Sallyanne Atkinson

She was poised, Sallyanne Atkinson - if the timing should ever be right - to become Australia's first female premier. Alas, that ambition can be no more for Brisbane's fragrant Lord Mayor, doyen of those who like their politics dry and their women pearl-ed and in twin-sets.

With Dr Carmen Lawrence having the premiership of Western Australia fall into her lap as the purge of WA Inc continues post-Bourke and now post-Dowding, Atkinson, it would appear, will just have to re-adjust the aim of The Ten Year Plan a smidgen - and head for Canberra, not George Street.

Not that she has an agenda or a career plan: there is no forward planning nor does she make many decisions about her life. In fact, she says she is rather opportunistic about it all. But first female prime minister of Australia would be nice, wouldn't it?

Atkinson's popularity is unquestionable up north. A poll taken just before the last state election indicated that the Liberal vote would soar by 50% if she, and not Angus Innes, was heading the parliamentary party.

This 47-year-old recently separated Catholic mother of five took over at City Hall in 1985, ending 24 years of Labor rule. At the last election she clocked 60% of the vote. Take away the Liberal endorsement and she would still beat everyone else home as an independent. The loves, as she calls the citizens of Brisbane, "my people", just adore her.

She has given them Expo and is at the forefront of the campaign to rid their fair city of the dreaded cane toad. They might have missed out on two Olympic bids (first to Barcelona then to Melbourne) but there will be others and Atkinson will be there for them, resplendent in gold suit with green trim, flying the flag on their behalf. She's like that.

Atkinson, in return for this adulation from the masses, "looks after people's future", heading the country's biggest and highest profile city council with shoulder pads that, like her hair, are never out of place.

In recent times she has been under increasing pressure to do the right thing by the party: turn in the key to the city of Brisbane and move to the state or federal sphere and win votes where they count.

The pressure has no doubt forced her to seek solace from her worry beads, a bowl of semi-precious stones and sea shells she keeps on her desk to finger with eyes closed at the start of each day, because "their shapes, colour and texture are soothing and calming. They help keep things in perspective by keeping us in touch with the earth."

Salt of the earth, is Atkinson. She walks by the Brisbane river for thirty minutes each morning in order to offset all those power breakfasts, lunches and dinners she has to attend.

The opportunity to lead the Queensland Liberals into the last state election slipped from her dainty grasp because nothing - bar the most unladylike use of political force - would have removed Angus Innes from the post. And she thinks he is a good man; she just couldn't do that to him.

She may end up being the Liberal's most popular, and longest serving, wallflower. The opportunity to go federal, with its lures of a promised cabinet post and maybe, just maybe, the chance to become Australia's first female prime minister evaporated, for the time being, in early February.

On the eve of a preselection deadline for the safe Gold Coast seat of McPherson, Andrew Peacock is alleged to have renewed his advances to Atkinson during a Liberal function in Brisbane. She demurred, claiming there was still just so much to do with her people, for her people.

But in Canberra, senior Peacock minders were a little amused by the headlines blazing across the front page of the Courier Mail, the day after the lunch: "Peacock Offer to Sallyanne - Mayor Asked To Take On Cabinet Post"; and the story's claim that Peacock had been "surprised" by the knockback.

The more cynical in the Liberal camp in Canberra were left wondering just why Atkinson was there in print the next day speaking of how flattered she was by the offer; how it was all a matter of timing; but gee, all this speculation about her future and the pressure from the party was making being Lord Mayor "extremely difficult".

And then there she was, popping up on prominent radio spots all over the place saying things like: "I get very frustrated in my job because we have all these wonderful, marvellous solid and important things here in Brisbane but nobody wants to know about them. And now something like this which is fairly hypothetical, you know, we hit the front pages. Anyhow, that's life I guess."

An unplanned life, of course.