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Interview: Julia Gillard, Beyond Blue Chair

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David Lipson speaks to former prime minister Julia Gillard about coping with political life, Donald Trump and her new role as chair of Beyond Blue.

Transcript

DAVID LIPSON, PRESENTER: It is perhaps a sure sign of trouble when a prime minister is compelled to state he will be in the job for a very long time.

That is exactly what Malcolm Turnbull did today after Tony Abbott again inserted himself into the public discourse.

There is probably no-one who knows how the PM is feeling right now better than Julia Gillard, but since leaving Parliament she has steadfastly refused to offer advice or commentary on domestic politics, preferring to concentrate on her own endeavours.

Today Julia Gillard starts a fresh chapter as chair of mental health charity Beyond Blue. And she spoke to me about the new job, coping with political life and Donald Trump.

Julia Gillard, welcome to Lateline.

Thank you very much. Great to be here.

And welcome back to public life in Australia. It seems like you have been gone for a while. Does all this lights, camera...

(Julia Gillard laughs)

DAVID LIPSON: ... microphone malarkey bring back any dreaded sense of Deja vu for you?

JULIA GILLARD, CHAIRWOMAN, BEYONDBLUE: No, no. Lights, camera, action.

I have been quiet. I haven't been entirely gone: I've been doing a series of things in Australia, but not courting the

public light. Now I will be looking for public attention for the cause of Beyond Blue and making sure that we're furthering people's understandings of mental health.

DAVID LIPSON: Yeah, and it is your first day at Beyond Blue today. On your last day at Beyond Blue, how do you want to look back and see what you have done; see what you have achieved?

JULIA GILLARD: I would hope that, by my last day at Beyond Blue, we're able to say as a nation that we have taken some big strides forward in addressing the suicide crisis.

And I use the word "crisis" deliberately because suicide rates are at a 10-year high. Eight Australians a day on average kill themselves. Six of them are men.

It's far higher than the national road toll and yet so much attention has gone on reducing the road toll - which is absolutely appropriate. But I want the same kind of national effort and sense of urgency behind reducing the suicide toll.

DAVID LIPSON: They are dreadful statistics and a lot of it seems to be tied up with the way men view themselves: that sort of view of strength, of stoicism and resilience, I suppose, as well. Do we need to change the way us men think of ourselves and perhaps the way we teach our children, our sons?

JULIA GILLARD: I think that gender stereotype is alive and well. And many men feel like, if they aren't confirming to it, they are somehow being weak.

We do have to change that. We have got to make sure that people feel comfortable thinking about their mental health, talking about their mental health and reaching out if they are in trouble.

Now, there are various ways of reaching out, including anonymously. The Beyond Blue website welcomes more than 7 million Australians a year and so people can get information and support that way.

But we want to make sure for more profound crisis that there are services that can meet people's needs.

DAVID LIPSON: Were there times for you during those really intense years of the hung Parliament - or even after you fell away from public life, the highs of office, if you like - that you struggled with any of your own personal demons?

JULIA GILLARD: I wouldn't say: struggled with personal demons or with Churchill's "black dog" or anything like that. I never felt depressed.

Obviously everybody has moments of anxiety and I had some moments of anxiety. But I did think about what I needed to do to protect my mental health when I was in the rigours of public life.

I guess when I was going through it: you know, some of the terminology I'm using now wouldn't have tripped off my tongue in quite the same way. That's the exposure to Beyond Blue that's helped me use that language.

But I did used to think - as I looked at often very negative media headlines, dreadful things on social media - I did consciously think: "I have got choices to make now about how much I let of this into my head; how much of this kind of poison gets in my head and stays with me. I have got some choices about how much I brood or whether I go to bed at night and sleep soundly."

And I made some very deliberate choices. So I didn't let it get in my head. I would sleep soundly at night. I'm not the sort of person - and wasn't during the days of my prime ministership - who would be padding around at 2:00am, sort of anxious about something.

But I also know now, from my period at Beyond Blue, that just because in the past I have been able to withstand quite strong pressures without having an episode of mental ill health doesn't mean that you can say as an individual, "Gee, I'm immune." I mean, no-one is immune. We all have risks in our lives about the possibility of mental ill health.

And that's why we have all got to focus on maintaining our best possible mental health and be prepared to reach out if we do need support.

DAVID LIPSON: More than a few people have pointed to the US President, Donald Trump's mental state and claimed fairly bluntly - some commentators - that he is suffering some sort of mental illness. What do you make of that sort of commentary, especially when it is somewhat flippant in regards to someone that someone may not like?

JULIA GILLARD: Look, I would worry that a charge of being mentally ill ended up being thrown around as an insult. That would worry me.

I know that some people in the US, some commentators, are not proffering that analysis by way of insult: they are actually saying it because they are genuinely concerned.

From the outside, I think it is very difficult to judge someone else's mental health. Certainly you and I sitting here: you know, neither of us have met Donald Trump, as far as I know. I certainly haven't. I don't believe you have.

DAVID LIPSON: No, I haven't. (Laughs)

JULIA GILLARD: So we really can't offer some analysis of a man we've never met. And in any event, and we're not mental health professionals.

So I think there is some need for caution here. But I do think, if President Trump continues with some of the tweeting, et cetera, that we have seen, that this will be in the dialogue.

DAVID LIPSON: One of the groups in this country in which depression is very prevalent is the LGBTI community. Why is that?

JULIA GILLARD: I think communities that feel stigmatised, potentially isolated, discriminated against, do have high instances of mental ill health. And that's not surprising.

If your day-to-day experience was one that came with some trauma, because you felt people weren't treating you decently, respectfully, then people will internalise that. This is very much the experience of many Indigenous Australians too, though for different reasons. Different kinds of discrimination are at play.

So, whenever we see stigma, we do have to address it because we know that it affects people's mental wellbeing and we do know then that the compounding stigma is: then there is a stigma around mental health and saying that you're in trouble.

So we can't let either of those things continue to exist and put people in difficult situations and then prevent them from reaching out.

DAVID LIPSON: There have been a lot of claims that a plebiscite on same-sex marriage would exacerbate some of those mental health issues for people in that community. Do you have a view on that - a strong view - in regards to a plebiscite?

JULIA GILLARD: When I had the great honour of giving the Michael Kirby Lecture in 2015, I did put the view that a plebiscite wasn't necessary; that this is something that Parliament should decide with a conscience vote on all sides. That was my view when I was Australian prime minister as well.

As we know, the legislation for a plebiscite hasn't got through the current Federal Parliament. I mean, who knows what the future could bring?

Should we ever have such a plebiscite, then I think there would be a lot of weight on everyone, including all political participants from all political parties, to make sure that the debate was respectful. I would be concerned that that kind of debate could have within it some very jarring voices, which would compound this problem of stigma that we have been talking about.

DAVID LIPSON: Sitting in the position that you hold now, do you regret not just getting it done when you were prime minister?

JULIA GILLARD: It would have been impossible to get it done when I was prime minister. What I did was made sure that Labor had a conscience vote. The other side of politics did not. And it's impossible for same-sex marriage to get through the Australian Parliament until all sides of politics have a conscious vote.

DAVID LIPSON: As you say, you don't weigh into domestic politics. You're very careful about that. I am interested, though, in your view on the world at the moment. Trump, Brexit, Macron to an extent: there seems to be a real disruption to politics as we know it or knew it. Is there a common thread running through all of these things? Or are they all separate? What do you think is causing this?

JULIA GILLARD: I think that there is a common thread in Western democracies and it's manifesting itself in different ways in different places.

But the common thread, I think, is: the rhythm of politics has been profoundly disrupted by the changes to the media cycle and the advent of social media. So the way in which the electorate perceives and sees politics and politicians is different now.

Now, some of that has got good sides to it: more information than we've ever had before; more direct engagement. But there's also more echo chambers, more bubbles where people can get trapped and they never get the full facts about an issue.

They believe passionately that president Obama wasn't born in the US and nothing that ever comes on their news feed contradicts that fundamental lie about president Obama. So I think that that's reshaping democratic debates.

And then, of course, there's the swirling debates and lived experience of inequality, of economic disruption, of: where are the jobs going to be? All of the insecurity that comes with that, all of that insecurity as communities change in terms of who lives there.

You know, many people feel discomfited that their community doesn't look the way it used to 10 or 15 years ago. There are still the continuing changes in the relations between men and women. The gender revolution continues.

So there is so much change and I think you have got people who are adapting to that well and thriving in it. I think you have got people who are anxious about it. And I think you have got people who are saying, "Stop! I want to go back. All of this is wrong." And that's the rhythm of politics around the world.

DAVID LIPSON: And that inequality seems to have given rise to some pretty unexpected figures, I suppose: Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn. The success that they've had openly advocating for socialism. Did you ever think you would see that in politics in your time?

JULIA GILLARD: It does give me cause for a smile that, apparently, the champions of youth today are these older men with quite old economic models.

But what I think it's telling us is: people are looking for some shifts to politics as usual. They are looking for something different. And Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders channelled that energy of wanting something different, particularly from young voters.

And then there are some very angry voters, who feel like the world is changing in ways they are really very unhappy about. And that has given rise to (phenomena) like Brexit and Donald Trump.

So this tapestry is there before us. I think, in Australian politics and in our nation, we can congratulate ourselves in some ways that, whilst we have rising inequality, we don't have the dimensions of the shift that many other nations do; that we have managed to see continuous economic growth; that we have been generally fairly good at reaching out and helping people who are at risk of being left behind by economic change - by no means perfect, but I think in Australia we do think about structural adjustment policies.

I, of course, would say that that's a Labor legacy, but I think that that is now thought about by both sides of politics. So we get some things right. But you know, in our politics too there are some of these seams of discontent and that does shape political responses.

DAVID LIPSON: Julia Gillard, great to talk to you again. Thanks for joining us on Lateline.

JULIA GILLARD: Thank you very much.

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