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'I won't be pigeonholed and I won't be stereotyped': Linda Burney

Reporter: Mark Colvin
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MARK COLVIN: One of those experiencing their first Federal Parliamentary sitting today was Linda Burney - the first Aboriginal woman elected to the House of Representatives.

With a long career in New South Wales politics behind her, Linda Burney is already the shadow minister for human services under Bill Shorten.

She was previously, among other things, the first Aboriginal woman ever elected to the New South Wales Parliament.

I asked her about the pride and the potential burden of being the first in her field.

LINDA BURNEY: Well, it's the first Indigenous woman into the House of Representatives. Of course, Nova Peris was the first Aboriginal woman into the Federal Parliament.

I do feel very proud of that. I've always said though, Mark, that I won't be pigeonholed and I won't be stereotyped.

My experience and my background, of course, is right across a whole range of areas including child protection, fair trading, Aboriginal affairs and education. But of course my heritage, my Wiradjuri cultural heritage is absolutely fundamental to who I am.

I have always said that no-one gets to any place on their own. You rest on the shoulders of others. and I've had the great fortune, the absolute great fortune to have shoulders both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to rest on.

MARK COLVIN: And you mentioned Nova Peris. There was a campaign of, there were people who were extremely abusive towards her on social media and elsewhere. Have you found the same kind of thing happening to you and does that worry you?

LINDA BURNEY: No, I really haven't found it in the way that Nova experienced it in such an overt way. I think she handled it so graciously and magnificently.

Of course, I have had slights over my life including in the chamber of the New South Wales Parliament when there was a strong implication that somehow or other what's been delivered to me or what I've achieved in my life or the reason I've done the things that I've done in my life, including being a Member of Parliament, was not on my merit, not on my hard work; it was because of my Aboriginality and of course...

MARK COLVIN: You were a token as somebody ...

LINDA BURNEY: Yeah, and I think that is reprehensible. It has happened to me on a number of occasions.

MARK COLVIN: How do you react? What do you say when that happens?

LINDA BURNEY: Well, I, I try and always react with grace and I react knowing very strongly that I have worked incredibly hard.

I am a very competent person and what I've done, I have achieved through that hard work and the support of others.

MARK COLVIN: It's often said that people shouldn't go onto the frontbench until they've spent some time in the Federal Parliament.

You are on the frontbench, but I imagine that you would say that that's totally justified because you have senior experience in a state parliament?

LINDA BURNEY: Well, I have enormous experience in the state parliament and I am absolutely grateful and very humbled to be appointed immediately to the frontbench.

But, once again, I know that was done because of the fact that I've been a very senior cabinet minister, I've been a deputy leader of the Labor Party over the five years of very difficult times in New South Wales Labor. I've also been the president of the Australian Labor Party.

But I have had, you know, something like 35, 40 years now, Mark, in public life and I think that I've demonstrated and I hope that I've been able to do the right thing by people.

And my appointment is because of merit, because people saw in me a capacity, and it's been welcomed by everyone.

MARK COLVIN: So your portfolio covers Centrelink, aged care, Medicare, or some Medicare services and payments, and child support.

What are the kind of focuses that you want to bring to that?

LINDA BURNEY: Yeah, the portfolio is, you know, huge in terms of it's most of the payment systems for the areas you've just identified.

We've got our lead minister, Jenny Macklin, of course, in shadow cabinet and a number of other shadow ministers in that cluster.

It seems to me that the issue first and foremost is the incredible length of time it takes for someone needing assistance to get through on the phone line to Centrelink. It can take up to an hour.

And many of those people only have mobile phones. They use their entire credit trying to talk to someone in Centrelink.

It seems to me that there is an enormous issue amongst the employees of those organisations.

There is a huge casualisation of the workforce.

Many of the women in that casualised workforce are being told you will work wherever we want to tell you and when, which is very difficult from a family perspective.

But of course the other thing is that those workers have been arguing for a pay rise for three or four years now. That's obviously an important issue.

But the most crucial thing is that there is enormous churn in terms of staff, there are huge waiting times for people trying to get assistance in those areas, and the IT upgrades have cost \$1 million so far and the public has no detail of those IT upgrades.

MARK COLVIN: And a very personal question on your first day in the Federal Parliament: I notice during the election campaign that one day was the 10th anniversary of the death of your partner, Rick Farley.

LINDA BURNEY: Yes, it was.

MARK COLVIN: Very, very popular and very bipartisan figure in Australian public life. Was he in your mind today?

LINDA BURNEY: I've got tears in my eyes hearing you speak of Rick. Of course he was in my mind and he will be in my mind tomorrow when I give my first speech about four o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

And you are so right, we are such a lesser country without the likes of the Rick Farleys of the world.

MARK COLVIN: Linda Burney, the first Aboriginal woman elected to the House of Representatives. And her partner, Rick Farley, who we were discussing there was the executive director of the Cattlemen's Union, chief executive of the National Farmers' Federation, and a prominent member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation before he died tragically young in 2006.