

Striking a different note

MARK DREYFUS AGREED TO TAKE TIME OUT OF HIS BUSY SCHEDULE AS A FEDERAL MP TO BE INTERVIEWED FOR THE YLJ.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the Member for Isaacs, Mark Dreyfus. Would he dominate the conversation with talk of Labor policies and initiatives with the view to generating positive PR for his party in this federal election year?

It seems a particularly cynical view, as I found in Mr Dreyfus a genuineness and honesty that is rare among any professional nowadays, let alone in a politician.

Of course, Mr Dreyfus did touch briefly on Labor's "Closing the Gap" policies, speaking of the personal satisfaction he felt when, on his first working day in Canberra, Prime Minister Rudd offered an historic apology to Indigenous Australians. But it was more to draw attention to how that particular experience highlighted the direct intersection between his new career as a politician and his earlier work as both a field officer for the then newly formed Northern Land Council and counsel for the legal team working on the Stolen Generation case.

As Mr Dreyfus himself noted in his first speech in Parliament, it is his experience as a barrister – particularly his work in Indigenous issues, the environment and urban planning – that will most influence his political career.

Were you interested in practising law from a young age?

Both my parents are musicians (his father is noted composer George Dreyfus) and are still working in music in their 70s and 80s. Growing up, I had an interest in writing and reading and ended up studying arts/law at the University of Melbourne largely because I had the entry score to do so. I never really expected to practise law.

How did you get your start in the legal profession?

I graduated in 1979 and went to work as a field officer for the Northern Land Council, an organisation which represents Aboriginal traditional owners in the Northern Territory. In that role, I had a lot of contact with lawyers – that was the first time I considered a career in the law. I spent some time travelling and eventually came back to Melbourne to study at the Leo Cussen Institute. I did some work experience at the law firm Moule Hamilton & Derham (now Freehills) and was lucky to be offered a position there following my admission. I think it's fair to say I had a lot of luck throughout my legal career.

When did you decide you wanted to become a barrister?

In 1985, I started working as a ministerial adviser to then Victorian Attorney-General Jim Kennan. Jim was himself a former barrister (and, in fact, returned as Senior Counsel upon his retirement from Parliament) and always encouraged me to follow in his footsteps. I went to the Bar in 1987 with high hopes and was privileged to enjoy a 20-year career there. While I was working as Jim's ministerial adviser, he was appointed as Minister of Planning and Environment. In advising Jim on that portfolio, I developed some expertise in planning law. This served me in good stead at the Bar, with planning and environmental law making up about 20 per cent of my practice.

What was it about your legal career that you found most satisfying?

I always gained more satisfaction out of my pro bono work than anything else I did as a barrister. Of course, the one exception would be my advocacy work in the High Court of Australia. I think most lawyers



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FORTUNATE LIFE: Mark Dreyfus insists he had a lot of luck in his legal career.

AT A GLANCE

NAME
Mark Dreyfus

QUALIFICATIONS
Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws, University of Melbourne

OCCUPATION
Labor MHR for Isaacs (2007 to present)

FORMERLY
Appointed Queen's Counsel (1999)
Barrister (1987-2007)
Ministerial Adviser to Victorian Attorney-General (1985-1987)
Solicitor (1982-1985)
Research fellow, National Research Institute of Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine (1982)
Field Officer, Northern Land Council (1979-1981)

OTHER
Married with three children (two of whom currently are studying law)
Fluent Spanish speaker
Member – St Kilda Football Club

would agree that having worked in the High Court is an enormous honour. I gained great satisfaction from the knowledge I was shaping the law.

What do you miss most about your work as a barrister?

More than the work, I miss my old workplace. It's always difficult to start in a new workplace but there is a particular camaraderie that exists at the Bar, which sets it apart from other professions.

When did you first get involved in politics?

Like a lot of people of my generation, I was outraged by the dismissal of the Whitlam government at the climax of the 1975 Australian constitutional crisis. For a while after that, I didn't want to have any part in politics. However, in 1979, I eventually came around and became a member of the Australian Labor Party.

What skills gained in the course of your legal career have you found most transferable to politics?

Lawyers have a clear understanding of the legislative process and the role of Parliament. Lawyers are also undaunted by formality. There are skills that are directly transferable between law and politics; I have had to learn a lot of new skills since being elected to Parliament.

What would you tell young lawyers to encourage their interest in Australian politics?

I would impress upon young lawyers that politics does matter. Politics is the process by which we govern Australian society in an orderly and peaceful fashion. Good governance can only be achieved when there are effective legislative processes in place. I believe legal practitioners have a particularly important role to play in good governance given they have greater knowledge of Australian legislative processes.

What do you hope to be your lasting legacy for Australia?

I hope to see the development of policies to bring about equal education for all Australians. I also hope to use politics to inspire greater tolerance of differences, whether differences of cultural and religious values or political positions. ●

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