

MARION SCRYMGOUR  
AFTER RECEIVING  
AN HONORARY  
DOCTORATE FROM  
SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

*tq pioneers*  
**MARION  
SCRYMGOUR**







*Marion Scrymgour admits that friends and family thought she had gone mad or become a masochist – or both – when she left one brutally tough job for another.*

But the likeable, no-nonsense Aboriginal Territorian didn't see it that way.

She enjoys fixing things, creating order out of chaos, developing good governance, getting people to do what they are paid to do.

Marion was called in three years ago to fix the Tiwi Islands Regional Council, which was at war with the Tiwi Land Council.

Nobody doubts that she did an almost miraculous job – the two sides are friends again and driving a tremendous economic development program on the islands.

After a job well done, Marion immediately accepted the role of chief executive of the Northern Land

Council, which was being torn apart by internecine warfare.

She says the staff were “traumatised” by the raging arguments, which were played out in sordid detail day after day in the media.

Again, her *modus operandi* – listening to both sides, pushing for compromise, soothing egos, reminding protagonists of the greater good and, if necessary, cracking heads – seems to have worked and the NLC is beginning to function effectively again.

“I had to remind people that this organisation is more important than any individual,” Marion says. “And I’ve been reminded of that over the past few weeks travelling to Aboriginal communities and seeing the poverty and desperation and disadvantage.

“These are the people we are supposed to be helping.”

She admits that the conciliatory work on the Tiwi Islands and now at the NLC in Darwin can be exhausting at times.

“I’m always talking, talking, talking. Shit, I do a lot of talking nowadays.”

She is dedicated to helping Aboriginal people create an economy that benefits them – and raised a few eyebrows when she suggested even looking to China for investment.

“The NLC is about making sure investment benefits Aboriginal people.”

Marion was born in the old Darwin hospital at Myilly Point.

She was the middle child of seven sisters and three brothers brought up in a working class home in Darwin.

“When the others were scrapping I was the peacemaker.”

Her mother, Clare Mwalaminni, was a Tiwi who was diagnosed with Hansen’s disease, better known as leprosy, after being evacuated to Victoria during the Second World War and was promptly sent back to the Northern Territory.

She was treated at the leprosariums at Channel Island and, later, East Arm

– and even started working there by performing basic nursing duties.

“Her disease was under control. We used to visit the leprosariums and thought nothing of it.”

Marion’s father, Jack, was a member of the Stolen Generations – he was taken from his Aboriginal mother and white father at Ti Tree in Central Australia and sent to Croker Island.

During the war, he took part in missionary Margaret Somerville’s Long Walk Home to avoid Japanese bombing.

Jack Scrymgour taught his children an invaluable lesson: if you want something, work for it – don’t expect other people to give it to you.

He also told them: “I’ve got no money to give you but I’ll give you something more valuable – an education.”

Marion went to St Mary’s Catholic Primary School and O’Loughlin College.

The kids spent happy breaks on the Tiwi Islands.

“My dad had issues and mum would pack us up and take us to the islands. We loved it and were sad when we had to go back to Darwin. They were the best of days.

“And my mum was happiest when she was there. It was her home – they were her people, her culture.”

Not surprisingly, Marion’s dad was angry when Marion quit school halfway through year 12 because she wanted to start earning money.

But she went on to enjoy a highly successful career as a health service administrator in Katherine.

They were heady times – the NLC was flexing its muscles over land rights and the Rights for Whites campaign was in full swing.

Marion got little help from CLP Cabinet Minister and Katherine MLA Mike Reed in her push to improve health services for Indigenous people but remembers his colleague Steve Hatton with affection.

“He was fantastic – he did his best to help.”

In 2001, she was elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for the seat of Arafura, which covers the Tiwi Islands.

Marion was the first Indigenous woman in Parliament and later became the first Indigenous leader of an Australian government in history when she was made acting Chief Minister.

Many opposed Labor’s decision to

choose a woman candidate for an Aboriginal seat.

But she had the backing of two powerful Territorians – Opposition Leader Clare Martin, who would steer the ALP to its first victory in 2001, and football legend Maurice Rioli, who was retiring as the local MLA.

“It was a big gamble, especially for Clare,” Marion says. “I wanted to help create a pathway for young women.”

She endured one of the most tumultuous years of her life in 2009.

While suffering severe thyroid problems, Marion quit Labor over the homeland policy – making Paul Henderson’s administration a minority government – and sat in Parliament as an Independent.

There was a subplot to the drama – Marion’s intense dislike of fellow Labor MLA Alison Anderson.

“We couldn’t sit in the same room.”

The two had fallen out when Marion helped journalist Russell Skelton in writing his scathing best-selling book *King Brown Country* about Ms Anderson’s administration of the poorest local government council in Australia.

“She never forgave me.”

Six months later, Ms Anderson walked out on the ALP, prompting Marion to return to the Labor fold and save the Government from collapse.

“I was happy to be back. I’ve always been a Labor woman. My father was a strong Labor supporter – he always said Labor was the party of the workers.”

Her father told her something else: “Be true to your convictions, even if that’s unpalatable at times – don’t care what other people think. You must be able to sleep peacefully at night.”

Marion, who has four children, one of them a clinical psychologist, quit Parliament in 2012.

She is now 59.

“I’ll retire after this job,” she says. “I think I’ve deserved the rest.”

MARION WAS THE FIRST INDIGENOUS WOMAN IN PARLIAMENT AND LATER BECAME THE FIRST INDIGENOUS LEADER OF AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IN HISTORY WHEN SHE WAS MADE ACTING CHIEF MINISTER.

