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TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

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Thank you for those very warm words of introduction, which are incredibly flattering. I rather suspect I must have written that bio myself. I don't recognise the person described there, but it is a great honour to be invited to join you. And I hope I can add some value and embellish the occasion. And I'm very open to questions.

I discussed with you before the event that I felt somewhat unqualified on a number of fronts. Just to be explicit I, on this day nine years ago, was still living as a male, functioning fully as a male and an army officer. And the summer of 2011 and 2012 was incredibly challenging for me. I went to the brink of suicide. I hope that doesn't distress anyone, but if, obviously, the normal warnings accompany that, that if that raises stuff for you, talk to someone about it. But it's impossible for me not to be seriously honest about what happened to me.

And I got through that summer, barely, writing a book about the Indian tour of Australia. And on Australia Day 2012 it was gazetted that I'd been awarded a Member of the Order of Australia and Ricky Ponting and I received a standing ovation in the middle of the Adelaide Oval. And on what should have been the happiest and probably most fulfilling day of my life, I had both the means and the intention of ending my life with an overdose in an Adelaide hotel that evening, and by strange dent of circumstances or coincidences, people were put in my path who diverted me on that occasion.

And looking back on it with hindsight, I can see the lighter side of it. I ended up having dinner with a couple of crazy filmmakers from the UK who were making a documentary series. And the topic of my book about the future of global cricket and the Indian Premier League and the growth of India as a financial superpower were topics dear to all of us. They prevailed on me to go to dinner with them. And I very coincidentally met a man called Rahul Dravid, who's since been an inspiration and a part of my life.

That story was documented in the play as well. And I can say at my own expense, I found out by default, when I did an event for the Australian Stock Exchange a while back, that there are only apparently three living Australians, who've been the subject of plays during their lifetime. One's Paul Keating, I'm another and the other one's a dear mate, Shane Warne. And I tried to work out what the common factor was amongst the three of us. And I did work for Paul during the 1987 election campaign and had a bit to do with him when I was an official in the New South Wales Labor Party. Warne, I obviously know quite well also. And I thought perhaps the common factor in the end was, other than me, Warne is probably the worst bottle blonde with the most expensive Botox on the world cricket circuit. And that provided the common link for those three theatrical forays. But it's a serious topic in the sense that a caveat is expressed because I don't claim the title 'woman'. I am always delighted to be invited to a forum for women run by women.

But my leadership experience was very much characterised by incredible networks that only men can assemble. I lived to the age of 56, fully functioning as a male. I'm nearly 65 now, and only since June, 2012, have I been fully living as a woman. So I don't claim the term 'woman'. I don't want to buy into the culture wars. There's a huge fight between trans activists and gender critical feminists. I'll leave them to sort that out amongst themselves, but I don't lightly demand to be treated. I function socially as a woman, but I define as transgender or transsexual. And that's, just in my view, truth in advertising.

So any hints I give on leadership need to be heavily caveated with the fact that I did have a very different career to most women and equal pay for equal work was never an issue for me because I joined an organisation, thankfully, where rank always carried increments. And every person in the Australian Army knew what every other person was paid because the data was tabulated. And whether you were male, female, or in my case, transgender, the salary never changed. And so that argument about disparity and earning has never been an issue for me.

That's not to say I haven't faced some challenges and they've been internal and distressing, and it's been a quite challenging period since I transitioned. And I can't get up here and give you a how to, and I can't cavort about the stage like an Anthony Robbins and leave you or motivated and raring to go. But I hope I can share some wisdom and some optimism with you, and maybe just some points about leadership that I've observed as I've grown older. And as I've said, I'm getting old now. My career is largely behind me.

And I hope I've picked up some wisdom that is of universal applicability. I guess, so you're probably thinking, "What did we pay for? Because we're hearing someone who's now defining as neither a woman, nor a leader, nor a public sector person." And that is sort of Hilaire Belloc's description of the Holy Roman Empire, which he said was neither Holy Roman, nor an Empire. And if you want to get your refund and run for the door, I'll totally understand.

But over the course of my career, and it's by no small means a paradox that I'm talking to you today in Perth mainly from Canberra on a day when dire findings about the conduct of the special Air Service Regiment would have been finally ventilated.

And it's a day that for me is an extremely grim day when I deployed on operational service three times because of my language skills, I was often embedded with special air service operators. And it was privileged to serve alongside people for whom I had enormous regard. I've known every Commander of the Special Air Service Regiment since 1977. I've known every Special Operations Commander Australia since its inception under Duncan Lewis in 2007, right through to its current incumbent Adam Findlay. And every one of them is a close friend. So today's a day of some trauma for me. I've been aware of these allegations for some time.

And I knew about the thrust of this inquiry sometime ahead of its publication. And it's been a burden to carry because I've seen 35 year friendships trashed. I've been privy to conversations that I wish I'd never had to hear. And I've seen friends of long standing who've been Godparents to one another's children, no longer speaking to one another because of that rupture.

But I learnt some lessons even at my age about what moral courage and leadership looks like. And the person that most exemplified that is the person, probably least credited with the process that culminated yesterday. And that's a guy called Major General Jeffrey Sengelman who became disturbed by some infractions. And nothing I'm telling you is secret. It was all for those of you based in Perth, you'd probably remember some of the stories from your local press, but there were incidences of private weapons being sold from Swanbourne and connections to bikie gangs on the part of members of the regiment, some illegal arms dealing and there were instances of strippers coming to boozy parties on the base.

All of this came to his attention and he regarded it as a systemic failure of leadership by the senior people in the regiment who were not setting a decent example. And he showed enormous moral courage to assemble his team, as in the entire Special Air Service Regiment in the gymnasium at Swanbourne and he invited them to communicate directly with him and any matter that was troubling them because he considered that there was a systemic issue about both the administration, cohesion and the proper running of that organisation. And he got 209 submissions, and that is an extraordinary response. To his great credit, he gave an undertaking to every one of those soldiers that those confidences would remain with him.

So he went to the then Chief of Army and offered his resignation because he said he was in position of information which warranted criminal investigation. And he said he couldn't undertake that, or couldn't make any of the findings public without resigning because he would be breaking his word to his men. That takes a particular type of integrity that is very, very rare in modern society. And I know the man very well and we communicated in the last few days, I first met him in 1981. And I have just been in awe of the resilience shown through this process of staying the right course, leading by example, and making tough calls and having hard conversations with people whom he considered very dear friends.

And that is a case study where there's close scrutiny. And I think in coming weeks, you will read more about that. But he went to the Chief and said, "I'm very troubled by what I've learned, but I'm not willing to breach the undertaking I gave my troops." And that is how the RGADF was involved. And he said, "Please do not resign because you are indispensable. The matter will be referred to an independent authority and all of this will have to start from ground zero again so that you can maintain your pledge to your people."

A couple of things I think that are useful, and something I've noticed having now been on both sides of the gender divide, I want to make a couple of points about some leadership styles that are important I think.

A lesson that took me a time to learn is that I think leaders who are confident and have genuine competence and belief in their abilities ask questions to which they don't know the answer. I've sat in rooms and some of you probably have too, where leaders create a climate of omniscience and guru status amongst their subordinates. They play favourites and they elevate those who can agree most enthusiastically with them. And it's not conducive to fresh thinking or breakthrough thinking. And I've found only the best leaders are brave enough to say two things, I don't know, or I don't have an answer, what does the room think about a problem?

And that takes courage and integrity. It is a trait I've tended to notice more amongst females than males, now that I've had the chance to contrast both styles. Again, something that came to me late and came to me through my involvement with Cricket Australia, and I had to unlearn some behaviour. Because while my leadership style was forged in the crucible of a military college at the tail end of the Vietnam War, and I graduated into an army most of whose soldiers had been to the war, and it was very daunting to be a 21 year old kid basically commanding a combat rifle platoon, about half of whom had served in the Vietnam War. In the case of my platoon Sergeant and Corporals, all of them had been on two tours. The company Sergeant Major had been on two tours with the Australian Army training team.

These were legendary figures and we didn't have medals to establish what we call chest cred. So we were obliged really to live to an exacting standard. And Duntroon in the 1970s was a very, very tough place. The Army was an incredibly tough place and the physical and emotional demands made on us were of a type that I won't go into in detail, but I can assure you, it winnowed the wheat from the chaff. I swore and on the 14th of January 1974 to resist the Crown's enemies. That was the Australia that I was raised in and barring a disaster between now and 14 January, when I do the last post ceremony at the War Memorial, unless Meghan Markell really gets off the leash, I think I can say mission accomplished. If Her Majesty survives to that date. The one thing I've been able to do is resist the Queen's enemies unto death.

So I honoured my part of the bargain. But the leadership lessons we were taught were pithy, but they were valuable. And that was, never hesitate to seek advice. We were told by the senior Vietnam veterans, Korean veterans and World War II veterans who were our instructors at Duntroon. None of you are as smart as all of you, your NCSOs, your senior enlisted soldiers will have had combat experience, never be afraid to speak to them privately and ask advice. And it was good advice because in a hierarchical organisation, that instinct doesn't come naturally. And you knew that you had been accepted when after a period of time, and I would add this caveat, our troops had us under constant scrutiny, and it's a lesson that leaders need to remember. And I think it's often forgotten in the current climate.

We were told that we would be under observation at all times, whether in uniform or not. How we conducted ourselves privately and publicly would form an impression on our troops. So the standards that we insisted on were standards that we would be held to subconsciously by them. And you knew you'd got over a hurdle when informally the troops, when we would be deployed in the field, would call you skipper or boss, which is an Australian term of affection. And if you were something of a... If I didn't have much regard for you, they would punctiliously referred to you as Sir, right to the end of your tour. And my shoulders went down and I breathed the hardy sigh of relief when after a particularly arduous period, doing some training, someone asked me, "Skip, you fancy a cup of..." They used to call it a brew and they'd boil up some water out of a canteen, out of our ration packet, I knew that I'd got over one of the first hurdles.

So I never doubt as a leader that people don't just expect directions from you. They do expect you to adhere to values. And I don't want to engage in controversy, but I did three operational tours in harm's way, and I lived amongst my soldiers and I cherish that each time I left the flag that flew over my headquarters was presented to me with their signatures on it. And there's one in each room of my house, which I cherish to this day. They ain't Cartier watches, but hey, they do have a value of their own.

On a point on diversity, which I know having looked through the batting order today, we've got people who work in that space. I'd make a point about diversity that's important as well. It was another one that came to me slowly, given the incredibly cloistered environment in which I was trained. I was trained for a very specific purpose and that was to go to war. In the end, the massive investment in my class and as a case study, the class of 1977 from Duntroon graduated 63 people. Of that 63, only 42 of us entered Duntroon in 1974, the reminder were people who had failed a year, but were given a second chance because they are regarded as having appropriate officer qualities.

So despite all that massive investment in us, only five of that cohort ever ended up deploying outside Australia on operations. And that's just the luck of the draw. Many of them went on to do other things in the private sector. By the late 1980s, early 1990s, most had left the system and that's just the way things worked out. So there was nothing diverse about that institution in that era. Every one of us was a prefect or a vice captain or a captain of a school. More often than not, an all-boys private school. Most of us had been exceptional athletes, Captain of the First XI, First XV or rowing eights. You get the picture.

Every single one of us virtually was the son of an AIF veteran from the second World War and the grandson of an IRF veteran from the first World War. It was a very, very cohesive, non-diverse group. Although with hindsight, when I look back now at some of the great eccentrics that I've stayed in touch with over the years, there was probably more diversity of thought than I gave credit for. But it was a cookie cutter solution, a highly distilled essence of what they thought they needed to lead an army that's still expected to be engaged in wars at any moment. And I grew up with that view, that that's what right looked like.

As my career unfolded, I came to serve alongside more and more women, exceptional officers, all of them, and that opened my eyes, but two conversations which I've had with very experienced senior leaders really were transformative for me. One was an RIF pilot whom I met at Swindon in the United Kingdom in 2014, he's interesting fellow, this guy had flown fast jets in 1970s, he'd been to the Falklands War. He was on his last tour and about to retire. And we were talking about the changes in cyber warfare and space. And he looked at me, and he was a big genial fellow, probably this audience are too young to remember a British crime show called Cracker, but there was an actor called Robbie Coltrane and that this guy looked like the dead ringer for Robbie Coltrane. And I was fixated. He was a naturally very humorous fellow.

And this guy is telling his story and he just told me something. And I thought... This shows that you can never be too old to learn. He said, "When I joined, everyone looked like a recruiting poster fighter pilot from the Battle of Britain, looking up at the sun with the loose goggles on, straight out of the chewing gum cards of perfect." And he said, "Now, Catherine, the sort of people we need with the high levels of numeracy to do cyber work, engage in space activities." He said, "We've got to recruit people who I would not want to see wearing the Queen's uniform. They live in their mother's basement like vampires. They're covered in body art. When they're not at work, they probably hacking the MOD, Ministry of Defence computer, or surfing porn on the internet until they lapse into unconsciousness." Sorry for that mental image, it will take some expelling, but that's what he said. And he said, "I wouldn't have them in the blasted RAF, but the fact is we will lose the next war unless we have them and retain them."

And I had a light bulb moment when he told me that. I then met a General who had been a longstanding friend of mine, likewise, a Duntroon graduate who went to infantry. He's now running the COVID-19 task force, Lieutenant John Frewen, in his final days of service. And JJ, for a period of time, ran our cyber security network, ASD. And he said to me something very insightful, because again, he and I were products of the same system. I had a meeting with him and his team at ASD, and he talked to me about the changing nature of work and his workforce. And he said, "Two things have opened my eyes. I've got two daughters and I'm never going to stand by and watch them move to the back of the bus. So when we were looking for universities, for the kids, we queued up like most parents, at those that had visible diversity programs." And he said, "No one's going to tell my daughters they're not good enough." And that was from a very crusty, hard bitten infantry officer.

So everyone who's on a learning journey on this is open to persuasion.

The last thing I'll say was just, and I had digressed on this. I can be a bit discursive, but when I was involved with Cricket Australia, I learned one of the brilliant things. And that is, people come in all kinds of shapes and sizes when you talk diversity, it's not purely along the lines that we see along fault lines around race and gender or sexual identity, whatever. You can miss introverts if you're not careful. And I nearly did. There was a young woman called Jodie Fields. She doesn't mind, I've cleared this, I can tell this story. She and I were sitting with the Cricket Australia, high-performance management bunch during the negotiations in the pay dispute.

And Jodie didn't say anything for a long time. She was a former Captain of Australia and a wicket-keeper and if there are any cricket fans in the audience, you'll know cricket, the only people who've got a louder mouth than a wicket-keeper are probably fast bowlers. Both of whom, as a left-handed opening bat, I find sort of like the natural enemy. I regard them as the funnel web spiders of cricket, but I've never met a wicket-keeper who isn't constantly in your ear chirping away like a magpie. Jodie didn't say a word in any of these meetings. And there was a guy there who was an ocean-going dickhead. I won't name him because he's a Western Australian, I'd better be careful. And he was a fast bowler.

So I walked around and just checked on her. And I said, "Look, you okay? You've got a lot to contribute, but you're not saying anything." She said, "No, no, no. I'm not intimidated." She said, "I process meetings differently to other people. I actually, what you've done is actually what very few people do." And by the way, I'm not claiming any great credit for this. I did it out of concern for her wellbeing, not because I thought she had a different way of operating and taught me the lesson of asking questions because she just said, "I'm just a textbook introvert, Cate. I hate meetings. I have my best thoughts, I take a while to process, I go away, and if someone comes and asks me, then I can give them something useful, but I don't talk well in crowds. And I tend to be a listener." And that was, again, another light bulb moment for me.

Time's running down here now. And I just, I guess we'll close with a couple of thoughts. Work's important, but this year's probably shown us that a lot of other things are important too. The east, in particular Victoria, has been locked down much harder. You folks have had a different experience of this. Although there's been clearly some lockdown and some distancing and so on, but Zoom's become a factor here and I'm talking to you via Zoom and glad we can do it, but there's been a loss of connection, certainly. I know my own life has shrunk. I used to travel prolifically and took it for granted. And my life has tended to shrink, that has its own mental health challenges if you're a person like me.

I've had a pretty serious history of alcohol and drug abuse in my past, and I'm a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. And so I can very easily succumb to gloom and loneliness. So it's important to remember when you're contemplating things about career and so on, that what I think this year has done is make us all look with a bit of perspective about work-life balance and showing us there are ways other than just time clock punching to achieve outcomes. And I guess if I could give you a parting word, it would be to make sure you're building a life rather than just making a living in a year where life and death have been probably in the forefront of everyone's mind with the nightly news.

You're never going to see a trailer behind a hearse. So use your one crowded hour to do the things that are of enduring importance. And a wise man said to me that if you're not going to be talking to the people around your deathbed in your last hour about it, then don't take the thought to bed tonight to keep you awake.

I love poetry and music when times are bleak and I guess my journey's best summed up by a lovely piece from Robert Frost, the great American poet about the road less travelled. And there's a book written about that.

It's a poem that's somewhat ambiguous in its meaning, but I guess it just summed up the choice confronting me a shade under nine years ago.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Thank you.