

by Archie Bayvel

Everything's the same as it always was. With one exception

It's late at night and a light's still on in the garden shed of a working class home in a western Sydney suburb. It shines for years as a plump young schoolboy uses the shed as a study refuge from the bustling family home he shares with his parents and three younger brothers.

When he isn't in the shed with his books he's at school or working in his uncle's fruitshop. He progresses from school to university and from the fruitshop to a job at Flemington markets.

The hours of study are rewarded when he leaves Westfields High as male dux of the school then graduates with first-class honors in economics from Sydney University. A talented kid with a strong family work ethic has shown his mettle. You don't get a first for nothing!

Twenty years later, in the week of his 40th birthday, the Hon Joe Tripodi, MLA for the NSW seat of Fairfield, describes his youth as the same as that of many boys and girls from migrant families.

With one exception there has been little change in his work habits. Were he to keep a current My-Day-by-Joe diary it would read a lot like this:

6am: Gets up and reads the day's media clippings that relate to his portfolios. He is minister for Small Business and for Regulatory Reform as well as for Ports and Waterways.

6.20am: Identifies the likely issues of his day.

6.30am: Begins an hour of exercise on his walking machine. Or decides to give it a miss.

7am: Has breakfast on the fly. A cup of coffee and a biscuit.

7.30am: He's outa there being driven to work while he scans Sydney's four daily papers.

8.30am: Arrives at the office.

Then what? "Then I'm at work, of course." As if that answers everything.

6.30pm: Leaves his office.

7.15 pm: Sometimes has dinner with his wife. Or doesn't, because he has functions to attend many evenings in his electorate of 183 nationalities speaking 88 languages.

Late pm: Home.

The cycle begins again next day and almost every day. Work, work, work. Everything is the same as it always was. The one exception is the shed.

Today's shed is Parliament House on Macquarie Street where his executive suite is protected by a palatial beige lobby with seats far apart so conversations cannot carry. His personal office is cool with doors opening to a rooftop garden; it is a shed to beat all garden sheds.

With that you now know more about the private life of Joe Tripodi than almost anyone except his wife and parents.

Thanks to years of unflattering, square-on photographs that look like a postage stamp celebrating greengrocers he probably has the most recognisable face in parliament. But nobody really knows much about the man. The public record is just that – a record of his public doings.

Not that he's reticent. Joe Tripodi would be one of the chattiest ministers in town but he seems to maintain a pace that leaves little room for chardonney-set chat. Work seems to jostle a life so far largely unreviewed.

Waiting to see him in the main lobby one is surrounded by a constant traffic of ordinary-size men dressed in the modern equivalent of the toga – over-size dark suits design-inspired by horse blankets. They are highly animated and repeatedly stand up, sit down then stand up again. They are important people on important business with other important people; like fruit bats



strayed in fancy dress from the nearby Botanic Gardens.

The Hon Joe is running late. The people for his previous appointment have only just gone in but we move upstairs from the bats to the beige calm of the inner lobby.

When our moment comes and his previous meeting dissolves, it is like witnessing the death of a mother spider when her horde of hanger-on offspring scatters randomly in all directions. It is hard to believe that so many people could emerge from one meeting.

There is a brief minute before we are shown in. Literally just a minute of recovery time. He makes good use of it because when we get across the threshold he is immaculate, fully toga-ed in a blue-stripe as elegant as suits are when they're only one among several. And there's that wonderful cheery smile. Our meeting is clearly what he's been looking forward to all morning.

Table litter from his previous meeting is headed "Port Botany" so at least he's on song and the number of his visitors tends to support his later assertion that he's having success in bringing people together to discuss that place.

But tell us about you, Joe:

"We were a typical working class migrant family," he says. "Things were crowded sometimes hence the garden shed but we were well off compared to families with five or six children all living in an apartment.

"Dad came from Calabria, mum from the Ionian Islands and they still live in the home where we were brought up. Until he retired my father worked in the same job for 30 years at a factory in Five Dock.

"I was a very studious child and so were my brothers. One of them has a PhD in ecology and works in Queensland; another is a barrister who is married to Angela D'Amore, the State MP for Drummoyne; and my third brother is a project engineer with Baulderstone.

"I played a bit of rugby league in primary school but really there was no sport in my youth. I just didn't have time. I had a job at 13.

"For us to make university we really had to work at it because we were at a very rough school. It went through five principals in six years and out of 200 kids in my year only six went on to uni."

He's very modest about having been dux of that school and is quick to point out that he was only the male dux. He was beaten

by a girl. It was 'way back in 1984 but her name trips off the tongue of memory without a second's hesitation: "Karen Spencer, married now and works in the UK."

Joe's married now too but with no kids and his wife – "An Italian girl born and raised in Australia" – runs a deli-supermarket at Mt Pritchard with her parents and brother.

What about leadership? – "Mostly I learned that from being the eldest son in a big family and by working for years in Young Labor. I was an analyst at the Reserve bank before I entered parliament in 1995 at the age of 27.

What about, er...

Ports and waterways?

"The portfolio," he says, "offers lots of challenges. Port Botany is the main task at present with a very big review of the landside issues. Areas of reform are mostly in relation to regulation of the rail and truck interface with the stevedores.

"All areas of interest to SAL are rolling. The Enfield consent has been issued, the rail issues are being examined. David Richmond's Office of the Co-Ordinator General is on the case for rail and internal port interface. We'll make rail as competitive as we can get it."

Still all just talk, though? –

"No not just talk. In fact part of the problem has been to get all the people affected talking to each other and that has been achieved and it's a big step. We're getting good results."

As we leave, agitation among a group in the foyer pinpoints the Minister's next customers. His smile welcomes an advancing wall of bats in blankets; he's enjoying another day at the office, greeting the next person he's been just dying to see.

As Sharon Stone sort of said: With a good brain and a bit of attitude, a fruitshop apprentice can go a long way in politics. Specially if he works, and works and works.

Why does he do that?

His answer is already on record: "To use it as my vehicle for achieving good - it's the reason I joined the Labor Party.

"If flying business class had been my motive in life I wouldn't have gone into public office. The reality is that my generation, Gen-X, has lots of options in life. We're tertiary educated, well informed; we could walk away and pursue other causes. The reason I've persisted with this is because I passionately believe it. You can make a dollar or you can make a difference in life, and I choose to make a difference." ▲

