**SWiM *Inspiring Stories* Conversation series**

The Honourable Jaala Pulford

4 April 2023

**NATALIE HANNAN:** It is my great pleasure to acknowledge this Inspiring Stories conversation is being recorded on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, custodians and leaders of this incredible and beautiful land and waters for thousands upon thousands of years. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. I also want to recognise the important contribution of our First Nations colleagues and students to our academy. For those of you who don't know me I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. I resolutely believe that we all have the right to a safe, fair and equitable workplace where an individual's gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, their background, their race, and where disability or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential.

Our faculty is certainly rich in impressive in accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo, yet they're not always represented, particularly at the senior levels and much important work is needed around gender equality and broader diversity and inclusion. I hope that these conversations highlight the various barriers women often face, challenge our systems and celebrate diversity that inspires leadership and enhances belonging within our faculty, allowing all to reach their full potential. I am delighted to be introducing **The Honourable Jaala Pulford**

Jaala is a former Australian politician who was a Labor Party member of the Victorian Parliament, representing the Western Victoria region. Jaala was Deputy Leader of the government and Victoria's first female Agriculture Minister where she oversaw significant reform including the establishment of regional partnerships and a medicinal cannabis industry. As Minister for Employment Jaala steered Jobs Victoria through the pandemic leading the government's effort to help small businesses navigate and survive the impact of lockdowns. As Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Jaala secured both Moderna and BioNTech for Melbourne, cementing a local end-to-end mRNA vaccine capability ensuring supply as well as a Research and Development hub with significant investment. Jaala has a Bachelor of Applied Management and Master of Public Policy. Before entering politics, Jaala was an organizer for the National Union of Workers, and had various roles within the Australian Labor Party for a long, long time. As a Member of Parliament, Jaala's efforts have enabled thousands of Victorians to gain work in healthcare, construction, hospitality, retail, transport and logistics, information technology and horticulture Jaala is chair of MTP Connect, the Medical Technology and Pharmaceutical Industry Growth Centre and director of the Children's Cancer Foundation. In 2023, the University of Melbourne cleverly appointed Jaala as a Vice Chancellor's fellow - we are very fortunate to have such an impressive leader within our university. So thanks so much Jaala for joining me today.

**JAALA PULFORD:** Thanks, Natalie. That's a lot! And yes, I hope that wasn't as painful for everybody else to sit through as it was for me. Lovely to be part of the university family and lovely to be with you all today I hope everyone's got a cup of tea or some lunch and ready for a chat.

**NATALIE HANNAN**: Yeah, it's always hard I think for the speakers to have to listen to me you know reel off all these amazing things so thanks for putting up with that. It’s incredibly impressive and inspiring and that's what we are hoping to achieve through this webinar series.

I was hoping to find out a little bit more about you, your story, and are you happy to tell us a bit more about where you grew up, your childhood and what drew you into a career in politics?

**JAALA PULFORD:** Thanks again Natalie, and thanks everyone for joining us. Before we get into it would like to acknowledge that I'm on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging here, but wherever else people may be joining us from and particularly want to acknowledge any First Nations people that are with us today and express well both excitement and strong support for the opportunity that Australians will be presented later in the year to fix that glaring omission in our constitution. So let's start by reflecting on that very special and important history.

A bit about me? So I grew up in Castlemaine I grew up sort of in the bush, halfway between Castlemaine and Melbourne and that was a lovely, lovely, lovely spot to grow up. You know, sometimes little kids are told to be careful of the traffic on the roads when they go out to play; we were told to be careful of falling into the gold mines; it was a lovely spot Some of the kind of more striking memories of that period are swimming in the dam or evacuating on Christmas Eve before the 1982 summer bush fires which also included Ash Wednesday some months after that Christmas Eve evacuation. But you know what little kids' reflections of things like that are that was all just very exciting. The wind changed and it was all okay but you know I sort of grew up with the realities of drought and you know in quite a sort of remote little spot albeit you know minutes or so from both Castlemaine and Melbourne and half an hour or so from Bendigo. I went to school and got talking to a group of scientists; was a straight humanities student. By the time I finished school it was an exercise in getting out of town for myself and most of my friends, so we were all on the first train to Melbourne or wherever else we went after.

Though of course with the passage of time you realize how lovely it is to grow up in a place like Castlemaine, but when you're busting to get out so that was probably a pretty well-worn path. My parents are in Trentham, so they're still in Central Victoria. I have a sister and a brother, he moved back to Castlemaine, and myy sister's family are in Melbourne's west. I went to Monash University for a bit, and was a spectacular flameout because probably I chose the wrong course. You know it was really an exercise in getting out of town rather than going to actually learn anything. NASA had the internet but regular people didn't in their homes and so I found this fabulous, fabulous traineeship and employment opportunity and it kind of left the smouldering wreck of my arts degree behind which took quite some years to remedy but yes absolutely loved returning to study a bit later on and it’s been interesting seeing things a bit from the inside of the university, recently.

Of course as a parent watching people learn remotely the last few years it's just so different. You know back then it was not particularly compatible to be working and studying. Back then, I meant like when I started my career. The ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) had a traineeship program for young union officials and some of you may remember the very charismatic Union leader, Bill Kelty. He decided that the Union movement could do with some young people and some women and some people of different cultural backgrounds if it were to remain strong and relevant. They put in place this traineeship program and it's still running. So I was in that in the first year with several other people who certainly went on to have quite senior roles and responsibilities through the Labor movement either in the Parliament or in the Union movement.

My host union was the National Union of Workers who are overwhelmingly blue collar workers, people in warehouses, poultry processing, dairy processing. Next time you go to the fridge and you pour the milk; those are the people who put that in the bottle. You know, rubber and tyre makers, fibre optic cables that are probably enabling a whole lot of us to be communicating with one another, *the people who make those* not the people who lay them. It was just an amazing experience; I spent a lot of that period being the workers compensation person and helping people navigate a very complex compensation system and wherever possible return to work and health. I loved it but during that period, the Kennett Government abolished common law rights for injured workers and it was at that point even though I'd been quite involved with the Labor Party throughout, I thought *Ooh there's a real difference here between the stuff you can do in Parliament and the stuff you can't do in Parliament* and that was just a really striking example. If there was one thing that really you know made me do something so crazy as enter Parliament with a five-year-old and a two-year-old, it was that. Then opportunity presented itself and by the opportunity presented itself I'm kind of — I was talking to Meredith who runs Pathways to Politics the other day, and I can just imagine what she would say to me ‘The opportunity didn't really present itself It's kind of like a knockdown, drag out, internal bruising battle type situation for anyone to be pre-selected and particularly for a pretty safe seat… *so the* *opportunity was taken* ‘ —and I entered the parliament in and then, time really flies right?

Many years in the parliament, eight of which I was a Minister in the Andrews government. So I was a minister from day one to the end of the first two terms of the Andrews government including some of those portfolios you mentioned and few others as well – actually nine in total. I thought it an opportunity where you are on really limited time. A point of the exercise was to create enduring reform where you could; day-to-day stuff that you always had to do. You know today's crisis, today's thing on fire, but it had to be attended to right then, here and now, but I always thought that managing the portfolio was one part of the job; it was about trying to find a way to create an enduring change.

Then, I decided that I'd put enough into all that and didn't recontest the election and now I'm having this wonderful adventure seeing what the rest of the world has to offer which has been a delightful experience.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I mean that's an incredible career and you're still so young so it's incredible to hear all the things that you're doing at the university now as well. I think how lucky we are to have that perspective and knowledge and the things that you would've had to see and fight for in your time in the government. I was really interested to see that you joined the Labor Party as a 16 year old−

**JAALA PULFORD:** Mm, I bought the average age in the Castlemaine branch down a notch and they ran an excellent carpooling system to get me home after the monthly meetings. They were excellent and very welcoming; it was just after our federal election and Bob Hawke was the Prime Minister, and it was towards the end of his term and the Australian Democrats were the centre party at the time (they held the place then that the Greens hold in the National Parliament now) but their politics was more at the centre, and they had a woman who was their leader, Janine Haines. I just thought she was so amazing, AND, she was the first woman to lead a parliamentary political party in Canberra. So my politics were always very clear to me to be labour. I just thought she was so cool and I found the whole experience of like watching that election utterly captivating so I went off and found my way into the Labor party about three months later.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** We're so lucky for that sliding door moment. Jaala, you are also known for supporting and empowering women. I look at some of the roles you've had and I think how exciting, but also perhaps sometimes daunting that you know you were the first woman in many of the roles you've taken on and we've heard about a woman you were inspired by I guess as a young person at the time, were you aware that you were blazing such an important trail?

**JAALA PULFORD:** Not really, always. My mum sort of became of age at a time when the women's rights movement was making a lot of noise and really asserting itself in a way that it hadn't ever before, so I've never really kind of hit a glass ceiling until I was well into my twenties. And then even still I'm not sure like I remember being in a debate at a young labor conference about women's representation and just thinking like, what is all this? You know like I was just really fortunate to be raised by a woman who was told growing up she could be a teacher, a nurse or a nun and that was it; they were the three options and she chose none of those but yeah I guess my sister and I were always raised with a completely different mindset and it wasn't in a kind of aggressive over the top way; it's just like, “You can do whatever you want. Look at what you want to do and you can just do it”. So when I got to parliament people would say, "Oh what's it like being in such a blokey adversarial environment?" And I was like “You should see where I came from”. Because in the Unions when I joined, in it’s hundred-year history; it was one of Australia's oldest unions (and it's the one that brought you industry superannuation in the very, very first battle for the very first clause in an award about superannuation). So you know we had a rich and very, very proud history and there were three women in the place and like the whole place and some of the leadership had decided we're best to attract some more and so I started with another woman who's still there she's now the national president of the organisation and three others came along about a year later. But it was you know like when they said, okay we're in the office you know first day you know what do we wear? And the answer to the dress code question was’ jacket and tie for the blokes, and women, you work it out’, like the question had genuinely never been asked before. So you know, we were a novelty at the time.

By the time I got to Parliament, the Labor Party had changed its rules around women's representation and the Victorian Parliament in its years, when I was elected I actually looked this up and put this in my statement when I retired. Now I'm wishing I could remember exactly the number. When I was elected in the entire history of the Victorian Parliament there were few women who'd ever been elected, and the batch that I went in with kind of really kicked that up a notch and now it's really completely unremarkable.

In fact, I saw in the news today the new government in New South Wales has a cabinet that's half and half (gender representation). From a gender point of view, that looks like society but of course you know I think everybody recognises some people with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds are still quite significantly underrepresented, and then Indigenous people are still quite significantly underrepresented as are people with a disability. You know when you look at the statistical evidence is that the incidence of disability relative to the involvement in our elected representative forums of people with a disability is so low, and I think they probably could like claim to being the most underrepresented group of people in our Parliaments these days.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Similarly, here in the faculty. That's why we are you know trying to talk about this and why it’s important to have many different types of lived experience in the academy and in our workforce so that we can be innovative and think differently and make sure we're not leaving anyone behind.

I was thinking a bit about the last few years in Victoria in regard to your career. I'm just thinking, how did you navigate such an important leadership role in such a turbulent time? I'm looking towards the bold leadership in securing Moderna and BioNTech in that time you know how did you navigate this incredibly full on leadership role?

**JAALA PULFORD:** I think one of the more interesting things that I learnt when I did the Masters of Health in Policy and Politics, was around windows of opportunity. It was the first subject in the first year and I thought, *what a funny idea this is* but there were some amazing windows of opportunity right? We all think about what an awful period it was worrying about loved ones, particularly those with health vulnerability, people trying to work with kids on their laps, cats doing laps around their screens. You know, just insane right? Those of us with the relatively zen existence of working from home, like never mind the people delivering the food to the supermarkets, or the people in the health system actually turning up and risking you know serious illness pre-vaccination like every day — I find that leadership hard to wrap my head around — so it was interesting for government I think you know the thing about people in politics is —I can say this now 'cause like I'm sort of rehabilitating from it — is like there's a tendency to kind of overly dwell on the relevance that we have to everyone but at that time the politicians had a high level of relevance to everyone, right?

You’re funding for roads and schools and hospitals and national security and what the national economy is doing and you know whether your council picks up glass when they do their recycling, and you know like the things that government do and all the people who work on it and choose to be in that, it's like ‘this is the most important thing going on ever anywhere’. Of course for most of the time, other than when it's specifically kind of intersecting with your life or your work, you have people worry about it and not think about it too much. So what was fascinating to see was that suddenly government became very important to the lives of everyone, and relevant to the lives of everyone, and that brought with it a phenomenal responsibility.

You know you would've seen on the telly we all aged five years, but you know, such an interesting set of opportunities to do good things. There was quite a big reshuffle. The Premier moved a lot of the roles and jobs around and things in June 2020. It was literally the weekend after the first lockdown and before the next one, and I picked up Small Business and Employment and Medical Research, Digital Innovation. In that reshuffle I was in Roads before so we were all like on the phone to the feds all the time and the other States trying to keep the trucks moving so that the supermarkets would be stocked so that people could at least have what they need but also be calm so the basics were getting covered. Anyway so these new roles came my way, and during that period we started new small business programs. Now that would normally never happen right? That was like two decades worth of new small business programs. We tried things like mental health resilience training, digital adaptation, we changed the laws around commercial tenancy relief. It was an amazing period for creative problem solving. In the employment portfolio we took on employment programs focused on helping people at risk of long-term, like seriously long-term unemployment, and we were able to take it to scale and affect a kind of sixfold increase, like tens of thousands of people were put into employment through this program. So that was an amazing opportunity.

The pursuit of the mRNA capability was likewise you know like the Victorian government for years have been investing heavily in medical research and then all the industries that come with that — in terms of adaptation, translation — and we are as a State, undeniably in the top three places in the world for this, so we had a really strong foundation to build on.

I remember talking to the Treasurer pretty early on when we were all reading these articles about the people from BioNTech and what they were doing at Moderna literally as the company was being stood up. We decided that bringing that technological platform together with our existing research capability with cancer and genomics and you know paediatrics and all kinds of things, that we could do something quite extraordinary and something special, and so Moderna were expanding to six places in the world and we were quite determined that Melbourne would be one of those. It was a long and exhausting negotiation for the people involved. The day we turned up to do the big signing ceremony and announcement, there was the most amazing room full of lawyers and finance people, and they all hadn't slept for six months! They were completely, destroyed, but it was a great outcome for the State.

Similarly you know the BioNTech partnership will be about population scale, not pandemic scale, as a vaccine manufacturer, but distinctly different as it’s about clinical trial scale manufacturing. In all those discussions it was never about getting the amazing shiny people from somewhere else and just plonking them here. It was always about, ‘Here is the capability that we have in this regard in Melbourne and across Victoria, but in Melbourne in particular in the Parkville precinct and the Clayton precinct, and you guys don't want to be anywhere in the world other than this …’ We had dinner with the BioNTech folks the week that they came here, and they'd been zipping around Parkville all day, and you know they sort of wandered into dinner all frightfully jet lagged having been up for days and they just said ‘This is unbelievable. I mean there’s nothing like this in Germany!’

And you know, the Moderna folks were sort of similarly complimentary. We made a conscious decision to pursue that, and make the most of the fact that we had this awful pandemic happening with these horrible consequences for people, to find some good in it.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** It's pretty incredible though even you know it could have gone another way and I think the way it's gone is so great for Victoria and as you say for the medical research sector in Melbourne, I think such great things to still come as well. That's the thing it's that lasting impact of some of these big decisions which may not have occurred in a different time and you had to move and strike while the iron was hot—

**JAALA PULFORD:** And then the cause of all of that, because of that history and that extraordinary capability that exists you know we were able to build in the Infectious Diseases Institute, which is advancing really fast and the capability that's been built at the Doherty. So when Geoffrey Cumming decided he was going to divest himself a very large amount of money and was looking for the best cause in the world and the best place in the world to do that; in he walked.

I think there's been a couple of periods in Victoria's history where there have been things that contribute to a step change. I think that what we've laid down in the last couple of years is sum of all of those parts that will really be quite something. And you know, the new federal government has a deep commitment to science, so you know technological adaptation and industry development as well as for our education sector and research community. Whilst I think you know budgets will be tight for governments for a while as you would expect, we've got a really deep commitment at state and national level to these things.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** We watch and hope that there'll be an increase in the funding but also I think it's more about the bringing together all the people as you mentioned like these are the experts, and there's a lot of connected and really amazing researchers in this space so yeah I think it's an exciting time. I'm thinking about other leadership things that you've done and what you are doing now. As I mentioned we're really lucky to have you join us as a Vice Chancellor's fellow, but you've also recently taken on a very important position on the Children's Cancer Foundation Board as a Director.

I know you've been involved with the foundation for quite some time now for your leadership, but this work probably started for you for more personal reasons, you know and as a parent who was impacted by your own daughter who had childhood cancer, Sinéad. Are you happy to tell us about this incredible work that you're doing with the Children's Cancer Foundation?

**JAALA PULFORD:** Thanks Natalie and thank you for warning me before that we might talk about this because it takes a little bit of mental preparation. My daughter Sinéad had a lump in her tummy, and we took her to the Royal Children's Hospital - twice we went to the hospital’s emergency department and both times they said, "Oh, please come in, we've been expecting you". Those words you never want to hear from the emergency department at the children's hospital, it's so much better to be told you must wait three hours.

And Sinéad was admitted for you know days of testing that really not, said anything like what she had before, and you know that anyway she was discharged and then you know within hours back in there for another three weeks or so, until they got the pain management right But her care was, well her cancer was exceptionally advanced when it was found and she died weeks after she found the lump in her tummy. Sinead was excellent, vivacious, unicycle riding, outgoing, gorgeous, girl.

The intersection between her death and our grief and my work, has kind of popped its head up in a few different ways at a few different times. First during the debate around voluntary euthanasia, which I would stress was never ever about children, but it did get into the debate around why can't we just have palliative care instead? So I told Sinéad's story publicly then. A little passion project that my husband and I were involved in to help our beloved friends at Ballarat Hospice who cared for Sinéad at home for the second and third month of her illness. We helped them with their accommodation project, and they have beautiful new digs that was a special kind of grief project.

But the Children's Cancer Foundation folks had reached out a couple of ways through friends of friends type connections and then when they were just looking for some advice, they wanted to kind of check what they were being told by government with somebody who would be you know on their side but understand the government bit and so I did get to learn a bit about the foundation. They've been going for a few decades now, founded by three families ; basically a parents run group not entirely but substantially a parents run group They've built some amazing partnerships and have become quite the fundraising machine The last thing I did with them was when I was the Minister before I'd announced that I was leaving, was they came to me and said, "We've got a million dollars and you know we think the Victorian government should match it" And I said to them, ‘how about let's kind of do it this way instead rather than, we've got million dollars do you reckon you guys can come up with million dollars I said to them, Why don't we work out well what we want to achieve, and then work out what it'll cost". Because years of experience has told me that that was probably going to be a more effective path and of course the election was barrelling down and you know the financial year decision time was when we had that conversation.

Anyway so we got all the partners at the VPPC in a room and said, "Hey this why we're not very good at this" Like we're world-leading in cancer research and we are world-leading in paediatrics and genomics and like we're just not very good at *this* well we're not very good at this and everybody looked at their shoes and said, "Yes we probably could be a lot better at this". One of the problems obviously with improving outcomes for children's cancer is the research input and you just don't have the scale, which is of course a good thing, as the last thing you would want is to have a whole lot of kids with cancer to be running you know your clinical trials on, but we just don't have the scale in this country, which is obviously a good thing and also a bad thing,

So everybody went away for a few weeks and they came back and they had the department kind of helped support the putting together of that plan and they came back and said it would cost like a million dollars. It was a compelling plan so I took it to my colleagues who were very supportive of it and the Premier and I announced it on the Sunday before the Friday that I announced that I was leaving. So now I have the shoe on the other foot, now I'm helping CCF with the implementation of that. It's lovely and it'll be lovely to see the government deliver that as I know that they're absolutely determined to do so.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah absolutely. Sometimes we know they're the right thing to do and we know they're important but if we don't put the right structure or framework around it you know there could be that missed opportunity. What this was for you, and right before you stepped down, I think what an incredible piece of work that will have long lasting impact for many children and their families. I think that's the important thing - as a parent it's what you never want to have to go through - but to see that there's things that will be in hopefully shift that dial and to change those numbers.

**JAALA PULFORD:** When you talk about shifting the dial, the Pfizer and Victorian public service who heads up mRNA Victoria staffer completely infected me with that expression. He was always like; we're doing this because *we can shift the dial* and it's like you know, you do the things that *can* *shift the dial*. I remember at the time when we were putting that together - let's not work backwards from the ‘Take this dollar and match it with another dollar’. Let's work backwards from this ‘Will it shift the dial?’ approach. So when I was advocating for it in government, I could say like we have had all these amazing experts like *the infrastructure,* the structure between them not the capability of them individually or collectively but they're bits that kind of make it all work together properly. Where are the bits that were a bit lacking? And you know there are different partners in that consortium and everyone's really committed to it but everyone else has other things they're doing So this is about kind of you helping everyone focus on that together. Our guiding principle was, what will shift the dial?

And so I remain hopeful that we might do that.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** If anything will this will particularly for those rare diseases and things as you say there's just not the scale, and I reflect back to my own circumstances where my first child had a very rare congenital heart defect and the surgery to correct this was so young they hadn't you know it was lethal at birth, these babies would die, and when we think about the fact that they had to get the scale of the children to be able to do these surgeries on there was many, many failed attempts on these tiny babies with hearts the size of strawberries. I just feel so grateful for leaders who have changed the whole landscape of trying to think outside the box and with that mindset we've just got to shift the dial We've got to try and make sure that more of those babies go home.

**JAALA PULFORD:** Absolutely and that's just the most you horrific thing. A lot of people watching listening will have little kids in their lives whether as parents, or as you know aunties and uncles, or you know little siblings and you know it's just the worst right? It makes your blood chill to think that something bad's going to happen to one of your little people, so having that inquiry and determination to find new things and discover new things and then implement them is just; it's so inspiring to me.

When I was the Agriculture Minister, I thought *I'm never going to love a job in my life as much as this*. It’s not in any way to diminish any of the other roles I had but you know employment through the pandemic was so, so special and yeah I've had a few people say to me, "Oh it's cool that you're sticking around in this whole Meditech area". You guys were never getting rid of me (laughs)

It's that perfect intersection of creativity and ambition and humanity. You meet people working in the sector and you know you scratch the surface and they've generally got a really kind of quite extraordinary personal reason for why they dedicate their life to chasing that particular question, that particular answer to that very particular question. It's just super exciting.

And also you know it's this kind of powerhouse of our economy and it's something there's someone we can be really, really proud of. You know that day that Geoff Cumming came and made his commitment, it was Parliament Day and it was completely frantic, go to this media event and then still be at Parliament in the morning and the Premier had been there and you know and Mr Cumming had been there and you know Sharon and Duncan and everyone were really great…

I went back to parliament and he'd been on the radio all morning and people like, oh my God what is this? I kept saying to them, we've been telling you this is like really world-leading its a world leading destination for this you know this kind of capability. I wasn't just making this up, and it just didn't happen overnight either. It's because of the science, it's because of the university and it's because of all the institutes around it. Monash as well and all of the industry and institutes around them, and you know I mean that's not in any way to diminish things that go on places like La Trobe and Deakin universities, and you know even here in Ballarat my hometown where there's quite a lot of clinical trial activity going on - you know it all adds up to be this quite extraordinary powerful thing.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** And, the web and the networks of the hospitals and all the other things around, so yeah incredible. Thank you again so much for joining all of us and for your generosity in the conversation today.

**JAALA PULFORD:** It was a pleasure.