

DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE



WHERE ONCE SHE PRACTISED PATHOLOGY, JANE LOMAX-SMITH NOW PRACTISES POLITICS. BUT SKILLS FROM HER PREVIOUS LIFE HAVE STOOD HER IN GOOD STEAD. THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT MINISTER TALKS TO PAM RACHOOTIN.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BRETT HARTWIG

The first thing I learned about Jane Lomax-Smith was that there were few times she was not juggling three things at once. Presumably, any breathers she takes are planned weeks in advance.

Over a cup of tea slotted in before parliamentary question time, however, the mood is surprisingly relaxed. The scene is her large ministerial chambers within the

otherwise cramped South Australian Parliament House.

The Minister for Education and Children's Services, for Tourism and for the City of Adelaide has quite a CV. A UK and Australian-trained anatomical pathologist, she has been a lecturer and researcher (including a stint at Harvard)

and set up her own pathology laboratory in Adelaide.

Candid, thoughtful and articulate, she holds a PhD from the University of Adelaide for her work on the kidney disease IgA nephropathy and liver disease, and has written numerous scientific publications.



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Her contribution to medicine and science has been matched by her dedication to community service. She served five years as a councillor in local government for Adelaide City from 1991 before being elected as Lord Mayor, a position she held from 1997 to 2000. She was elected to State Parliament as the Labor member for Adelaide in 2002 and, typically, began ministerial duties immediately. She is married, with two sons aged 16 and 18.

Dr Lomax-Smith comes from a working-class background. Born in 1950,

she grew up in the East End of London. Her mother was a hairdresser and her father a carpenter.

“One of my first jobs was in the hairdresser’s shop, handing out hair rollers and perm papers,” she says. She loves the smell of perms, “so evocative of that era”. I couldn’t help but wonder if early exposure to pungent vapours helped prepare her for later work on formalin-preserved specimens.

She says she “always had a morbid curiosity, and even as a (medical) student was amazed by pathology. It was an

intellectual area, much more intellectual than most of the other bits of medicine in that day.”

Although she chose to do pathology training from the start of her career, she was also offered a job as a surgical trainee by a vascular surgeon. She says she “seemed to be capable of feeling pulses, which a lot of housemen and registrars weren’t capable of feeling”.

During her first year of pathology, she worked once a week in a surgical outpatient clinic. But she did not think she had the right personality for surgery and didn’t like night work, so it was never an option, despite her enjoyment of the clinical work.

Asked whether her practice of pathology helped prepare her for the practice of politics, she says: “(Each of the steps in) my really bizarre career path has actually given me skills that have been very useful.

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“Local government was very useful because it taught me about process, governance and everything from conflicts of interest to ... management areas like strategic planning and human resources that I wouldn't otherwise have known about.

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She regards the old-fashioned mortuary presentations as theatrical. “It was all performance skills and about pacing the information a bit at a time to keep them on the edge of their seats.”

Dr Lomax-Smith regards science, and especially an understanding of statistics, as essential in politics. She gives her staff her old statistics textbook to read because, “I get enraged when people tell me numbers mean something that they don't.” She values science for providing an analytic approach to problem-solving.

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She describes herself as a risk taker. “I always want to know I can do something, and once I prove it, I want to do something else. In most professions you have peaked by the age of 50 and tend to learn less as time goes on.”

She has kept challenging herself intellectually by switching careers and starting again at the bottom of the

learning curve, not that she ever seems to stay at the bottom for long.

Her most satisfying portfolio is Education, she says, because of its impact on the community and ability to alter “everything from children's opportunity and family stability through to the economic viability that underpins any industry development”. She believes that “one of the challenges is to match low population growth with high skill needs and low unemployment”.

Although she has an academic background, including Latin, she believes in flexibility in order to keep less academic children engaged.

One of the issues she is particularly interested in is how to make sure every child gets to the stage of choosing a career in life. She feels that “the worst brain drain isn't teenagers moving to Sydney; it's teenagers not reaching the stage they can make choices (about careers).”

She is also focusing on pre-school experiences, the 0 to 5 age group, especially investing in early childhood development centres as one-stop shops with early intervention services and the capacity to facilitate good family interactions during the crucial formative years.

Asked what disease parliamentary debate might most resemble, she is understandably reluctant to think of it in those terms, although tinnitus comes to mind.

“It is more like a playground at recess,” she says. “I look at the behaviour around me and they remind me of my boys at their worst ... except that my boys will grow up and, I hope, calm down.”

So is it easier to be a woman in medicine or politics? Dr Lomax-Smith says she found pathology to be egalitarian and characterised most men in the field as “very sensitive individuals”. “Politics can be abrasive,” but it is that

way to everyone. She describes herself as “fairly tough”.

She reads widely (“I drift into another orbit reading”) and says one of the great privileges of her current role is the opportunity to meet the guests invited to Adelaide's Writers' Week and the Festival of Ideas.

As for the workforce crisis in pathology, Dr Lomax-Smith believes that it is part of a greater crisis in science. She is concerned about the “hullabaloo and hysteria about autopsies and retained body parts (that) is destroying the appreciation of pathology as the only natural audit. It is in the context of anti-intellectual pressures from a whole range of community views.”

As far as returning to a career in pathology goes, she suspects she would be “too rusty to go back now”, after a gap of eight years. “The challenge for histopathology, and the thing that concerns me, is that if children have never dissected an animal at school, and if medical students know virtually no anatomy or only learn on a need-to-know basis, a lot... has been lost.

“Because, to me, (every single case in) pathology is always a challenge, an intellectual puzzle, and it is hard to imagine that you can enjoy the craft unless you have been involved in the gross anatomy of it all. If you can't understand pathology, you can't understand treatment.”

She misses “the instant gratification of pathology, the joy of finishing something, the buzz of looking at a pile of signed reports going out, or a completed autopsy report. Because in politics nothing ever gets finished, it is always a work in progress. You are always nibbling at the edges and pushing things along slowly, without being able to say at the end of the day, well, today I did something. It may take months before anything really happens.” 🔥