Marion Scrymgour: The first female Aboriginal Minister in Australia

Birgit Hain (Darwin)

Marion Scrymgour is the first indigenous woman to ever achieve Ministerial office in Australia. Sometimes Marion stands on the balcony of the Northern Territory Parliament House overlooking Darwin (photo 1) and thinks: "Who would ever have thought an Aboriginal girl growing up in Darwin could end up in this place ?"

"I feel pride, but I also feel the weight of the hopes and expectations of indigenous women".

Photo 1: Marion Scrymgour - standing on the balcony of Parliament House in Darwin.

In 1960 Marion Scrymgour was born in Darwin to Tiwi-woman Claire Mollimini who was born and raised on the Tiwi Islands. *(Bathurst Island and Melville Island* situated about 80 km north of Darwin *are often called the „Tiwi Islands". Today 2500 Tiwi people are living on the islands.)* Through her mother, Marion has inherited Tiwi identity and obligations as a member of the Miyartuwi Skin Group.

Her father, Jack Scrymgour, is a child from the stolen generation. He was removed as an infant from Alice Springs to Croker Island (an island located north east of Darwin in the Arafura Sea). Marion belongs to a large family with 8 sisters and 3 brothers. Family life was hectic at times - growing up in a 3-bed-room house in Darwin. Marion says today: "The work ethic I have comes from my father."

Because of her mother's good relationship with the Catholic church, Marion attended primary school at St Paul's and St Mary's in Darwin and secondary school in Sydney at 'Our Lady of Sacred Heart College' and 'St John's College' in Darwin as well as attending Technical College in Sydney for 1 year. Marion raised three children: Cherise, Richard (junior) and Helen - born in 1980, 81and 83.

In these early years Marion and her partner Richard had no home. They were living at the fishing camp at Fogg Bay where Richard worked. When the fishing season was over they lived either at Richard's parents' house in Batchelor or her parents'

house in Darwin. It was not until 1987 Marion had a house that she could call home. In 1989 Marion started work with the Northern Land Council.

(The Land Rights Act of 1976 was a turning point in the history of all Northern Territory Aborigines. The Act created mechanisms for the making of land claims and for the trusteeship of Aboriginal lands. It provided for the creation of Land Councils.)

From 1990-1993 Marion lived at Nguiu on Bathurst Island and worked as Office Manager for the Nguiu Community Government Council. During this time working with her mother's people she gained a greater understanding of their language and traditional values. Marion also completed an external book keeping course and external studies for a University degree in economics.

Marion separated from Richard, the father of her three children, in 1991. A year later her Mum passed away. In 1993 Marion decided that change was needed in her life. She moved to Katherine and worked for the Commonwealth Government and the Northern Territory Government to establish two medical health services. While working as CEO of Katherine West Health Board Aboriginal Corporation Marion met her future husband David Dalrymple, a lawyer by profession.

"There was always a desire to become involved in politics" but at first Marion was rejected by the Labor Party because of Aboriginal perception and that politics was a male dominated world. Marion Scrymgour's political career began in 1994 as a Member of the NT Labor Party in the Executive Council. In 2001 Marion moved from Katherine back to Darwin and was elected to Parliament when the Northern Territory Labor Party swept to power in August 2001 after 26 years of Country Liberal Party rule. When Marion got sworn into Parliament it was the first time ever that Aboriginal dancers (from the Tiwi Islands) were allowed to dance in Parliament as part of a traditional ceremony celebrating Marion's introduction to Parliament.

On the 15th of December 2003 Marion Scrymgour became the first female Aboriginal Minister in Australia. Her portfolio included: Minister of Family and Community Services, Minister of Environment and Heritage and Minister assisting the Chief Minister on Youth, Women and Seniors. During Marion's life working in indigenous affairs, particularly health - Marion gained an excellent experience for her task as a Minister. Marion's tasks are various and of a sensitive nature:

In an article of the *Northern Territory News* (24 April 2004) Marion said ".....No.1 priority is the protection and well-being of children – protection from drugs and alcohol, protection from abuse and protection from exploitation.... This is why the Labor Government has committed a record amount of $ 54 million to child protection over the next five years to build a better system."

Since 2001-02 the NT Labor Government has increased support to the Department of Health and Community Services by 43% to $ 687 million (NT Budget Media Release, 3 May 05). The NT Government has also announced Australia's first

residential rehabilitation services for people with volatile substance abuse problems – like petrol sniffing. Four separate services for young people and adults will be set up in Darwin and Alice Springs. Marion Scrymgour said the rehabilitation services will provide an environment that accepts and supports the cultural background of people with volatile substance abuse problems." The service will also invite families to be a part of the treatment and rehabilitation process, and also provide after-care and follow-up. This is a holistic approach that focuses on the person, not just their substance abuse." The rehabilitation services will provide support for the new laws which passed parliament this year, which ban petrol sniffing but do not criminalise it. (*Common Ground*, July 2005, page 26)

One of her first duties as Minister for Parks and Wildlife was the opening of the refurbished Blyth Homestead in Litchfield National Park which was built by her children's great grandfather - Mr. Sargent. Ms Scrymgour said: "Our heritage properties are an important part of the Northern Territory's tourism and lifestyle – which is unique and the best in Australia."

Photo 2: (July 18, 2005)

Environment and Heritage Minister Marion Scrymgour opened the Blyth Homestead display in Litchfield National Park – called "Tough Times Tough Lives" – recognising the contribution to the Top End of the Northern Territory made by the owners of the building – the Sargent Family. Ms Scrymgour said the Blyth Homestead – which is Heritage Listed – was developed over four decades and will now provide a fascinating visitor experience.

> "The NT Government is balancing growth with lifestyle while protecting our environment". (*ALP News Statements*, 14 May 2005)

The electoral profile

Marion Scrymgour's electorate "Arafura" covers the Tiwi Islands, along with the Cobourg Peninsula, Kakadu National Park and western Arnhem Land. Main centres include Nguiu on Bathurst Island, Milikapiti on Melville Island, Managrida and Gunbalanya in western Arnhem Land, and Jabiru in Kakadu National Park. The electorate covers a rural area of 201,900 sq. km and three quarters of its population is of indigenous origin. The electorate derives its name from the Arafura Sea, the name first applied by the Dutch in 1827.

Due to the vast size of her electorate Marion is always on the move but still finds time to be with her family and husband David. Marion is proud of her children and their achievements. Cherise (25): studied psychology at RMIT (Royal Melbourne

Institute of Technology) and is just about to finish her thesis on "drug and alcohol – non-use and use between 18-25 years on Tiwi Islands". Richard (24): took a course in aquaculture and is now working as a farm technician for the Marine Harvest on Bathurst Island. Richard junior has 4 children who bring much joy to their grandmother Marion. Helen (22): studied Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne and worked for the Victorian Government in Aboriginal Affairs for a year. Helen is now working for Marion in her Electoral Office.

Note by the author

I have got to know Marion since I moved to Australia through my partner Terry Patroni who has been a friend of Marion since the late 70s. I have found Marion a sincere and hard working person as well as becoming a friend.

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