**SWIM Inspiring Stories** Senator Janet Rice

**The University of Melbourne**

TRANSCRIPT

14 June 2022

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I'd like to acknowledge that I'm hosting the "Inspiring Stories" webinar on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, custodians and leaders of this incredible land and waters for thousands and thousands of years. I take this opportunity now to acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders, past and present. And I welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders here with us today. I want to also acknowledge all of our First Nations colleagues for their important contribution to our academy.

I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. I resolutely believe we all have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace where an individual's gender, their sexuality, sexual orientation, background, race, or where disability or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. And our faculty is rich in impressive and accomplished women, breaking barriers and challenging the status quo. Yet in 2022, we remain, we still have underrepresentation at the senior and leadership levels within our faculty. And while we've certainly moved towards enhancing representation, here remains important work to do around gender equality and broader diversity and inclusion. It is my hope that by having conversations that challenge our systems, and inspire leadership from within, and to enhance our support of the talented people in MDHS, this will allow people to reach their full potential and will highlight the various barriers our people face.

I'm really honoured to introduce Senator Janet Rice. Janet has been a passionate campaigner for justice, people, and the planet for more than 30 years. And she took her seat as a Greens Senator for Victoria in 2014 and was re-elected in 2016 and 2019. A climate scientist by training, which I did not know until I was reading a bit more about Janet's bio. Janet began her working life campaigning to protect our forests. She was part of the 1983 Franklin River Blockade and a leader of the campaign that resulted in the creation of the Errinundra National Park in East Gippsland. Within a decade, she was a founding member of the Greens in Victoria. Janet is the party spokesperson for LGBTIQ+ issues, family, aging, and community affairs, forests, foreign affairs, and multiculturalism. Janet serves as the Federal Greens Party Room Chair. In parliament, Janet is the Chair of the Community Affairs References Committee. Not busy at all. Thank you for all you do. What an incredible inspiration you are to so many; the impact that you have had is outstanding.

**JANET RICE**

Thank you, Natalie. It's just a real delight to be here with you, thanks for inviting me.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

And a huge congratulations on the recent election success. I'm sure you're probably still beaming about your election win.

**JANET RICE**

Absolutely, it's been massive. I also wanna acknowledge before we get going, that I'm also on the lands of the Wurundjeri people, here in the office in Brunswick, and to acknowledge that this is stolen land and that sovereignty wasn't ever ceded, we've never had treaties with our First Nations peoples, and we need to have them. As part of my work, just really telling the truth about our history and then working for justice and working for treaties with our First Nations peoples, and that's very much integrated into everything that we, as the Greens are doing.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

That message comes through quite passionately from yourself and many of your colleagues. I'm sure myself and that many of the people in the room today will be really excited to hear that as well.

I was hoping if you might be happy to tell us a bit more about yourself; your journey from your childhood, your days at university and then moving into policy, conservation, and advocacy.

**JANET RICE**

Okay. All right. I never quite know how far back to go, where to start but I grew up in Altona, so very much a working-class suburb, with professional parents. My mother was a teacher, my father, an engineer. Some of the really important things I think about growing up in Altona is just having the multicultural diversity there, the post-war migration. Having that diversity around me; having nature close at hand in terms of the beach, and also having the petro-chemical refineries just up the road, really made me very aware of issues.

The smell of the refineries was there as part of our life. It really wasn't until I went to school and I won a scholarship to a private school in Essendon and used to catch the train there every day, then I realised that not everybody knows the reality of our modern industrial life and doesn't have the smell of the petro-chemical industry at the end of their street. So that was quite formative. I really didn't know what I wanted to do when I was growing up, and at the end of doing year 12, ending up choosing to do a science degree because I didn't know what I wanted to do. Just knew that I was good at science, good at math, so I went up to do a science degree. Then when I was at uni, I did my science degree, majoring in meteorology, and two really pivotal things happened as well as getting that degree under my belt;

One was learning about climate change, and that was in 1980 when I was 20, that was quite a long time ago now. I distinctly remember walking out of this lecture on climate and thinking, "This is really serious; the world's gonna have to do something about this." And knowing that it was something that no one knew about, no one was talking about at that stage.

And then the second thing that happened, pretty much at the same time, is as your introduction noted, I was involved with the campaign to protect and save the Franklin River in Tasmania. As well as being actively involved in that massive, huge campaign for protecting such an important part of Australia's nature. The thing that really hit home with being part of that campaign (which involved hundreds of thousands of people, right across the country, in fact all around the world) was that we won. That there was this sense that people can come together. You could have this massively well-organised, strategic campaign over quite a few years, and at the end of it, you win. So I had this really formative experience of knowing that if people work together to try and achieve change, that it's possible.

I got to the end of my honours year and decided having had that experience under my belt and knowing the importance of taking action on climate, that I really felt that I wanted to be an environment and climate campaigner rather than a scientist. I also had the advantage to that stage of having then being in a relationship with Penny, who ended up being one of Australia's leading climate scientists. I felt I didn't quite have to leave the climate science behind, and I was always getting the updates on what was going on. There weren't jobs for climate campaigners in those days, and I then pretty quickly found myself working in the environment movement and working on forest campaigning.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It actually leads into one of my next questions and you've spoken to me about your success and your passion with and a shared journey with Penny, Penny Whetton, who is also an alumnus of the University of Melbourne, and a revered climatologist. Penny was an expert in global warming issues with a strong focus on Australia. When I look at your shared purpose and the shared passion for these issues, I wondered what your thoughts were, whether or not you both went about this in advocating in different ways, and was this part of the success?

**JANET RICE**

Look, I think it was. Certainly, for us, I mean, Penny and I got together in 1982, when I was 21 and then we were together until she very sadly passed away, two and a half years ago, so we were together for 38 years. Pretty much from then me leaving uni and being working as an activist, she was working, building her career as a scientist. And we operated as a tag team. And that for both of us, feeling that yes, we were working together and understood the science. I was proud of her work as a scientist. It was fantastic that she was doing that. Equally she was really proud of my work as an activist and a campaigner. Together, the two of us felt that we had bases covered, I suppose.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

A formidable team. I think achieved so much because of both of you were passionate and had distinct ways of going about what success would look like for both of your careers. I'm very sorry to have heard about your loss from Penny in 2019. I'm sure this has been difficult in many ways, but particularly in terms of the focus of what you wanted to do, or do you think this might have even fuelled your fight a bit more to keep this work going?

**JANET RICE**

Look, I mean, across the whole spectrum of what I do, you certainly, when you lose a partner or lose a loved one like that, and so unexpectedly, you realise your mortality, and you realise just how every day is precious and that nothing can be taken for granted. So in some ways it does make you realise that what you do in every day of your life matters because you don't know whether you're still gonna be around tomorrow, but it's certainly, it's been a huge two and a half years for me, and really difficult, obviously, for the first 12 months, 18 months. But, I've got through it, which is another thing that you learn that really awful stuff can happen and you can get through it, you can. And that resilience to keep going.

I mean, one of the other things that I really learned also through that was being able to know that you need the support and help of everybody else, and that you can't get through stuff like that on your own. Being open and vulnerable and able to ask for help, ask for support, and that massive support was there. I think in terms of working through my grief, having support from all of my friends and my family, and the community around me has been incredibly important. People who are just willing to put themselves out for you so you can continue to work.

Then, recognising just how important it is to really look after my own mental wellbeing. Losing Penny has given me more ability and more strength to be able to say no to things, because that's one of the big things when you're passionate and determined, a bit obsessive about things. It's very hard to say no, when you know that somebody's asking you to do something and you know that it's going to make a big difference and it's very tempting to spend 18/20 hours a day working and not having time for yourself, but, that it's just not sustainable. So knowing the importance to me, of having to take time out to say, “No, I'm not going to be there for that. Sorry, I've got to go away. I've got to go and spend some time in nature. I've got to have some time for myself." That's one of the things that I've got a bit better at. But I think it's the thing that I find the hardest thing to do.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Many of the "Inspiring Stories" speakers say the same; that you've got to have that sustainability or you can't continue to make an impact.

**JANET RICE**

I think one of the other things that I've really learnt from having lost Penny in the last three years is how much every one of us, as an individual, we can't achieve it all on our own, everything that we do, we are doing as part of a community and are very much have the feeling that, “Yeah, I've been doing a lot of good work throughout my life but I can pass the baton to somebody else and that there's a team”. Basically, I am standing on the shoulders of giants, there are people that have got us to here. I've been doing this work for 30 to 40 years. As I wind down my work, I don't think I'll ever completely give it up, but you're passing the baton on to other people who will keep on working together. The change that we want to see in the world is done by people working together rather than us having this unreasonable sense of our own self-importance in anything that we achieve.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

That is inspirational leadership; not just being the superhero yourself, but also making sure you're bringing the team along with you so that as you say, there's a great succession plan. If we couldn’t do certain things that there'll be people behind us that will be able to come and take it on and give it life of its own. I think they’re the types of leaders we're now starting to see emerge now, which I think is exciting.

Another exciting thing is the great success that the Greens Party have seen in this recent election. My understanding is it's the 30th Year Anniversary of the Greens Party. What an exciting anniversary to celebrate; the largest Greens representation ever, right?

**JANET RICE**

That's right, yes. Going back to the 30 years - picking up my story from being a forest campaigner and then being one of the founders of the Greens here in Victoria in 1992 was very much being, working on forest campaigning, working with the community, but being fed up by action not being taken in the parliament. And that recognition that there's a lot that we can do as a community, but essentially, if you believe in our democracy, which is pretty good, it's got a lot of flaws, but it's the best system that we've gotten. I certainly don't want to see it overthrown. Well, then we've got to be in there and we've got to have people in their parliaments to make the right decisions. I got fed up with lobbying the Labor and Liberal parties and it was soon after Bob Brown and Christine Milne, and the other two independent had been elected to the Tasmanian Parliament in 1989. I basically thought, we need the Greens in Victoria. I then threw myself into being a co-founder of the Greens throughout '91 and we launched the party in Victoria in November 1992. It is really lovely, 30 years on, to get to this stage of actually having the breakthroughs that we had at the May election. And to have 12 Senators that we now have, is the largest third-party force of any party in the history of the Australian parliament.

To make that breakthrough and get three new members at the lower house to keep Adam (Bandt) company in the House of Representatives and to have a party room of 16 – huge. We’ve gone from 10 to 16, which is just massive. We had our first face-to-face party room meeting last Friday, and to have all 16 of us around the table was just extraordinary. For me as program chair, it makes operating collaboratively and making decisions by consensus even more of a challenge that we're going to have to keep on working on. But it's an extraordinary increase in strength. And we just had national conference here in Melbourne, in fact over the weekend, and to see people and the sense of celebration and achievement. And the sense of that 30 years of hard work has built towards the success that we achieved was, it's a very powerful and very moving time in the history of the party.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I look now at what's happened and the change with a lot of hope. I think the other part is the Teal Independents, that probably support much of what the Greens also advocating and fighting for. It’s quite an exciting time in history and in politics for us in Australia.

Another passion of yours, is the support and advocacy for our LGBTIQA+ community. It's clear from your work that that's unwavering. Do you think how, we're talking about hope and feeling of hope for the future, do you think that this recent election shift now offers more hope for our LGBTIQA+ community, particularly with the leadership we're seeing in this country?

**JANET RICE**

Look, I hope so. I mean, the Labor Party still don't have a Minister for Equality which we were really wanting and hoping that they might appoint a Minister for Equality, which they don't have. But certainly, their position is much more supportive of the LGBTIQA+ community. Having us with the power and the levers that we have in the parliament with our unwavering support for LGBTIQA+ rights. I mean, our platform has very much been that we want to see an end to all discrimination. We want to reach the end of our journey to equality. And clearly there is still discrimination that exists in our laws. Certainly culturally, there is still discrimination, and prejudice, and stigma. And I'm hoping that we will be able to make some really big steps forward over this term of parliament. And certainly, we will be pushing for them. And like on many things, Labor have got a reasonably good platform, but we just need to push them to make sure that they are implementing that and going further where necessary.

I mean, things like removing all forms of discrimination against them, students and teachers, which is still in our laws; you can discriminate against students and teachers on the basis of their sexuality, that needs to go. And they're the sort of issues that certainly we continue to fight for.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think the time is now, so I'm hopeful and looking forward to finding out when we get our Minister for Equality, but we hope that there will be a push on the leadership so that that will become a reality sooner. I'm sure in politics especially, that you will face many barriers.

I talk about this in a broad sense because there could be barriers every day, I'm sure. But I wanted for this audience particularly, to get a sense of whether or not you thought, do these barriers derail you, or motivate you?

**JANET RICE**

I think it's in my psychology, maybe it's my science background but I love solving problems, and I love strategizing, and working out some ways through things. So my ways of working are about having an awful lot of flexibility because certainly both in the community as an environment campaigner, and then in politics, nothing ever goes to plan. I mean, today was a absolutely classic case in point, today has gone completely in the opposite direction of what I thought it was going to do with various things that have been taking up my time this morning. And you just manage that and you have to have that flexibility and be able to work through that and be able to make an assessment of where we are now and work with people again. It's like this morning, having a bit of a pow-wow with some of my other colleagues to work out where we're going to be going forward on the sort of issues that we are working on this morning and you move through it.

Putting your faith in people, working together with good intent and determination, and knowing that things aren't going to be easy. And again, when you are working for change, whether it's social change, environmental change, working to be tackling the climate crisis, the inequality crisis, they are massively big issues. Nobody expects that we're going to be able to overcome them easily. So, knowing that we'll just, we will keep on working strategically and doing the most that we could possibly be doing at any one time. And with the determination and the commitment to not give up. At times you will, then get to things that definitively we have failed, we've lost something, and you've got to grieve for that then accept that things didn't work out and we haven't been able to overcome all of those barriers. But in, for, for the big things, it’s a matter of saying, “Okay, we didn't do it that way, but we're going to continue on and we're going to keep on working on it."

It's how I feel about climate now. You put your logical hat on and it looks incredibly pessimistic that the world's going to get its act together to be able to tackle with the climate crisis, but you can't give up, you've got to keep on thinking while there's life, there's hope. While we are still here, and while you've got good people that have got this passion, and commitment, and determination to do things, we're going to keep on working on it. We are never going to give up.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Listening to you now, but also in past conversations, you and I have had, you just seem to have this incredible level of optimism. Where does that come from?

**JANET RICE**

I don't know whether I have optimism, but I still have hope. It’s that sense of humans are incredibly resilient, incredibly resourceful, incredibly capable, and that at some stage, on all the issues that we face, and you look at the arc of justice and you hope that it's going to continue to be working to for good things. You've just got to believe that that’s the case. And because while there is still life, there is still hope. By thinking that there's not, you know that that's a place of despair and that's just not a good place to be taking action. For me, I get hope from the people that I work with. I get hope from being surrounded by good people and capable people. Knowing that there are billions of people across the world who want a better planet and a more just societies as well, that together we are incredibly powerful. As I said, while we are still working on it, you must remain hopeful that there is going to be some good outcomes.

I think it's also then recognising the thing that can be difficult. You look at the environmental damage now, the damage that's being done by climate change. The damage that's still done by discrimination and stigma against people is that, there is damage being done. And there are losses, acknowledging those losses, and grieving for those losses, but they're not getting stuck there, they’re working through those. You carry those losses with you, you carry that grief with you as well, it impacts on who you are. So reflecting upon my personal journey that, the grief I have for losing Penny is with me, will be with me for the rest of my life, but it doesn't stop you from then continuing to move on. And moving on, supported by people, and supported by all of the other species on the planet as well.

It's been one of the things that really gives me inspiration and strength is being in nature, connecting with the natural world and drawing strength from it, and drawing that sense that the world's an amazing, beautiful place. And that the love of the natural world is something that gives us the strength to be able to continue on.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It kind of reminds you what you're fighting for. And I think it's similar in my role as the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, I, similarly, am fed by the people and there are days that I feel like I've failed or there's things I want to move a lot quicker. And then I'll just get a few wonderful emails, or nuggets from people that just tell me what the difference that has made for them, and that just inspires me to keep going.

**JANET RICE**

Fundamentally, when you are taking some action, when you're involved in feeling, you are doing something towards tackling the problem. That gives you strength and motivation to keep on going.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Exactly. I'm so grateful to you today. I know you are incredibly busy, it's post-election, and there's lots going on. I really appreciate you spending time with us to talk about your work and the things that are really important to you. So thank you again, Janet.

I just want to extend my true gratitude to you for taking this time today.

**JANET RICE**

Thanks very much, Natalie. And thanks everyone for coming. It's been lovely, really enjoyed it.