



# Trailblazer Natasha leaves lasting legacy

**Kate  
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**E**VERY now and then a politician comes along who challenges the existing stereotypes, commands respect and intrigue and makes a lasting contribution towards changing the political landscape.

This week the Federal Parliament farewelled one such politician when Natasha Stott Despoja made her final speech to the Senate. While her career as a South Australian senator has come to an end after 13 years, the legacy Natasha leaves is a lasting and significant one.

Natasha Stott Despoja proved that you could be young, female and make a valuable contribution to politics and public discussion.

Her hard work as a legislator over many years led to many accomplishments, not least the furthering of the causes of young Australians, women and particularly working mothers, the hearing impaired and the pursuit of accessible, quality educational institutions.

In terms of what Natasha achieved and what she stood for, perhaps of greatest significance to me now is in her long-standing and passionate advocacy for the interests of young Australians. Her departure will not leave a vacuum in this sense with the Rudd Government re-establishing the youth portfolio after the previous government ruthlessly abolished the position of Minister for Youth. I am proud that our Government is establishing an Australian Youth Forum to ensure young Australians have a seat at the table and a strong voice in public discussion and an Office for Youth to ensure Government focus on addressing the generation gap in our society and tackling so called "youth issues".

Yet as impressive and numerous as Natasha's accomplishments have been, her impact exceeds her achievements.

Natasha's election helped change the face of the Australian Parliament and

the political landscape. It ensured that when people, particularly young women, looked to the Parliament they didn't just see a huddle of middle-aged men with whom they had no connection. For the first time they saw someone who actually more closely resembled them.

I have previously noted that growing up I never once considered politics might be a viable profession for someone like me, and I am confident many of my peers felt the same. Reflecting on why this may be the case I realised that when I looked towards our parliaments I saw a group of legislators from a different age, overwhelmingly of a different gender and speaking a language which seemed scarcely relevant to my life and issues. And there is no doubt we still have a long way to go in providing a parliament that is as broad and diverse as the community that it seeks to represent.

When Natasha entered the Senate in 1995 she made headlines with the shoes she wore. They were a symbol that she was the youngest woman to be elected to Parliament at the age of 26 and that she by no means fitted the existing mould of a typical politician.

But Natasha wasn't going to let preconceptions prevail. In 1996, during her first speech in the Senate, she called for all to "consider that what I have to offer is worthy of this great chamber and that what I have to say is of more interest than my footwear, which the media seems to notice so frequently". She boldly told all to grow up, sit up, and listen up.

There is a particular responsibility that goes with breaking the mould – do well and you may open a door through which others may follow, yet fail and you will set back not just your own cause but the cause of others who similarly do not fit the mould.

In that first speech to the Senate in May 1996 she noted that South Australia historically led the way in legislat-

ive reform for women. She should now note with interest that the Member for Kingston, Amanda Rishworth, is the youngest member of the House of Representatives – and a young woman from South Australia. Incoming Senator Sarah Hanson-Young will be the youngest member of the Senate – and a young woman from South Australia.

And, without blowing my own trumpet too much, the youngest Minister is a young woman from South Australia.

I have no doubt these facts are in part due to the trail blazed by young Natasha in demonstrating that successful politicians can come from diverse moulds.

We each sought election not because we are young and female but because we have ideas and views to contribute and don't believe that these should be excluded from the discussion.

Yet this column is not meant as a eulogy. I look forward to watching Natasha's future life and career evolve and wish her, Ian, Conrad and Cordelia all the best for this new and exciting phase of their lives. I am sure she will continue to serve her country, her state and the women's movement with the same passion and integrity with which she served in the Federal Parliament.

But while Natasha will no longer be there, the incoming Senate brings new personalities and no doubt plenty of new excitement. South Australia's representation will include Sarah as well as our very own wildcard Nick Xenophon and a man I know will make a valuable contribution as the man of integrity and commitment I know him to be – Don Farrell. A new chapter for South Australian representation begins.

So, all the best Natasha. And thank you.

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**FAREWELL:** Natasha Stott Despoja in Parliament this week