Australia's Stateswoman

As a 21-year-old law student at the University of Melbourne, Julia Gillard was elected president of Australia’s student union; by age 29, she had made partner at her law firm in Melbourne, Australia; not long after, she won a seat on Parliament for the Labor Party. When Labor leader Kevin Rudd was elected prime minister in 2007, putting an end to 11 years of center-right rule, Gillard was named to several positions in the new government, including minister for education. But in 2010, with Rudd’s ratings having slipped, she successfully challenged him for leader, becoming Australia’s first female prime minister. Sitting atop a shaky minority government, Gillard managed to get a carbon-pricing scheme enacted and a health-care funding bill passed. But in June 2013, Rudd challenged and unseated her as leader, and later that year, Labor itself lost its hold on the government to the Liberal Party. Gillard now chairs the Global Partnership for Education, a fund that has allocated $3.9 billion for schooling in developing countries over the past decade. She spoke with *Foreign Affairs* deputy managing editor Stuart Reid in New York in September.

Do you miss politics?

It's mixed. Coming out of being prime minister, it's the end of the best thing you'll ever do and the end of the hardest thing you'll ever do, all wrapped up into one. You certainly miss the best of it and, for me, the best of it was having the opportunity to make change in my nation. But you don't miss some of the day-to-day stresses of it. But having the opportunity to chair the Global Partnership for Education is very precious to me, because the things that really drove me as prime minister were about education and opportunity, and I'd like to pursue that still.

Donors have lots of choices when it comes to where to put their scarce resources -- public health, infrastructure, the environment, and so on. Why should they focus on education?

Because it's the single biggest change agent for the future. If we want poorer countries to develop, take their place in the global community, and have an economy that provides jobs and opportunity and prosperity, then we have to be educating the children of that nation. When you look at development outcomes, if we could make sure that people could read and write -- basic education -- the spinoff from that is something like 170 million people being lifted out of poverty. Huge gains are to be had through educating children. Particularly huge gains are to be had by educating girls, because all the evidence shows that if you educate a girl, then not only will she go on to make an economic contribution for her family, but her children will also be more likely to survive infanthood, more likely to be vaccinated, and more likely to be educated themselves. You set up a very virtuous cycle.

In many places, part of the problem is that kids have underqualified teachers, who are underpaid and not respected by the community. How do we get the best people to become teachers?

Well, in many of the countries in which we're working, there's a teacher shortage -- just not enough people who are trying to do even basic training for teachers. So a part of a change agenda has to be about training more teachers, in addition to improving the skills of teachers. Our way of working is genuinely a partnership; we work with 59 developing countries to develop education-sector plans. What do they need? What, for them, would get more children into school and increase the quality of education?

In the U.S. and Australia, there's obviously a lively debate about how you get the best brains to go teaching, because people have so many choices. But in many of the countries in which we're working, being a teacher would be identified as a very good opportunity and a good job. It's about getting people the skills to go out and do that.

How should teachers be evaluated?

In Australia, a first-world developed-country context, I was very focused on making sure that we understood learning

outcomes in schools, that we could see what was happening in classrooms and whether or not children were learning. Moving to a developing-country context, I think you can take those lessons with you. We can be evaluating teachers by simple things like attendance at school each day -- in some countries, having teachers regularly attend is a problem, as is getting children to attend -- and then looking at learning outcomes as well.

The Millennium Development Goal that drives us is universal access to primary school education. We're 58 million kids behind where we need to be to check that box, so we're not going to make it by the end of 2015. But we do have to make that promise come true. There's also an increasing focus on the quality of what's happening in schools. Around 250 million children, many of whom are getting some access to education, don't end up even with basic reading and writing skills. The future has to be about access, but also the quality of learning.

So how should students be evaluated?

We don't prescribe and say, “You must have this test, and here it is.” But if you are going to improve quality, then part of an education plan or a national education system has to be assessment, which is then used to drive quality improvement. You're not going to know what's going on unless there's testing.

One focus of the Global Partnership for Education is schooling in conflict zones. In places such as Iraq and Syria, is there really any hope for educating children during wartime?

There's always hope, but clearly, working in conflict-affected and fragile places is harder. More than 50 percent of what we do is in fragile and conflict-affected areas. We can point to some good track records even in very difficult environments: Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, places like that.

If you look at Syria, these are children that had a good education system, by the standards of the region, who were regularly attending school. War breaks out; they're fleeing for their lives with their families, many of them going to Lebanon. What we can do in Lebanon is make sure that these children continue to get an education. And steps have been taken to educate Syrian children in Lebanon. If you look at a very different situation, Ebola in Liberia, no, children are not able to go to school, because of necessary quarantine restrictions. But we're working to find ways of still having some education content delivered while children are at home, through radio and the like.

How do you promote girls’ education in places where extremism and sexism get in the way?

It’s very challenging. Our partnership model means that we're working with developing-country partners, so we're not flying into a country for the first time and saying, “We know how to do this.” We can point to places where you would expect those cultural stereotypes to hold girls back from school, but where there's been ways of breaking that cycle. In a country like Yemen, we can point to a good track record in increasing girls' enrollment in schools.

Partly that's about [demonstrating to] families the dollar value of education. It's about making sure that schools are safe places for girls. It's about making sure that schools are providing quality education. Why send your daughter or your son to school if, at the end of the day, they're not actually learning? There have been some models around the world that have included cash transfers to families to increase the incentives to go to school.

Even in places where there are cultural barriers, families still view education as important?

Look at Afghanistan. We've been working with the minister for education there, and there have been huge increases in school enrollments. What was keeping the girls from school -- cultural predisposition or the intimidation and violence coming from the Taliban? When girls have had an opportunity to go, they've gone, and their families are thankful.

Australia was the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. Why was Australia even in Afghanistan?

We had a shared interest with the United States. The U.S. had been attacked on its own soil, and we, under our

alliance with the U.S. and for our own people, had an obligation to fight in Afghanistan to make sure that it couldn't continue to be a safe haven for the training of terrorists. Australian lives were lost in New York on 9/11. Australian lives were lost in bombings in Bali. And when you traced all of that back, there were connections with terrorist training in Afghanistan.

A big issue in Australia is asylum seekers who come by boat from Central Asia and the Middle East. What, if anything, is Australia's responsibility to these people?

Clearly, we've got responsibilities under the [UN] Refugee Convention, and the government I led and, I believe, the current government looks to its obligations under the Refugee Convention. The difficulty has been that there is a lively people-smuggling trade that seeks to exploit desperate people. Sell them a passage on a very unseaworthy boat and, far too many times, that's ended in the loss of hundreds of men and women and children on those boats. Consequently, Australia also has to look to its responsibilities to not have people make that fateful and often fatal choice.

You're perhaps best known outside Australia for your 2012 "misogyny speech," in which you railed against Tony Abbott, then the leader of the opposition, now prime minister, whom you called sexist. The clip went viral. Why do you think it resonated so much?

It's a question possibly better answered by others. But my sense, because so many women and men have spoken to me about it since, is that whatever the context it was given in, when people watched it, it gave voice to a whole range of things they wished they'd said. For a lot of women, I think they looked back at moments in their lives -- in their workplaces, in their personal lives, in community or sporting organizations in which they're involved -- when they really thought they were treated in a sexist way yet didn't say anything. When they watched that speech, they were thinking to themselves, "I wish at the time that I'd called it out and dealt with it, rather than just accepting the environment I was in." I think it felt like an empowering moment for many women.

I get women who come up to me because they've seen the misogyny speech, and sometimes they ask me for advice about how to deal with sexism, for example, in their workplace. My advice to them is to pick the moment when they're going to call it out. But I also have men talk to me about the misogyny speech, and one thing I always say is that it's important for men, in all sorts of contexts -- in workplaces, in politics, in business -- to also call out sexism. If there is a woman in a political campaign who's not being dealt with fairly because of sexist stereotyping, then it's in the interests of businessmen and other men in politics to actually say, "Look -- let's judge this candidate on her merits." Maybe we agree with some things she says and passionately disagree with others, but none of this should be done on the basis of sexist stereotyping.

Why, in almost every country, Australia included, do women make up less than 50 percent of the legislature?

I think this is the continuation of the historic stereotypes about women in leadership. It's changing, but it needs to change quicker. We've seen a lot of change in Australia in terms of the number of women in Parliament. The House of Representatives is about a quarter women; the Senate is about a third women. We've gone radically backwards in terms of the number of women in the cabinet. There's only one woman in the cabinet now, which I think is to be deeply regretted.

When you look at some of the research, there's an issue here about how we view women leaders. We tend to correlate leadership in men with likability and success; our cultural stereotype is to correlate leadership in women with not being likable. There are also some very practical things about when political parties are looking for the next person to support into Parliament. Do they think about women, or do they do what they've historically done, which is tend to look for the next man in queue?

Then there are practical issues about how care for children can be squared with being in a parliament that's often thousands of kilometers from where you live. In our culture, men haven't tended to face those issues; the historic norm's been that men have the nonworking wife at home. But that, too, is changing. I've served in Parliament with

many men who had very young families. They found the dislocation of being away from their children profoundly distressing. Their wives worked, and it strained the families to try and get child-care arrangements together when they were flying out on Sunday night to Canberra and not coming home till late Thursday night.

Australia is a classic “middle power” in international relations. What's the right global role for a country like that?

The right global role is to be a creative middle power. You should neither underestimate nor overestimate your weight. We are not a global superpower. We're not the United States; we're not China. We're a country of 23 million people. But we're the 12th-biggest economy in the world. So we should feel that weight and be ambitious, and I was ambitious for us with things like our successful campaign for a seat on the United Nations Security Council. But neither should you make the error of overestimating or overplaying your strategic heft in the global community. I think Australian governments of both political persuasions have largely got that right.

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