

Isobel Redmond was the star guest at the May 21st event for the Royal Commonwealth Society, held at St Mark's College. Lawyer, raconteur, politician and taser survivor, it had the promise of a lively and entertaining evening.

As introduced by RCS President, Libby Ellis OAM, Isobel Redmond's primary profession was as a lawyer, based in Stirling in the Adelaide Hills, with a legal practice of her own. At various stages, she had also worked with Jay Weatherill (later Labor Premier) and Patrick Conlon-also a Labor Minister, in the legal firm, Duncan Basheer.

Interestingly, she had flirted with Labor Party membership in the early 1970s. For someone who was later to lead the Liberal Party, this demonstrates the depth and conviction Isobel Redmond holds on a plethora of issues.

An earlier foray into politics was as a Stirling district councillor and in a female first, as President of the Stirling Rotary Club.

Both were precursors for taking up the position of first female leader of the Liberal Party. While narrowly winning the two-party preferred vote at the 2010 election, the Liberals, due to the preferential voting system, managed to gain only 18 of the 47 seats. Ironically, this first female leadership of a political party in South Australia was 115 years after South Australia became the first province in the world to grant women the right to vote and be elected, ironically with two prominent men, Sir Edward Stirling MP and Ebenezer Ward spearheading it, along with Catherine Helen Spence and Mary Lee. Isobel held the position of Leader of the Opposition Liberal Party from 2010 to 2013, resigning from Parliament in 2017.

The title of Isobel Redmond's talk was, in a nod to the book and film of the same name:

'A Funny thing happened on the way to the Forum.'

As a Commonwealth politician, Isobel was eminently qualified to take part in a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) forum in Ottawa, Canada. After flying from Hong Kong to Vancouver, she had several hours to kill before the bus journey via Toronto to Ottawa. As a sign of her good nature, she volunteered to be one of the ones standing aside as other connections were more pressing when seats had been overbooked. In a convoluted scenario, this resulted in her being stranded in a remote parking lot at 1.30 am in the morning after the bus driver's shift had finished. All ended well, however, and she eventually arrived in time for the forum in Ottawa!

Isobel then spoke of the CPA, which as a major Commonwealth pillar, is of particular pertinence to RCS. The CPA began as the Empire Parliamentary Association in 1911 and evolved from a very small gathering of the primarily 'white' dominions, undergoing further adaptation with the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and with the name change to CPA in 1948. It now embraces 180 parliaments across 56 Commonwealth nations. Many of these are state and territorial parliaments such as our own from South Australia and numerous regional parliaments in India and Canada, among others.

The main aim of the CPA is the promotion of democracy, obviously with varying degrees of success depending on the circumstances across the Commonwealth.

Focal points for discussion have included:

Women's issues

Disabilities

Smaller Commonwealth nations – under 1 million

Standards for Parliaments

Disinformation

Mental Health

Other anecdotes in her speech were concerning 'Bureaucratic Bingo' and a Commonwealth-wide cookbook titled, 'Green Eggs and Hansard'. The latter was an activity Isobel employed privately during prolonged and particularly 'dry' parliamentary sessions. It involved circling buzzwords frequently used on a bingo format. Examples of overuse might have included, 'touch base', 'low-hanging fruit', 'circle back', 'move the needle', 'pivot to', 'synergy' and 'catchment area' to name a few.

The cookbook in question is ongoing and includes recipes from politicians with the book on sold to raise money for charities. Mention was made of 'Moose Chow Mein' (or 'Charmaine'), a Canadian moose recipe adapted by Margaret Thatcher and 'Gut Feelings' a Scottish recipe which may have either referred to a Haggis concoction or a creamy smoked haddock dish also playfully dubbed 'Deconstructed Cullen Skink'.

On the topic of books, Isobel's book of choice for her journey to the Ottawa CPA was 'War Paint', featuring the lives of the renowned cosmeticians, Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden. In another tangled web, news of her reading of this miraculously reached one of the conference hosts who, before she had even spoken, postulated, 'So you must be Isobel Redmond?', presumably because the book was perched under her arm.

Perhaps a highlight of the evening was Isobel regaling her willingness to undergo tasering to honour a pledge she had made, most likely in relation to crime prevention. It was somewhat of a harrowing experience, whereby she was propped up by then MLC member and Minister for Trade and Investment and later the South Australian Agent-General in London, David Ridgeway on her left and another equally tall politician on her right.

Isobel obviously weathered the ordeal well and we were able to handle the taser at this oration.

A most entertaining and informative evening!

Dennis Coleman