

## **Janine Haines: from schoolroom to Senate**

### **Margaret-Ann Williams**

When Janine Haines first came into the public spotlight, “they” sneered and called her a “schoolmarm”. (That was shortly after Janine had been appointed to the Senate by Don Dunstan to fill a six month casual vacancy.) “Schoolmarm” was meant to be an insult. (No one suspected back then that Janine had charisma.) They were so wrong. And Janine’s time as an English and maths teacher turned out to be an excellent preparation for life in the Senate.

For a start, she had high standards. I recall the first letter I wrote as her staffer. It was a fantastic letter to the Minister, I thought. I had roundly abused him in no uncertain terms, for his personal and policy shortcomings. Oh, I really got stuck into him, just as I’d heard politicians have a go at each other on the radio. And proudly I took it in to Janine for approval and a signature. One glance was enough...

“That’s not how you do it in a letter,” she told me, in no uncertain terms of her own. “We save all that for Question Time. When you’re writing a letter you have to be courteous, colleague to colleague.”

Janine was always careful about her letters, though not in the way you might think. When we staffers presented a letter for her signature, she’d read through it with her blue pen,

striking out and correcting any errors of spelling or punctuation, then sign it. Off it would go, complete with corrections. Now this letter may not have looked perfect – but the recipient would know that it was Janine’s very own letter.

That was Janine the English teacher. And being a teacher gave her a wonderful way of keeping perspective. Any crowd of people would remind her of a bunch of rowdy adolescents. Year 9 maybe. I’ve heard Parliament called the “cradle of democracy”. Janine saw it more as the kindergarten – at an all-boys school. Her colleagues were like fellow members of the staff room. To Janine, the really important people at Parliament House were the workers there – the Senate staff, the drivers, the travel officers, the staff in the Parliamentary Library and the dining room. Woe betide a staff member who was less than courteous to a driver.

Janine’s ability with the English language went far beyond correcting letters, of course. Her structured speeches were a joy, usually with one continuing metaphor that lent cohesion and elegance. In the Senate she would improvise from a scrappy collection of notes and clipping to create a polished impassioned spiel. In fact, once she was accused of “reading a speech” – a Senate no-no – and asked to table the offending document. She happily complied, proving her both her innocence and her virtuosity by gathering up all those shreds and tatters.

She was a whiz, too, on talk radio, always hyped up and ready for a strenuous game of verbal tennis. Her words would virtually leap up and bite you on the nose. It was

startling, but Janine opened her mouth and spoke truth. If that old Emperor wasn't wearing any clothes, Janine came right out and said so. If her political judgment hadn't been so good she would have gotten into strife more often than she did – and that was a fair few times.

I particularly loved Janine's use of good old Australian idioms, usually derisory– no one uses them now and they weren't common then: “mad as a cut snake”, “a sandwich short of a picnic”, “Cloud Cuckoo Land”. Actually, Janine's specialty was giving heaps. You really would prefer to be on the same side as her, but if Janine respected you she would respect your views.

Forgive me if I lapse into “good old days” sentimentality. This was all before – can you imagine? – before the word processor. Before the fax. Obviously before e-mail. The office in Old Parliament House was no bigger than a broomcloset – for Janine and an assistant sharing. It would never pass today's OH&S regulations.

And yet in spite, or possibly because of, all that, a lot got done. I think much of what Janine was proudest of in her brilliant career was accomplished early on, before she was leader but when she carried the amazing portfolio load of Health, Social Security and Women – not to mention Attorney-General, Housing, etc. The progressive agenda she and the Democrats followed must have been ahead of its time because it still seems current – the job-sharing we spoke of then, for instance, translates now into work/life balance.

By the time she was elected as an Australian Democrat senator, Janine had a good idea of what she wanted to achieve. She'd been thinking about it ever since the end of that first, all-too-brief term – ever since she had been expelled from her Senate paradise after only six months. Janine was very well prepared to take political leadership. She was grounded, with a strong South Australian country upbringing that overtly stressed values like equality of the sexes. She'd had a great education, and she had applied herself and made the most of it. So, highly literate and numerate. She had worked – worked hard – as a teacher. She had a strong marriage, her two precious children and she was a home owner. Janine could seem brittle, she could be testy. She did drive her staff wild at times. True, she didn't tolerate fools. But there was also a soft heart and she was determined to make change happen. The constituents who most mattered to her were the ones who needed her most: carers, victimized women, young disabled people confined in nursing homes.

She moved the motion that formed one of the longest running Senate select committees, namely: the select committee on private hospitals and nursing homes. When the Democrats held the balance of power she used it to negotiate improvements to Medicare and to champion equal opportunity legislation.

Another important thing Janine did right from those early days was to broaden the public's notion of what an effective woman could look like. Could you really take someone with an hourglass figure, gorgeous skin and strappy high heels seriously? Well, that was Janine – and you had better take her seriously!

Not that Janine took herself too seriously... she often said, “You know you’re in trouble when you start believing your own publicity”.

Finally, in honour of Janine the English teacher I’d like to conjure her up for you with a rhetorical flourish – first the adjective she made her own, and then, using the literary device she’d quickly identify as simile.

The adjective, of course, is “feisty”. Definition: full of spirit or pluck; frisky or spunky 'assertive', 'able to speak up for oneself' (usually applied to women). Apparently this word has been used in a high-performance car ad, suggesting that the car is fast, tough, and exciting to drive. That would be Janine.

And the simile: if I were to compare Janine to the weather, it would be as a fresh gusty breeze, fluttering the paperwork, blowing away all the dust. Filling our sails, and doing us a world of good.