

Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

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'A Farewell to Kate'

In retrospect, the Carnell Government should probably not have lasted as long as it did. It was always in a minority, and when it was returned at an election it still remained in a minority. It is no reflection on her Ministerial colleagues to say that the Chief Minister personified her Government, and that it survived as long as it did mostly because of her capacity to do that well.

Yet all the time the Carnell Government was there on sufferance, and at last the Assembly suffered it not. I do not wish to go into the reasons, which are now history, but instead pay my own tribute to Kate Carnell, with whom I have had a lot to do since she became Chief Minister in 1995.

She was the Leader of the Opposition when I outlined to her party my desire to transfer the *University of Canberra Act* from the Commonwealth to the ACT. She was as enthusiastic about this move as the then Chief Minister, Rosemary Follett, was, and helped in a number of ways, along with Senator Margaret Reid, to get support for the move within the Federal Liberal Party.

By the time that transfer had become effective she was Chief Minister, and I then had to deal with her Government on the details of the transfer. The ACT did not have a university, and had no public servants with extensive experience of these strange organisations. There was, for that reason, something of a tendency within the ACT Government to want to establish UC as a part of the ACT administration, not as a free-standing, autonomous university, responsible to the legislature but not part of government.

I do not criticise those who wanted that kind of control. There was once a belief that governments should not get too close to publicly situated businesses and comparable entities, and the outcome was a passion for setting up statutory authorities. Inevitably, too many of them behaved as though they were not really accountable to anybody.

A counter-belief arrived, that statutory authorities were bad things, and that governments should either run them properly, or put them out into the cold water of the market swimming pool and see whether they sank or swam. All Australian universities are technically statutory authorities.

At length we seemed to be an impasse about whether or not UC ought to be subject to the ACT Treasury and the ACT's *Financial Management Act*. I asked for an appointment with the Chief Minister, and set out the need for her university to be like all the others in terms of autonomy. To be otherwise would cripple us competitively.

She listened and quizzed me about aspects of the problem. Then it was 'OK! We'll do it your way.' And that was that. The final *University of Canberra Act*, modelled of course on the Commonwealth one, is a fine piece of legislation, and our relations with the ACT Government and Assembly have been excellent throughout.

I came to admire Kate Carnell's qualities as a political leader, her passionate commitment to our city, her unflagging preparedness to speak about it and to represent it, and her determination to make it a community which did not depend on what the Federal Government thought or did. My political scientist's judgment is that she has been the equal of any of the State Premiers, and unlike any of them she maintained a highly effective Government for five years without a majority in the legislature.

For her, UC was not simply Canberra's own university. She saw us as highly effective, innovative and productive. She came to see a lot of what we did, and was forthright in her admiration. Those of you who were present at the opening night of the International Film Festival will have seen an example of her capacity to praise those who were doing things to enhance Canberra, her city.

She has had an unusual capacity to see the whole as well as the parts. I have known a few Ministers who had that gift, and they were all most effective. That gift of political synthesis was a large part of her ability as Chief Minister to dominate ACT politics. To that she added good manners, a vivacious personality, and the knack of being able to talk to everyone, at all levels, anywhere. It was, and remains, a powerful combination of skills, in any walk of life.

Kate Carnell has been a fine role model for Canberra's young women. It is no small task to be a political leader anyway, and she was at the top of the small group who achieve the highest office. There is a life after politics, especially for those who leave early enough. I don't know where she will go or what she will do, but whatever the destination, Kate will be notable and effective. And we will be the poorer for her departure.