got a job as a research assistant in the Research School of Social Sciences working on Ageing and Family. It was work in an area which has now become a career interest. She considered becoming an academic but decided it wasn’t for her because “there probably wasn’t enough adrenalin in it ... You’ve got to recognise what you’re like and what you’re good at and I just decided that it didn’t have the pace that I liked,” she says. “So I thought if it doesn’t have the pace that I want, what I might do is start work in the public service for a while and I’ll think what I’ll do when I grow up.”

She went back to the Bureau of Statistics and worked on labour market statistics, giving her an appreciation of the market issues. She also worked on the Special Supplementary Survey looking at families. While debating what to do next she applied for various jobs and got a Clerk Class 7 in the ABS, a considerable leap. The next day she was also offered a Clerk Class 6 in the Aged Person Welfare Branch in the Department of Social Security. She consulted a senior colleague who told her, “You can come back to the ABS any time. Go and try out there in the policy world ... That was very good advice,” she says. There she worked, among other things, on the Home and Community Care program, which paradoxically, she came back to run years later.

She then went to work on Medicare and the Health Care Agreements. “That was very good because that showed you how government manages inter-government relationships,” she says. “It also showed you how government managed the financial relationships between levels of government and it introduced you to the complexity of things like the Grants Commission ... Things were not

necessarily as they seemed – the drivers, and incentives, understanding that complexity again has proved incredibly useful during my career.”

Having done that Halton thought it would be a good long term career move to transfer to the Department of Finance. “I was being told effectively, just hang round for a bit and you’ll be an SES officer. And I made a conscious decision that I didn’t need to be an SES officer before I was 30,” she says. “Basically ... one of the things I had learnt early was that breadth of experience and perspective are incredibly important and secondly, you need to understand the different players in any part of the environment in which you work ... One of the great advantages I had in the Community Care Program is working with a lot of people in the community sector, understanding the consumer issues, understanding what were the drivers and what were the challenges that some of these people faced in their day to day lives. To be able to bring back the experience and perspective to bear upon the policy perspective is incredibly useful ... I then realised that I needed to understand more about the things I had seen in the Medicare negotiations, about ... the issues around the money debates, what were the issues around the inter-governmental relationship issues? What were the things that led government in the centre to make decisions?”

Halton says running a department is like running a big business. Policy is her real interest but she thinks there is a much better chance of delivery on policy objectives if the department is well run. So she spent some time on her rise to the top gaining corporate experience, running the corporate services in the Health department. In Finance Halton had been one of a small number of women. Helen Williams had pioneered as the first Finance Senior Executive Service woman but had left by the time Halton arrived. Halton did two years there and had her first child while in Finance. She recalls sitting in Parliament House on the orange sofas and Brian Howe who was then a senior cabinet minister coming over and chatting to people from various departments. “He wandered over to me and he stood in front of me so I had to kind of lever myself to my feet and he said, ‘We haven’t met ... You’re Charles’ daughter’.”

“I was petrified. Absolutely mortified, because the entire room just stopped. Every senior person in that room was listening and we then had a conversation about my dad ... It was very nice of him because he was coming over to say hello ... But I had always stayed away from the bits of the service where my father worked ... on the grounds that it was much better to stay away from his area of influence and people could never make a comment about unnecessary advantage, or coaching, or any of those other things. So there was this senior Cabinet minister acknowledging my parentage. My father was his first Secretary – they went way back.”

Halton left Finance on promotion to come back to the Department of Health as an SES officer. She had her exit interview with Steve Sedgwick who later became

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Secretary. By this stage, Finance had worked out that they should be sensitive about people, particularly women, and, when Sedgwick asked why she was going, she replied, “because I’m being promoted, Steve”.

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