

JOAN KIRNER

Joan Kirner, AM, BA, Dip Ed, FACE, was born in Melbourne on 20 June 1938. Her parents believed that she should have the opportunity of a good education and Joan attended Penleigh Presbyterian Girls Schools and the University High School, Melbourne. Joan graduated from the University of Melbourne and began her teaching career in Ballarat in the late 1950s.

Joan and Ray Kirner were married on 14 January 1960. They have two sons and a daughter. The education of their children started Joan on her political career, and her life-long commitment to community activism. She was horrified when her elder son started school in a class of thirty-four children and was determined to improve conditions in schools for the children, the teachers and the parents.

Working initially through her children's school's mothers' club, Joan was alarmed to find that the club seem preoccupied with cake-baking and the bust sizes of girls' school uniforms, and limited its role to working only through the school principal or, as she put it, 'serving the decision-makers, rather than being part of the decision'. She felt that a more active role was necessary to enable parents to be decision-makers in education. Joan believed that a total education system should deliver for children competency, power, the feeling of belonging and the feeling of usefulness. She also worked hard to ensure that handicapped children were not disadvantaged in the school system.

Through various parent organizations, Joan lobbied Ministers and other politicians. The establishment of the Australian Schools Commission by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s was an important step. Joan was appointed to be the representative of parent organizations on the Commission in 1979.

In 1975, Joan was the first woman to be elected as President of the Australian Council of State School Organisations. She maintained her belief that parents should renew their efforts to 'identify and make known the needs of children in schools'. In March 1977, after five years as President of the Victorian Federation of State School Parents Clubs, Joan Kirner delivered her final address, 'But I'm only a Mum: Sub-title – On deleting the word 'only'.

It is perhaps no accident that she quoted from Thomas Mann in this speech: 'The friend of humanity cannot recognize a distinction between what is political and what is not. There is nothing that is not political'. In this address, Joan stated her belief in decentralized and collaborative decision-making. She also believed in not working in isolation, and in using her extensive networks.

Joan Kirner entered the Victorian Parliament as the Labor member for Melbourne West in 1982. In the first few years, she worked on a number of committees such as the Parliamentary Committee on Social Development, the Ministerial Inquiry into education services for the disabled and the School Improvement Working Party.

She became a Minister in 1985. Her first portfolio, Conservation, Forests and Lands, thrust her into an area where she had little background knowledge, apart from a personal interest in National Parks and environmental conservation. Her previous work with parents' organizations stood her in good stead on several occasions. On one trip to look at the problem of salinity in farming lands, she met a farmer who had been active in school organizations and was able to tap into farmers' perceptions of the problem and the solution. From this chance encounter, a catchment level approach to salinity developed and, with it, the community-based Land Care movement.

Joan achieved her goal of becoming Minister for Education in 1988, the same year as she transferred to the seat of Williamstown which she represented until 1994. Joan Kirner became Deputy-Premier in 1998, and Premier in 1990. These were difficult years in Victoria, and Labor lost the 1992 election. After a short period as Leader of the Opposition and shadow Minister for Women's Affairs and Ethnic Affairs, Joan Kirner retired from Parliament in 1994, and resumed a very active role in community affairs, while maintaining an active commitment to political causes. She was both Deputy-President and President of the ALP in the early 1990s.

A wide variety of community bodies absorbed a great deal of her time. These included the Salvation Army's Crossroads, and the boards of the Playbox Theatre, the Melbourne Cricket Ground Trust, the Women's Circus, which appointed her its Patron in 1995, the Living Museum of the West, and the Evatt Foundation.

Enabling talented women to enter politics has, however, been a consuming interest. She was co-founder of Emily's List in 1996. Emily's List is a financial, political and personal support network for progressive Labor women candidates. The acronym, Emily, stands for Early Money is Like Yeast – it makes the dough rise. Early money gives Parliamentary candidates a very important advantage in campaigning. In its first five years, Emily's List helped sixty-eight women to be elected to parliaments around Australia. They included Carol Martin, the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to an Australian parliament, and Clare Martin, recently elected Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. Emily's list also contributed \$350,000 to Labor women's electoral campaigns and has commissioned gender gap research into the ways government can meet the needs of women.

Joan Kirner continues to give much of her personal time as a mentor for women in a variety of spheres, particularly politics, and has published *The Women's Power Handbook*, with her biographer, Moira Rayner¹.

¹ *Who's Who Australia 1999*; interview with Joan Kirner, Melbourne, February 2002; *Contemporary Australian women*, 1996-7; J Kirner & M Rayner, *The women's power handbook*, 'But I'm only a Mum: Sub-title: on deleting the word 'only'', Presidential address, Victorian Federation of State School Parents Clubs, March 1977.