



Senator

THE RISE, REIGN AND REPRIORITISING OF AUSTRALIA'S YOUNGEST POLITICAL VETERAN,
DEMOCRAT NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA.

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Interrupted

Natasha Stott Despoja is back in the spotlight. I've caught her midway through a media hit after announcing her intention to leave Parliament at the next election. It's been a while since she's ventured from the back bench of the Senate to put herself in the media gaze. Her hair is still scared straight from an appearance on the *Kerri-Anne Kennerly Show* yesterday for goodness sakes.

She is good at this stuff and despite copping it for doing so, her love affair with the people on the street lives on. She laughs cheekily, still high from the U2 concert she's been to on the weekend. "I felt very young, not quite hip, but still young. A number of people came up unprompted and said, 'Hi Natasha.' And I thought, 'I love that'. I love that people can come up to me. And it was quite funny because people kept coming up to me and saying 'are you Natasha Stott Despoja?' and I'd say, (she goes all mock bashful), 'Yeah'. And then a guy came up to me and said, 'Are you....?'. And I jumped in and said, 'Yes, I am Natasha Stott Despoja'. And he said, 'No. I meant are you selling programs?' So there's another thing, never believe the hype."

There's always been hype about Natasha, on a national scale, ever since her 1995 entry to Parliament at the age of 26.

And in a world where Paris Hilton's off her scone, Nicole Ritchie's off her food and Britney Spears offs her undies, there's something to be said for a woman who's a role model for being community minded and participating in the democratic process. A woman who doesn't touch drugs, eats three square meals a day and does it all with her underpants on.

But Natasha Stott Despoja loves show biz. The thrill of a good performance is in her blood.

Her mother Shirley Stott Despoja was the first Fine Arts editor at

the *Adelaide Advertiser*, imbuing in her daughter a love of theatre, of music, of opera. “I was her date at many shows over the years”, Natasha smiles. “I remember meeting Don Dunstan for the first time at the Adelaide Festival wearing the obligatory safari suit – him, not me. The 70s and 80s in South Australia were a really amazing time, a renaissance time. Combined with law reform in relation to pubs and clubs, gays and lesbians, women’s issues, the arts were flourishing.”

Her mother’s hand in her upbringing is clear to see. Young Natasha soaked up the older woman’s Dunstanesque passions and internally reconfigured them in her own unique way.

“Whether it’s feminism, fighting for a free education or fighting for David Hicks to come home to face a fair trial – they’re issues strongly influenced by my background and upbringing. I guess I do have that influence from my mother that underpins my politics”, she muses.

It was whilst studying for her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Adelaide, majoring in politics and history, that Stott Despoja put her politics into practice. Her unshakeable belief that education – at all levels – is “a right not a privilege” led to her involvement in the student movement and coincided with the reintroduction of tertiary fees in the form of the HEAC, then HECS. She was instantly turned off both major parties when they voted for fees for education.

And it is the fusion of politics and show biz that’s propelled Natasha into iconic status in the Australian political landscape.

That of course, and the freethinking politics of the wine leaking crazy place we know and love as South Australia – the first Australian colony to give women the right to vote in 1894, along with the right to stand for Parliament in the same year.

It was the other Don – Don Chipp, circa 1969, who shared Dunstan’s reformist thinking, using his power in the Gorton Government to address the censorship of books and magazines like *Playboy*. In 1977, disillusioned with the Liberal Party, Chipp founded the Australian Democrats. And guess what, the first Australian Democrat to enter Parliament – the Senate – was a woman, Janine Haines, from South Australia.

Natasha was eight years old.

“I’d always been interested in the Democrats because Janine Haines was a huge influence on me as a woman, as a feminist. I certainly understood from an early age too that as a person who had had access to education I had a responsibility to make sure that other women had the same or better opportunities.”

Natasha and her family had handed out Democrat how to vote cards in the 1990 election for Haines. And although Natasha’s mentor failed in her bid for a lower house seat, Natasha impressed enough of the right people to be offered a job with Democrat Senator John Coulter – a well known environmentalist. It was December 1991. “And then I fell in love with legislation, and realised you could change lives through laws.”

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Enter Democrat Stott Despoja. Girl on a mission. It took only 18 or so months for the party to invite her to run for the Senate with Coulter in a “let’s be honest – very token position – I was third on the Senate Ticket. So there was absolutely no chance that I was going to win. But when I got a relatively high personal vote, it started a flow on effect. People realised there was a youth vote in South Australia. And no political party, no candidate was accommodating that youth vote. I’d be going to campuses and debating Senator Amanda Vanstone or David Kemp. And it occurred to me that well, I’ve been studying legislation, I know this stuff. And people were saying if they can do it, you can do it. It’s no big deal.”

But it’s in the story of the Australian Democrats decision making processes that Natasha’s ride really begins. You see, the members’ votes – whether milk bar owner or holder of a Senate seat – all have the same value. And, most importantly, the members can decide who the parliamentary leader will be – unlike the Labor and Liberal parties, where the vote is confined to parliamentary members only.

For instance, after the 1993 election, John Coulter was replaced as Leader of the Parliamentary Democrats by Cheryl Kernot, who attracted over 80% of the members votes – “one of the most dynamic, high profile leaders in Australian Politics”, acknowledges Stott Despoja. Kernot recognised Stott Despoja’s talents, employing her as a script writer and policy advisor. “I learned a lot from watching and working with her, no doubt about that”, she admits.

“She modernised the party in many respects. Her image of the party was one that was very approachable. Cheryl was one of the first politicians to do non mainstream media. We forget that. Cheryl did *Frontline* and learned this was an important tool to make Democrat policy available to a broader audience. She learned that very early.”

So Natasha sat at Cheryl’s knee until early 1995. She sheds no light as to why she left – but it wasn’t long after that there was a newsbreak: Senator John Coulter unexpectedly announced that due to illness, he’d be retiring from the Senate, leaving a Senate



vacancy and a gap at the top of the Senate's South Australian Ticket for the next election.

Stott Despoja had run for preselection in 1994 "with no intention of actually winning because Senator John Coulter (the sitting member) was running. He was top of the Ticket and I supported him. So I ran and came second on the Ticket". That's the way she tells the story. Guess she ran for the experience.

But with Coulter's resignation, the Democrats in South Australia were suddenly, fantastically in the middle of the biggest, most delicious political human interest story ever. Because given that Natasha had run second to the big man, her name was first out of the hat to replace him. "There was total panic. A couple of the members said, 'Hang on – she's pretty young. It's ok to have her as number 2 on the Ticket but we weren't really seriously thinking she was going to run and get elected.'" To settle it, the national executive of the Australian Democrats called two fresh preselections; one to see who would fill Coulter's vacancy until the next election, and another to see who would run at the top of the Ticket at the next election. Stott Despoja won both.

"It was an incredible show of support from an incredibly democratic party who said we want something different and younger and fresher, and we believe she's got experience, even if she doesn't have age. And then it was rushed through the South Australian Parliament and I was whisked off to Canberra November 30th, 1995 and sworn in immediately, very fast. Filling a vacancy is a very different experience from going to the polls, getting elected and then knowing like most Senators do, you've got some time. But for me there was some risk of not only being the youngest ever female, but the shortest serving Senator ever in the history of Australia."

Stott Despoja had two sitting days filling Coulter's vacancy before Paul Keating adjourned Parliament for the year. In January 1996, he called an election for March. "If I hadn't won at the next election it would've been very embarrassing", she explains.

And so she hit the hustings. She had learned her lessons well.

We were making the *McFeast* political series at the time, *Live from the Bowels of Parliament House*, and Natasha had sent us a flyer promoting her Men of Senate Calendar, a send-up of the beefcake calendars doing the rounds of footballers, athletes, anyone really, who was happy to take their clothes

off to raise a bit of money. It was a great piece of self promotion, and her chirpy letter caught our attention. Natasha was booked to be our first guest on the program in 1996.

This wasn't a political interview remember, it was personal: and she blitzed it.

"Shows like *Good News Week* were continually underrated by people in positions of power or even mainstream political commentators. For me it was about democratisation of the political process. So people would say – my goodness, that person's actually a human being. I want to hear what he or she stands for. Being funny is much harder than standing up in question time, you know", she reasons.

Democrat Stott Despoja caught the public's attention, was duly re-elected and rewarded for her efforts by her Party with a very defined role. "It was clear from day one. It was a role that was not only sanctioned by but impressed upon me by my leader at the time, Cheryl Kernot, and then Meg Lees, who said, 'This is your job. You've got to get the party attention. We've got to be accessible and available to our membership and they need to know

what we are doing.’”

And get attention Stott Despoja did. She wore her Doc Martens to Parliament, she came out as a chocoholic, she was sassy in the *Woman's Weekly*, funny on *Good News Week*, available on Triple J. Her national profile sky rocketed. Some loved her for it, some knocked her: personal profile is double edged publicity. “People say, ‘Oh yeah self appointed Doc Martens wearing youth spokesman.’ Well, you can't claim to speak on behalf of all young people. But what I could claim was, ‘Hey, I've got a slightly different perspective from a lot of the people who are already in here, and it may not be completely representative of my generation but at least it's offering something more diverse than what we've got.’”

But in the process, Natasha became a ‘pop culture’ star. Her clothes, her boyfriends, her birthdays, her wit, all made news. And the party members loved it! So when Cheryl Kernot stunned Australia with her resignation as leader and defection to the Labor Party, it was no surprise that the littlest Australian Democrat was elected as Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary party, supporting the veritable and earnest Meg Lees as ‘top dog’. Under their leadership, the Democrats wrangled the balance of power in the Senate at the 1998 election, with nine senators represented, the highest number ever.

And then, in this potted history of Democrat Stott Despoja, came the GST.

Meg Lees supported it. Stott Despoja did not – nor did 70% of the Democrat members. In very simple terms this led to a leadership spill, where the members replaced Lees with her deputy. And that's when the trouble really started.

The Natasha we saw – the showbiz Natasha, was the laughy, ebullient and ever enthused. Within the party room however, it was a different story. Why? We don't know. Like Princess Diana, she was Queen of People's hearts, but she just couldn't find complete traction either with the mainstream political commentariat, or her political colleagues.

“There was a time there when people would say, ‘What a princess or she's precious’. It always made me laugh. I think I've been pretty tough given some of the criticism I've had to deal with.” She still smarts at the memory of veteran political hound Alan Ramsey's description of her in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 2001 as “The Anna Kournikova of Australian Politics”. “You learn to shrug it off”, she sighs, but it's clear the comment still rankles.

Stott Despoja, in a ballot initiated by those blasted empowered members, unseated Lees as leader in April 2001, before the upcoming election. Her parliamentary colleagues weren't happy – they had backed Lees, as an older, more world wise campaigner.

But an election was nigh. Stott Despoja's team formulated campaigns based around her stewardship, like “Change Politics”. And then, on September 11 2001, the world changed completely.

Fear permeated the community. The Howard Government weathered the Tampa crisis. An alternative c word to ‘change’



dominated Australian politics – ‘caution’. Against all this, Stott Despoja campaigned relentlessly. To her credit, her colleagues did get their seats back.

She sighs. “The members had chosen a leader that the majority of the parliamentary room didn't want. You can't compete with that. After the election it became clear that people had very different ideas of what my role as leader should be. Imagine if we went to John Howard and said, ‘Look, we are going to take away all your power as leader, so you'll just be the figurehead that does the publicity but we'll do the rest’”.

Natasha once again says it all goes back to her being a woman in a position of power at a relatively young age – “even when you're the most experienced person in the room”, she adds with “a room full of people who just can't quite reconcile that”. But we will never know how Natasha Stott Despoja behaved as a politician within her own ranks. Did she manage people well? Could she calm others' insecurities? Did her own insecurities interfere with her handling of

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Above left Natasha campaigning with Don Chipp at the 2001 election. **Left** Natasha arrives for the first 2006 sitting of Parliament wearing her opinion on the RU486 debate on her chest. **Above** March 2005, Natasha in her office with son, Conrad.

complex human as distinct from complex political interactions?

She resigned amidst great drama, making more headlines, eliciting much sympathy, and sought refuge on the back bench to concentrate on policy and committee work, her first love – only raising her head to release Pitt/Aniston style photos of her wedding to lobbyist and PR spin guru Ian Smith, and celebratory photos on giving birth to their son. Very Hollywood. Stott Despoja also happily posed in her office for a front page photo for *The Australian* with Conrad when she returned to work after his birth.

Other women could still watch her life and say, if they wanted, “Wow. If she can do it I can”.

And that’s why she is a role model. It’s her life choices that Democrat Stott Despoja is broadly known for amidst her public. As much as she craves credibility for her legislative work and policy contributions, the detail of what she does is niche market only. People admire her for the macro picture of being there. That’s what happens when you make your personal life political.

She’s been bombarded with encouraging letters and emails from other women for her decision to leave Parliament, “allowing for a possible return to politics in the future”, she smiles. It’s as if Natasha has given this whole generation of Cinderella Greer’s, us mixed-up women bred for success and surprised enough by the deliciousness of making a family, a great excuse to say, “May I just not be concentrated on my career for a moment so I can enjoy my life?”

Having served in Parliament for 11 years, she will be eligible at 55 for a yearly indexed pension of around \$74,300 a year, but she can claim the pension immediately because she was elected before the changes to the super rules. Politics has served her well. Just as valuably, she holds a profile with the Australian people, some of whom see her life as a reflection of their own.

Is she a cautionary tale for other young women – for the Nicola Roxons, the Kerry Nettles, the Kate Ellis and Julia Gillards, the Tania Pliberseks who have streamed into Parliament behind her? “Well, I think, on the one hand I could caution them and say, ‘Be careful. You will be vulnerable and subject to attack if you do too many light hearted articles or dare put on a glamorous dress or wear a pair of funky shoes.’ But on the other hand there’s a part of me that says ‘Just accept that you are a multi-faceted human being. You have a life. We’re not these robotic one dimensional people who go and vote on things that affect your lives and never let your hair down and relax.’ I get very

frustrated at this notion that to be a good politician you have to simply do politics in a way that’s acceptable to the mainstream. But yes, possibly the cautionary note might override all of that.”

And then the word that sums up her time in Parliament. “It’s a patriarchy”, she tosses over her shoulder as she climbs the stairs to the photo shoot. “And I like breaking the mould. I’m glad that I was involved. And these days I would still like to think I’m breaking the mould, but maybe in very different ways.” ■