



PROFILE

Jeannette McHugh

It was a curious sight: forty conservative professionals cheering Jeannette McHugh at their annual dinner in 1983. One man, puzzled to find himself agreeing with her, bemused at finding he liked her, exclaimed to McHugh, his new local MP: "But you're on the Left!" "Yes," she answered, "but what does that mean?"

"I stand for child care. Is that so controversial?" She'd opposed Vietnam—how many people today believed that was a just war? She was against uranium mining and nuclear power—was that so subversive? Since the moratorium protests which brought her into the ALP in 1967, Jeannette McHugh, 57, has always been an 'issues' politician. It's not that she can't play the factional games that characterise the ALP—when Graham Richardson resigned over the Marshall Islands affair, McHugh withstood pressure from both the Right and her own faction to take the vacant spot in the ministry. She just doesn't relish them the way some do.

Perhaps that has something to do with her popularity. In the seat of Phillip in Sydney's eastern suburbs, abolished at the last redistribution, McHugh has practised a style of politics more often associated with Independents than the Labor Party. Phillip was a 'weathervane' seat when McHugh won it in 1983—the first woman from NSW ever elected

to the federal parliament. It had always been marginal and whichever party gained Phillip could be sure of governing. She made it safe for Labor, blitzing a challenge in 1990 from the far-right Liberal candidate Charles Copeman. The two-party preferred swing of 1.15% to McHugh contrasted with a national swing against the ALP of 5.6%.

Labor strategists in the branches explain her success by her commitment to grassroots issues, hooking into residential and environment movements and practising the sort of local democracy which the NSW ALP Right seems to have forgotten.

"When I was first elected, people said I wouldn't hold the seat because I was a woman," says McHugh. "They said I'd never get support in the clubs, the pubs, the sporting clubs." McHugh networked frantically attending every dinner of every club and association, and gained a reputation as a good local member.



After McHugh nominated for the ministry in June, some Labor MPs expressed concern that she was too outspoken—they said her tongue could be a liability in the lead-up to an election. Her response to that was that her portfolio [Consumer Affairs] is "one with which I have no ideological difficulties at all." One Left MP is said to have called her the 'Minister for Housewives'—a patronising

comment which McHugh is willing to interpret as "an acknowledgment that women are mostly responsible for household budgets and finances". She should know. Before entering federal parliament at 47, McHugh spent 23 years in unpaid work at home, raising three children.

"I spent all day with the kids. I was a very isolated housewife," she says, recalling her early days in a semi-detached house in North Bondi. McHugh had excelled at high school, gone on to Sydney University and became a teacher of French and German. She relinquished her job while her husband Justice Michael McHugh forged a successful career as a barrister. This experience has strengthened McHugh's belief that society should reward women for their unpaid work through better child care, housing, health, education and public transport.

Ask McHugh to nominate the major influences on her world view, however, and she'll probably talk about Vietnam and BHP. When she grew up in the shadow of Newcastle's steel mills—the daughter of two Labor-voting school teachers, the granddaughter of miners—BHP owned the private road at the top of her street. "I am still offended by that," she says, "because a road is something that you can't imagine is more common to everyone. I never walked down it in my life." She's sorely miffed that the Greiner government in NSW has introduced private tollways.

But she maintains that most of the issues she has fought for since the 1960s are now accepted by the mainstream. "Look at women," she says, "or the environment. It's not many years ago that, if you were described as a greenie, you were seen as being on the ratbag fringe. I think it's fair to say that the positions I have endorsed have taken a long time to get accepted in the party and in society generally."

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