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JULIA GILLARD

From hostel to HISTORY

She's one of our most senior female politicians and one day she could have the top job. But what's she really like? JULIE McCROSSIN meets Julia Gillard

If you want to get to know Julia Gillard and understand what drives her political passions, you have to know the story of her Welsh immigrant family, especially that of her father, John.

It's been a long journey from the Pennington Migrant Hostel in Adelaide, where Gillard arrived in 1966 at age four with her parents Moira and John and her older sister Alison, to the deputy leadership of the Australian Labor Party at 45.

The lessons of that journey underpin what she wants to change about Australia. And Gillard wants to change things. She believes, like former Prime Minister Paul Keating, that politicians are in the "change business".

If the polls keep going up for Labor, it is entirely possible she'll get the chance to make her changes. And up is the only way they've been going since she and Kevin Rudd snatched the leadership from Jenny Macklin and Kim Beazley in December 2006.

When we meet on a Sunday afternoon in the public cafeteria at Parliament House in Canberra, Gillard greets me warmly and makes me feel instantly at ease. Face to face, she comes across as down to earth, unpretentious and intelligent.

There is no sign of that clipped, robotic voice that often appears in her sound-bites on the news. If she gets the chance to talk a bit longer, as she does these days in the chatty world of breakfast television with her regular appearances on Nine's Today show debating the Liberal Party's heavyweight Tony Abbott, you hear a more natural voice.

We grab salads from the cafeteria and walk through the huge, marble-lined entry hall of parliament. On a quiet Sunday, it's almost empty except for a handful of international tourists. One Canadian, unaware of who Gillard is, asks her questions about Captain Cook and Hawaii. She tries to help him before we disappear through a security door.

Munching lunch on the green leather couches near her desk, she laughs as we discuss the US television show, *The West Wing*. She says the show's depiction of life in

the White House, where people rarely sleep or go home, has a lot in common with her life in parliament.

There's not much spare space in her office, meeting room and en-suite bathroom. The window offers a glimpse of a courtyard with trees. Aboriginal art by Maggie Long Akemarr and Tracey Moffatt decorates the walls. Sky News runs silently in the corner. Her bathroom is full of makeup and clothes. It reminds me of the bathrooms you see back stage in a theatre, where actors make quick costume changes.

There have been so many column inches in the press about Gillard's clothing and hairstyles, especially since she revealed that her Melbourne-based partner, Tim Mathieson, 50, is a hairdresser, that I feel obliged to comment.

She is wearing the sort of black slacks and a

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in profile



PHOTOGRAPH BY AAP

Julia Gillard, with partner Tim Mathieson (left), Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd (right) and his family, says she looks forward to a time when a mother becomes Prime Minister of Australia.

white shirt you'd describe as neat and tidy but unremarkable. Her hair, like her clothes, looks business-like. She'd appeared on the *Insiders* program on ABC TV earlier that morning in the same outfit. It's nothing special.

Clothing and hair are not the big issues for Julia Gillard. She accepts the media interest philosophically, saying, "You can't afford to take it personally." She believes the problem for women in politics is there's not a settled image in people's minds of what a female leader should look like, as there is with men. Men simply get better-quality suits, ties and shirts.

"Women have so many more options, it's easier to criticise," she says. "You have to take it with a grain of salt and a fair bit of good humour."

On the question of women and leadership, did she really tell *The Bulletin* magazine that a mother could never be Prime Minister? "It is not what I said, not what I meant and not what I believe," Gillard responds fervently, adding: "I look forward to a time when a mother is Prime Minister in this country."

For some time, when speaking publicly about the pressures in women's lives, Gillard has rhetorically asked the question, "Could John Howard or Peter Costello have had quite the same careers if they were women?" The question is intended to be a humorous way of getting her audience thinking.

The point she is making, she explains, is that it is easy for some men to look at women's

choices and offer a critical view without thinking for themselves what they would have done if faced with exactly the same choices.

"I was trying to say we need to be talking about the pressures for women," she continues. "Not just for politicians, but for women right across the nation who live the juggle of trying to put work and family together."

Gillard describes the stress she sees in the life of her friend Kirsten Livermore, the Federal Member for Capricornia. Livermore is the mother of two young children and her huge electorate is based in Rockhampton in North Queensland. She regularly brings her children to Canberra, but even with her husband's support, Gillard says, "It's unbelievably tough to work in a highly pressurised workplace and deal with family issues at the same time."

Gillard is relaxed about the interest in her personal life, as long as the convention in the Australian media of keeping within boundaries is maintained. "People want to know who you are, the shape of your life," she says. "That is legitimate."

Gillard met Tim Mathieson in 2004 at the *Heading Out* salon in Fitzroy, Melbourne. They started their relationship in 2006. Now he works as a sales agent for PPS Hairwear. He has never cut her hair, just given her the occasional blow-wave. They don't live together, but she has bought him a barbecue on the condition she does not cook. The relationship with Mathieson appears to be



completely separate from her political life. When they first met, he even had to ask whether she was in state or federal politics because he'd been in the US and didn't know. It must have seemed refreshing.

So what does Julia Gillard really care about and what has shaped her politics and her life?

The defining experience of Gillard's childhood was watching how hard her parents worked. "Both of them worked very, very hard, but dad worked unbelievably hard," she says with real emotional intensity. The family had emigrated as ten-pound Poms. Buying a house was a condition of their assisted passage.

Money was tight. John Gillard worked as a psychiatric nurse, volunteering for extra shifts. He worked two-month blocks of night shift at least twice a year to get the extra allowance. There were times he'd work 24 hours straight.

"Even with all that," Gillard remembers, "he



At Verve
Cafe Bar in
Manuka,
Canberra.

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had a second job in a nursing home, where he would work on some of his days off. It was just amazing hours." Gillard describes watching her father's working life as "very influential".

When Gillard talks about wanting to rip up the coalition government's Work Choices legislation, it is heartfelt. She really means it.

Her later experience as an industrial lawyer with Melbourne law firm, Slater & Gordon, was obviously also influential in her attitude to industrial relations. She worked for unions

and aggrieved workers, including many migrant women in the clothing industry.

But workers' industrial rights are not just a traditional union issue for Gillard. It is personal. She grew up in a family that needed the penalty rates and overtime; a family that was instinctively and culturally pro-Labor. Her father was the voluntary union representative at the local hospital.

"I had a window from my family into how important it is for people to be treated

fairly at work," she says. "Mum and Dad were working hard to pay off the house. That required predictability."

When Gillard was made deputy leader, she could have chosen any portfolio she wanted. She chose Employment & Industrial Relations, Social Inclusion because "getting decent laws for working people" is one of the two key things she wants to do if Labor wins power.

The other thing she says she wants to do is give working-class children the same opportunities in education that she received in suburban Adelaide in the 1960s and 70s. She went to Mitcham Public, Mitcham Demonstration School and Unley High.

"I genuinely believe it is tougher for a kid from a working-class family to go through state schooling now and come out with the access to opportunity I had when I was a girl," she says. ➤



Left: Julia Gillard relaxing at her favourite Canberra cafe; at age five (above); and in Year 5, aged 11 (below).



She admires former South Australian Premier Don Dunstan for making sure the schools and other basic services were delivered well. Dunstan impressed her as a leader, too. "He had the vision to say to what was a pretty conservative, provincial place when I was growing up in Adelaide, there's a whole world of arts and intellectual life and we're going to capture some of it for South Australia."

She thanks former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam for abolishing university fees because, she says, it's the only way she and her sister got the chance to go to university. Gillard studied arts and law with an economics major, first at the University of Adelaide, then at the University of



Julia Gillard in parliament in 2004, using the debating skills she honed in her years of student politics.

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Melbourne, where she was President of the Australian Union of Students in 1983.

This focus on education and its power to deliver a better life is another powerful legacy from Gillard's family history. One of the reasons the family came to Australia was for the sake of Julia's health. As a child, she had bronchial pneumonia and a doctor recommended a warmer climate, away from

the snow and bitter cold of Wales. Her mother's own childhood had been fraught with an illness that had disrupted her education. She was determined the same wouldn't happen to the young Julia.

So they moved to Australia, with Moira working in aged-care homes while raising her children. She was hungry for a better life for the girls. She read to her babies,

ignoring suggestions it would not be good for them. Both girls could read before they started school. "Mum was in front of all the contemporary psychological research about how young your intellect develops," Gillard says, smiling.

Gillard's father shared education dreams for his children. Growing up in a Welsh mining village as one of seven children, John Gillard had been an intelligent boy with a probing mind. But he wasn't able to take up a scholarship because his family needed him to work. It made him angry at the time and he is very conscious of a lost opportunity.

It means a lot to John and Moira Gillard that both their girls went to university. (Alison is now 48 with two children, Jenna, 25, and Tom, 21, and the sisters are still close.)

The big lesson from this history for Julia Gillard is that good government can change lives. "Looking at my life's story and comparing it with my parents' lives, it's not that I am smarter than them; it's not that I am prepared to work harder than them," she says. "They are smart and have an unbelievably hard work culture. But the difference is, I got access to the opportunities at the right time and they didn't."

There is one other person who was crucial to the direction of Julia Gillard's life. Throughout her school days, Gillard was friends with twin sisters Lyn and Kathy Pilowsky. The Pilowskys were South African Jewish immigrants of Polish extraction who'd left South Africa primarily to escape apartheid.

Gillard aspired to become a teacher, but she remembers a life-changing conversation with Mrs Pilowsky. After watching Julia in a school debate, she told Gillard she should study law. "You're good at debating, good at ideas, good at reading and good at logical thinking and argument," Gillard recalls Mrs Pilowsky saying.

It was a prescient observation. These days, Gillard is an admired performer in the rough-house arena of parliamentary debate. She is able to sustain her arguments in that heated, loud and often abusive environment. She honed these skills in years of student politics.

Mrs Pilowsky's comments also broadened a young girl's horizons. Lyn and Kathy Pilowsky went on to become a psychiatrist and a dentist respectively. Exactly what Julia Gillard will ultimately become is in the lap of the gods and the Australian people. ■