

FEATHER IN HER CAPP: ALUMNI MATTERS 2019

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There has been much conjecture about how the very concept of work is changing and what our working lives may look like in the future. Becoming Lord Mayor meant Sally Capp had to consider not only the future of her own working life but also that of the thousands of citizens she represents.

For Sally Capp, becoming the 104th Lord Mayor of Melbourne was not something she had ever contemplated. The first woman to be directly elected to the role and only the third to take office in 176 years (after Lecki Ord in 1987-88 and Winsome McCaughey in 1988-89), the former lawyer and self-professed “fiercely loyal Melburnian” took on the job in May 2018. “I often look back and think ‘what was I thinking?’ because it was never in my life plan,” she says.

The catalyst was the ignominious resignation of Sally’s immediate predecessor, Robert Doyle, which led to a series of late-night conversations with husband Andrew Sutherland regarding the leadership of their home city.

“I have always been someone who enjoys championing causes and the fact that there appeared to be this deterioration of respect for the role was really concerning,” she recalls. “We looked at each other and thought, if we feel that strongly about it, why don’t we put our hand up?”

What followed was the steepest of learning curves, which began with her favourite part – visiting Officeworks, to buy butcher’s paper, coloured pens and everything needed to construct a campaign, something she had never done before. An unaffiliated independent, she ran under the promise of “purpose and people, not politics” and vowed to be a Lord Mayor for all of Melbourne, not specific interest groups. This declaration clearly resonated with a populace that voted her in with a hefty 25 percent of the ballot before the distribution of preferences (and 53 percent afterwards).

This particular role may have been new to her, but Sally is no stranger to breaking fresh ground and ticking off firsts. She was the first woman to hold the London-based role of Agent-General for Victoria and the first elected to the board of the Collingwood Football Club, a team that holds her heart. Her former roles are as diverse as the CEO of the Committee for Melbourne, Executive Director of the Property Council of Australia and COO of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. She has held senior positions at KPMG and ANZ and sat on numerous boards, including the Melbourne University Faculty of Business and Economics and the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute.

“I know it looks like I have moved around a lot,” she says of her remarkable resumé, “but it’s very much having my mind and heart open to that serendipity of opportunity.”

Sally talks about the importance of asking the right questions and this is a skill she utilised throughout her initial bid for the mayoral role. But what she wasn’t prepared for was the depth of scrutiny and barrage of criticism people can face when campaigning for public office. “People make a lot of assumptions about you and those assumptions come at you with an energy that makes it almost tangible... when you go to the ‘meet the candidate’ nights you are confronted with people that hate you,” she recalls, still clearly unsettled by the experience.

But there was a lesson in this, says Sally, who has now promised herself to never fall into the same trap. “When I find myself doing it, particularly in important situations, I take myself back to the place where I felt so confronted by the fact that people had already made a decision about me. I reorient myself to ask more questions and ensure I don’t make those assumptions.”

This determination to keep asking, to gather evidence and to remain curious goes back to her experiences as a lawyer. “Testing that evidence and, frankly, my whole attitude to barriers, moving around barriers, over barriers, under barriers, whatever is required to keep moving forward, a lot of those skills were absolutely honed during my time at Herbert Smith Freehills,” she says. “Also, I’m not intimidated by detail, I’m not intimidated by regulation; I’m perfectly comfortable with contracts and things that look legalistic or complicated. I have a comfort level as a result of all those years of diving into that stuff.”

She is also comfortable with collaboration and negotiation, both vital skills for someone leading a city council – the local tier of Australian government. Because no matter the profile of the position, it’s only really through its collaboration with government at the state level that many decisions can be made. Local government, however, has a grass roots element that is unique, says Sally. “While I recognise absolutely that the state government in particular has the most levers in relation to how to create change and be able to make decisions in a local context, the fact is that local government plays an incredibly important role in how all of that gets managed. And we do that because we are so closely connected to community – to be able to harness that energy and those voices. When we do it well, it works really well, and when we don’t do it well, we are told immediately.”

One of the pivotal areas of engagement is population growth and jobs. “Melbourne is one of the fastest growing cities in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) – for the first time since the 1850s gold rush – and the state capital needs to evolve to cope, while not losing sight of its heart and spirit,” says Sally.

“Melbourne will overtake Sydney’s population within the next 10 years,” she says. “We need to ensure that we always stay a city for people. Even as we grow and rely more on technology, we need to remain caring. The economics are important, but our values will equally determine our success. A focus on a city that is caring and liveable for everyone also helps us engage and attract a generation interested in social good. A thriving, global city needs to include all types of workers and diverse communities to make it truly great. Our city is home to people from 200 different countries. We consider this a great strength.”

Knowledge sector

“We know from the evidence that the number one reason people are coming to Victoria and Greater Melbourne is jobs,” she continues, adding that what the employment landscape will look like in the future is changing rapidly. “I guess it’s the lawyer in me, but I love to go to evidence, and the way in which the economy, just in the city of Melbourne, has changed over decades has been extraordinary. We used to have a whole industrial zone on the River Yarra. We had manufacturing based in the city of Melbourne. That has completely transformed into what is now a knowledge sector driver for our city economy.

“The knowledge sector and associated professions is almost two-thirds of our economy,” she adds. “Our city’s economy has gone through significant change and Melbourne is now a well-established leader in knowledge-based industries and advanced manufacturing. “We contribute more than \$95 billion to the national economy annually. This means there is greater demand for highly skilled knowledge workers, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Our knowledge economy has driven our investment, with the State Government, in start-ups. We know that is important to foster an ecosystem to help young entrepreneurs succeed.”

The Council has implemented a number of initiatives to make this happen, such as a scheme to bring together some of the brightest minds around, via Melbourne Innovation Districts (MID). The City-North segment is an area that includes the central campuses of RMIT University and the University of Melbourne, the State Library of Victoria, Queen Victoria Market, the Royal Exhibition Building, Trades Hall and the Melbourne Museum as well as the Parkville medical precinct).

“The area is home to 21 percent (60,260) of all knowledge sector jobs in Melbourne,” says Sally. “The partners in the Melbourne Innovation Districts will collaborate to bring research and development activities out of their institutions to enhance innovation in people’s lives and in the operation of businesses and organisations.”

The Council also offers small business grants, for such fledgling enterprises as the successful KeepCup campaign and the grassroots campaign to encourage young women to get into coding, Code Like a Girl, while also working with community organisations and helping them with internships or apprenticeships and connecting them into employment organisations.

Then there is the annual 10-day 'knowledge week', "which is about showcasing our knowledge sector in terms of transitioning research into how people can operate more efficiently, operate their businesses more efficiently or gain more productivity – to understand what the future of work and the future of cities looks like, so that they can adjust."

Innovation

The future of work is in new ideas and fresh thinking, particularly from the next generation, believes Sally.

"Innovation and research are highly valued and that helps attract more than 50,000 overseas tertiary student residents to live in our city. We have benchmarked our city against other highly active start-up and research and development cities and we are developing well. Our next challenge is to 'scale up' to successfully commercialise and grow our start-ups."

Sally says another driver of population growth in Melbourne is its smart city initiatives and embrace of future-focused technologies. "The City of Melbourne has a Smart City office and we're harnessing technology to respond to growth," she explains. "Smart technology is being used throughout the city to help make Melbourne better: whether it's saving water, saving energy, enhancing pedestrian movement, easing congestion, cutting waste or finding a car park easily. We are taking a smart city approach to improve safety, productivity and amenity in our city.

"For example, we've installed nearly 400 solar smart bins across the central city. This has reduced bin collections by 85 percent.

"We've switched more than 11,000 street lights to energy efficient LEDs, which will help slash operating costs by more than \$1 million a year. And, we're proud to be using energy from the Crowlands 80-megawatt wind farm near Ararat to power our streetlights, recreation centres, libraries and town halls."

Tip of the iceberg

Sally describes her various responsibilities as tentacle-like, requiring much more investment and involvement than what may be immediately obvious on the surface. "I didn't really appreciate the depth and breadth of what local government gets involved in," says Sally. "In the number of programmes that we have to support, from people being able to access training and upskilling... to forums on how smaller businesses can improve their social media and marketing platforms."

Apart from looking after the interests and future prospects of Melburnians, there's also the whole tourism sector to consider. With unprecedented growth in this area and record numbers of visitors, as an industry it also offers increasing employment opportunities now and into the future.

When Sally decided to throw her hat in the ring for Lord Mayor of Melbourne in the summer of 2017, she genuinely had no idea what she was letting herself in for. "I was only ever seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of what local government does, how involved it is with the local community, how strategic it is in terms of future planning and, now that I've been able to peer inside, that sense of tentacles and depth and breadth... it really has taken me by surprise, but delightful surprise.

"It's been full-on and fabulous," she concludes. "It's been everything I thought it might be on steroids and so much more."