

ONE ON ONE

First among equals

As the second woman to ever fill the role, current Speaker of the House of Representatives Anna Burke reflects on the legacy of the woman who led the way.

Just hang in there and be tough.” Those were the first words of advice Anna Burke received when she became only the second woman in Australia’s history to be elected Speaker of the House of Representatives. And they came from the only person who was really qualified to comment.

At the other end of the phone was her friend and mentor, Joan Child, who was not only the first Labor woman elected to the House of Representatives but also the very first woman elected to the distinguished position of Speaker of the House.

“She rang me up and just told me to be myself and not to take any nonsense from any of them,” Ms Burke says, laughing at the memory.

Anna Burke’s friendship with Joan Child was cemented during the current Speaker’s early days in politics, when she was elected Member for Chisholm in 1998. Located in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs, the electorate includes part of Joan Child’s former seat of Henty, which was abolished in a redistribution when Ms Child left parliament.

Ms Burke says many people in her electorate still have a great fondness for the former Speaker and the work she did as their representative in parliament.

“Joan is still incredibly well respected within my electorate for the amazing work she did for her community, particularly in education and funding of various groups,” Ms Burke says.

“I’ve always regarded Joan Child as someone I’ve thought was a great role model. She had seen the Labor Party through the eyes of someone who had to struggle, and known from a first-hand experience that to get on you needed to help, you needed to help others.

“And that she was a woman doing it. She was the only woman here, she was all on her own, really leading the struggle by example. You’ve got to admire those people who also then take office and stay true to themselves and their ideals.”

Ms Burke recalls that when Joan Child became Speaker people didn’t even know what to call her.

“She had the great line that there’s no sex in the chair,” Ms Burke says. “They went back to the English tradition of madam, and it was again Joan who said ‘I’m not running a brothel’.

“I think it’s moved on from then and now I hope that people see it as the role, and whether it’s a male or a female it’s the person upholding the standing orders.”

But while a lot of progress has been made in Australia over the past 40 years, in many parts of the world women’s representation in parliament remains minimal.

Ms Burke says one of the most satisfying aspects of her role is the work being done by parliament to give women the support, skills and confidence they need to take their place in public life, wherever they live. She highlights the recently announced Pacific Women’s Parliamentary Partnerships



ROLE MODEL: Speaker Anna Burke honours the pioneering work of Joan Child

project, under which Australia’s federal, state and territory parliaments, with AusAID funding, are mentoring Pacific women to take their rightful place in political life.

“I think that is one of the fantastic parts of the job and the one I think I’m most proud of and if we can achieve greater representation in the Pacific for women that would be a terrific thing for the Australian parliament to assist in.”

Ms Burke says the Australian parliament also has huge capacity to support the broader development of Pacific Island parliaments.

“We have that knowledge base here, we can share that and we can assist throughout our region with training and technology,” she says.

However the biggest challenge may be at home, where she is working to improve the standard of behaviour and debate in the chamber, particularly during combative periods such as Question Time.

“Every day is a challenge, and every day is a high and a low. I think the thing I am most disappointed by is that we are not exhibiting to the public the best standard,” she says.

“We are not showing the parliament as it should. We are not saying ‘these are the leaders of the nation and we are going to show respect to the institution and respect to the public’.

“Every day I am slightly disappointed we haven’t been able to lift the standards to a higher level.

“I certainly hope that come the next parliament things will go back to a normal equilibrium.” •

Joan Child passed away on 23 February 2013 and was farewelled with a state funeral on 5 March 2013.