

Where I Belong

Episode 3: Sallyanne Atkinson AO

Podcast transcript

Wendy Love:

Imagine it's Saturday afternoon. The sun is shining over Brisbane, there's a gentle breeze – a perfect day to head to South Bank for an early dinner al fresco on Little Stanley Street and go for a walk along the river. You stroll up Queen Street and over the Victoria Bridge, but when you get to the other side (crickets chirping)...there are no restaurants in sight, no lagoons to swim in, no parklands or playgrounds, no Wheel of Brisbane. Just an all-but-abandoned industrial hub of old wharves and warehouses, and an unused stretch of grassy riverbanks.

Hard to imagine, right? But not that long ago, in the early 1980s, South Bank as we know it didn't exist. The banks of the Brisbane River were dotted with industrial buildings, and this blows my mind, outdoor dining was banned in the city. But that all changed thanks in large part, to the vision of this woman...

Sound courtesy of SEVEN NEWS *Flashback: The Battle for City Hall*

Sallyanne Atkinson: I'm proud and as I said I do feel slightly overwhelmed.

News Reporter: Earlier, Liberal Leader Sallyanne Atkinson seemed overwhelmed that she had won the Lord Mayoralty with such a large majority.

WL:

In 1985, Sallyanne Atkinson was elected Lord Mayor of Brisbane. She was the first Liberal Mayor after 24 years of Labor. Not only that, she was also the very first, and to date only, female Lord Mayor of Brisbane.

Sallyanne was 42 at the time, and she had a lot of ideas for Brisbane. Ideas that would eventually bring about the city we live and play in today – a place that looks very different from how it did 35 years ago.

MUSIC

WL:

But how did she do it? How did this woman, this mother of five children become not only the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, tasked with overseeing the largest local Council in Australia during a time when men dominated politics; when women often stopped pursuing careers after they married,

but was also behind an ambitious vision for Brisbane. One that included arts and culture into the city's planning, one that sought to embrace a more outdoor lifestyle. One that saw the river as an asset to the people who live here, not just a place for industry and smokestacks.

Sallyanne Atkinson:

The river was something I felt very strongly about, that we just hadn't made enough of the river. And now, of course, with all the bikeways and the walkways, you know, we are genuinely and truly a river city. And I just thought that was something that was very important. And I thought that the Brisbane River was significant, for the city. It's one of the things that the city has taken, it's whole character and personality from: the river itself.

WL:

The story of Brisbane's transformation actually starts with the story of the city's first, and so far only, woman Mayor.

THEME MUSIC

WL:

From Museum of Brisbane, you're listening to *Where I Belong*, a podcast that tells stories about fascinating and creative people, whose lives have been shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love and in this episode: Sallyanne Atkinson, the story of a woman who shaped this city herself.

THEME MUSIC FADES

WL:

I was one when Sallyanne Atkinson was elected Lord Mayor in 1985. I was also living in California. I came to Brisbane in 2003 so, I didn't know all that much about her until pretty recently - in fact a lot of my friends here don't know much about her.

My brother-in-law Richard does though, he was in his late teens when she was Lord Mayor. We talked recently about that time, about Sallyanne.

He remembers when there was no real food culture. When outside dining wasn't allowed - something I really can't get my head around, considering how pretty much every spot these days has outdoor tables.

Richard Love:

It was not an outdoorsy cafe city at all, that we think of today.

WL:

But what really struck me was what he had to say about Sallyanne's legacy. This is a guy whose politics would not typically be in line with the Liberal Party's.

RL:

But I guess in Sallyanne's case she was, you know, she was a genuinely respected person who, you know, pulled her weight at any table she sat at with international guests. And really, she pulled off a lot of miraculous things for Brisbane at a time when we were just a pretty sleepy, country town. You'd look back and you'd forget the politics, because what she'd achieved was greater than, you know, what her party was trying to achieve.

WL:

Sallyanne had zero political aspirations growing up. If you'd asked her when she was a little girl if she wanted to be Mayor someday, she would have said, "what's that?"

SA:

What I really wanted to do, and I've never confessed this before, was to be Miss Australia (laughs). I don't know if it was a career or a job, but I always thought that would be a wonderful aspiration.

WL:

At that time though, the late 40s and 50s, girls were expected to become teachers, nurses or secretaries, if they worked at all. None of which appealed to her.

She spent part of her childhood in Sri Lanka, and some of what she saw there made a big imprint on her. She says her parents were typical white middle class colonial people, her Irish father grew up in Sri Lanka, yet never spoke a word of Sinhalese.

SA:

And even as a small child, I could see the inequities.

WL:

She says she could see how awful the people of Sri Lanka were treated.

SA:

The patronizing, condescending attitude and the sense of entitlement, which I knew was wrong. And when Ceylon got its independence, I can remember my father, say how ungrateful they were. I mean, you know, "after all we've done for them." And I remember thinking that Dad, you've got your living from them. This is their country. And so that certainly always affected my thinking.

WL:

After Sri Lanka, Sallyanne went to high school on the Gold Coast.

SA:

My mother and my sister and I would come up by train to South Brisbane station. It took two hours and then we'd get out of the train at South Brisbane, and we'd get on the tram and we'd go to the Valley to buy school things. And then we'd come back into the city, and we'd have tea at the Shingle Inn and we'd ride up to the Clock Tower and then we'd go back home again.

WL:

She moved up to Brisbane in 1960 to study at the University of Queensland. She was one of very few female students; she also worked as a journalist. And then, one day in 1979, Sallyanne found herself elected to the city council. All thanks to what was essentially a plumbing problem on the road she lived on in Indooroopilly, in Brisbane's Western suburbs.

SA:

A water main had burst in our street. And we lived at the top of the street, which is a hilly street, we're at the top so, the water ran down from our place. And people used to say, will you fix it, go on, you know... so I went to see the people in the council, and they fixed it. And wow, that was, gosh, get things done, that was rather great.

WL:

As it happened a councilman had just stepped down, so she decided to run and she won.

MUSIC

WL:

Now in 1979, the year Sallyanne is elected to council, there were only two women on the council and zero women in the House of Representatives in Canberra, not one. So being a woman in politics was very unusual.

SA:

And it was certainly not usual, to have a woman with five children.

WL:

At her previous job, as a part-time journalist, she'd bring the kids along with her. They'd sit on her desk or crawl around at her feet. The second she won the Indooroopilly seat, she hired help. She knew the only way she could manage the councilor role was if she employed someone else to run her house – a job she says she really struggled to do, and one of the reasons she was so keen to work outside of it.

Another thing that set Sallyanne apart was that she was the only person on the council with a university degree.

SA:

I was a journalist, so I was really interested in what was going on. And I did a lot of reading, and I went to talk to lots of people. In sort of, later years, I was rather aghast and appalled at my brashness.

WL:

She was just 36 when she was elected councilor for Indooroopilly, but she had the confidence and sheer boldness to not let her age or inexperience phase her. She'd rock up to the offices of local ministers full of questions she wanted the answers to and fly down to Sydney to meet with officials there. And she took seminars to learn all about town planning.

SA:

There's no other aspect of the council more important than good planning, really. And it's the most creative process in council. I mean, public transport's important, picking up the garbage is important. But in the area of planning is where you actually create a city, where you make a city, where you decide what kind of a city this is going to be. So, I thought, you know, that was really fantastic to have. That's why being in local government is so rewarding, so exciting, and so fascinating; because it's a very creative level of government, you have a chance to actually shape a city, to do things. And it ties in very well with the arts and the whole creative process there.

WL:

Sallyanne loved being a councilor. She loved Brisbane. But over the years she became more and more bothered by something many of us have heard or perhaps even expressed ourselves.

SA:

We were very used to what I would call the Great Southern put down.

WL:

Which is to say that Brisbane was nothing but a big country town compared to Sydney and Melbourne: a cultural and culinary wasteland. And they weren't shy about telling us - the way Sallyanne saw it, Brisbane had a confidence problem.

SA:

So, Brisbane, because we were settled by convicts who were the worst of the worst the Government in London said, "send the really bad ones up to Brisbane". And I think that was sort of important for us. So, we've been sort of defending our reputation for many years. So for many years, Brisbane had quite a defensive personality, a bit of a chip on its shoulder.

WL:

She says she realised the ubiquity of this attitude about Brisbane a couple of years before she became councilor. She'd written a book about Brisbane and the University of Queensland Press made calls around the country to promote it. One of the calls was to a magazine in Sydney...

SA

...to say we've got this, you know, guide to Brisbane, and whoever on the other end of the phone said, "oh, one page or two?" There was just this huge condescension about Brisbane, how could you possibly, oh, clever person like you... how could you possibly live in Brisbane?

WL:

Sallyanne could not understand this mentality. She'd always considered Brisbane a great place, it just needed to take advantage of its natural assets - the river, the weather...

MUSIC

WL:

She was determined to fix Brisbane's self-esteem problem and prove to the rest of the country that her city was worth boasting about. And she was filled to the brim with ideas for how to make that

happen. So, in 1985, after serving six years as a councilor, she decided to run for Lord Mayor. This was not an easy decision. Indooroopilly was a safe Liberal seat. If she were to give up the seat to run for Mayor and lost the election, she'd be out. No seat on the council, no office of the Lord Mayor.

SA:

So, that was a very, that was like walking to the edge of the cliff and going, "jumping or not jumping?" But I've always been a bit of a risk taker and I really understood then the positive benefits of taking a risk, because the only way you can move forward with anything is taking a risk.

WL:

And risky it was! Brisbane had been a Labor town forever. The Labor Party had held the reins for 24 years. And on top of that, well, she was a woman.

SA:

People thought it was a very stupid thing to do. Most people in the party advised me against it. My mother advised me against it, she said Brisbane's always been a Labor town, dear.

WL:

But Sallyanne was emboldened.

SA:

I just... I could feel in my bones that Brisbane was ready for something different. And I was different. I think the fact that I was different, made the difference. The fact that I was young, I was female, I was University educated, I had a family.

WL:

So, she ran.

Sound courtesy of SEVEN NEWS *Flashback: The Battle for City Hall*

Chorus: Oh! Sallyanne can, Sallyanne can, Sallyanne can...

WL:

A team of women supported her, running heaps of campaign fund-raising events: morning teas, cocktails parties and family picnics. They sent out the invitations, put up decorations, cooked all the

food. And at the age of 42, Sallyanne Atkinson defeated the incumbent Roy Harvey and made history by becoming the first female Lord Mayor of Brisbane.

MUSIC

WL:

Coming up after a quick break, what it was like running the largest city council in Australia in a political landscape dominated by men. And how Sallyanne's plan of a better Brisbane kicked off with World Expo '88.

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WL:

Sallyanne Atkinson celebrated her win that night in 1985 at the Coronation Motel by the river in Milton. The motel was demolished in 2002 but was a popular spot in its heyday.

SA:

There was a great feeling of excitement around, just because of this whole different thing. We'd had the Commonwealth Games a couple of years before, so Brisbane was ready for something new and different, and I was it.

WL:

She was there with her support team, who she credits for devoting so much of their time to getting her elected. And as I said, a lot of them were women: her friends. Most of Sallyanne's female friends didn't work outside the home at the time. She was grateful to them for the support they gave her during the campaign, but also with things like school pick up.

SA:

In fact, at the local kindergarten at St Lucia, there were only two working mothers. And the other one was Quentin Bryce (laughing).

WL:

That would be Dame Quentin Bryce, the former Governor-General of Australia.

MUSIC

WL:

Now that she was the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, the head of the largest city council in the country, Sallyanne had enormous power.

SA:

I could have said, "paint those buses pink" and they'd have said, "oh, what shade would you like Lord Mayor?"

WL:

And she was keen to flex her leadership muscles. The Premier of Queensland in '85 was Joh Bjelke-Petersen, a controversial figure in the state's politics to say the least, but Sallyanne says she worked just fine with him because there was a clear separation.

SA:

He didn't express it like this, but it was "you look after the city, dear". He did call me dear. "You look after the city, dear and I look after the rest of the state." And that worked very well.

WL:

One of the first decisions she had to make went right to the heart of what she wanted to change about Brisbane. There was a plan for a freeway to go along Eagle Street in the CBD, right beside the river. Well, that would be antithetical to the vision Sallyanne wanted for Brisbane - a vision that would give

people more access to the river, not less. There was already a freeway on the west side of the CBD along river, the riverside expressway. So, with no time to lose Sallyanne confronted the planning manager.

SA:

It was a bloke for whom I had great admiration and, indeed, affection. But I said, "why is that road going ahead?" And he said, "oh, blah blah blah blah," and I said, "well, no, that's not very satisfactory. What will happen if the road doesn't go ahead?" And he went, "oh, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" - "that's not very satisfactory, either". And I said, "well, I don't think we were going to build that road." And I remember him saying, "well if we don't, I would have to resign Lord Mayor." And I said, "well, obviously one of us has to go, and I've just been elected." So, he did resign. And the road did not go ahead.

MUSIC

WL:

So, because of that decision - one of Sallyanne's first - we have Eagle Street Pier, a riverfront precinct in the CBD where people walk and cycle along the river and dine out at restaurants with panoramic views over the water, out to the Story Bridge.

But that development took time. It was another spot along the river that would be the first during her tenure as Mayor to be completely transformed.

But before we get to that, what was it like being the first woman to lead Brisbane? There were small things, like how much more effort she had to put into her appearance than a man would. All those shoulder pads. She didn't care for fashion, but tried. So if she was told to swap her flat shoes for high heels, she'd acquiesce and do it, despite the discomfort.

SA:

And I think that's very important, to give in when things don't matter all that much. You know, make a stand on the big issues, make a stand on matters of principle. But do not mess around with little things. So, if the boys want me to wear high heels, okay I'll wear high heels.

WL:

She had to put up with behavior, with language that was often quite patronising and dismissive. But she learned to turn her woman-ness into a strength - to use it to her advantage to get things done.

SA:

You have to remember that the council had been run by the Labor Party for 24 years. There were certain ways that they would do things and quite often I'd be told, "well, that's not how we do things." And I'd go, "no, but that's how we're going to do things now." And I could almost see them going "oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Yes, well, that's what you get isn't it, when you've got a woman running things", and there was all that sort of stuff. But I ignored all that. You have to sort of rise above all that. I mean, when Russ Hinze would call me "girlie" or "pet", he was the Minister for local government. I needed him, I needed money, I didn't want to antagonize him. And it was to my advantage in dealing with Joh Bjelke-Petersen as Premier, because he had a lot of trouble ever being rude to a woman. Which he would have if I'd been a bloke, he could have got stuck into me, but I could tell how uncomfortable he was of, you know, doing things like that.

WL:

I'd like to say that kind of language would never fly now, but as has been made abundantly clear this year, there's still a heap of residue of that kind of culture in workplaces across the country. And then there were the things that served as stark reminders to Sallyanne that men were the norm in politics.

SA:

For example, there was no female toilet outside the council chamber. And to go to the loo, I would have to sort of run down a corridor. Or, I would go to the gents, and I would get one of my male colleagues to stand guard at the door whilst I went to the gents, you know, there were those sorts of things.

WL:

A lot of her job was making decisions, something she learned to be quite good at. She realised that her time before politics, when she was at home raising her children, actually primed her for Lord Mayor.

SA:

Probably the best training for me for running a city came from managing a house and five children. You know, you're sitting around the dinner table and somebody says, "he's got more than I've gotten", "you're nicer to him than you are to me." And you have to manage your household budget. And you know, you know, if you spend all your money on Monday, there's nothing going to be left by Friday. So these are very good training for business and certainly a very good training for running a city.

Sound Courtesy of and © The State of Queensland (Department of the Premier and Cabinet) 2021

It will be the biggest event of Australia's bicentennial. It will be the major attraction in the world next year. It is the 600-million-dollar World Expo '88 in Brisbane...

WL:

I can remember when I first arrived in Brisbane in August of 2003. I was told by pretty much everyone about this incredible party back in 1988 that lasted for six months and helped put Brisbane on the map.

Sound Courtesy of and © The State of Queensland (Department of the Premier and Cabinet) 2021

Chorus: A new world in each pavilion. 40 countries including the US, Russia, China, Japan, Australia...

WL:

If you went, you probably have a lot of strong memories about how it felt to be there.

Sound Courtesy of and © The State of Queensland (Department of the Premier and Cabinet) 2021

Chorus: Together, we'll show the world!

WL:

People still talk about it today, 33 years later, as this pivotal moment in time, when the image and the spirit of Brisbane changed forever.

SA:

Expo '88 was an enormous event for the city. It was an enormous event, full stop. Six months of partying and going out and all that sort of thing. The world coming to Brisbane, but most important, I think, was that it really gave people in Brisbane confidence in themselves. The rest of the world was coming to Brisbane and going, "wow, what a great city this is."

MUSIC

WL:

And it all took place on that neglected site in South Brisbane that I talked about at the start of this episode. An area on Turrbal and Yuggera land. What we now know as South Bank, across the river from the CBD. A whopping 40 hectares - more than five Lang Parks - was reborn for Expo '88.

There were rollercoasters and dodgem cars, even a monorail. There were street performers and fireworks, live performances, and food from all over the world. Maybe you remember the Swiss Pavilion with its 40-meter high indoor ski slope, the Japanese tea gardens, the water skiers performing up and down the Brisbane River. Or maybe the highlight was getting to sit in the driver's seat of KITT, the artificially intelligent car from the show *Knight Rider*. Whatever the memory, Expo '88 got people seeing Brisbane through a bright new lens.

SA:

I think we were very lucky that we were able to have Expo on that site, on the banks of the river. Because I think that Expo site has been the most significant change to Brisbane, certainly in my life.

MUSIC

WL:

And, thanks to Expo '88, the ban on outdoor dining was finally lifted and trading hours were extended into the evening. So instead of heading home for the night at 5:30pm – yes, that's what used to happen... people hung out, and dined out in open air restaurants, played along the river and experienced what Brisbane could be, even after the Expo ended. And for Sallyanne, the Expo brought some exciting perks to the Lord Mayorship.

SA:

For me, it was terrific 'cause every day I'd go to lunch there and you know, one day it'd be lunch with the Queen and another day it'd be lunch with the King of Spain, another day it'd be lunch with Maggie Thatcher and Dennis. Yeah, it was a wonderful experience.

WL:

It's important to note here though that the lead up to Expo was a traumatic time for communities in the surrounding areas. A lot of people were displaced due to rent increases and the removal of low-cost housing. Many fought to stop the event.

MUSIC

WL:

But despite some pushback, Expo '88 was deemed a huge success. Eighteen and a half million people came. Queenslanders began to feel pride in their capital city, and tourists finally began to see Brisbane as a proper city, not a big country town.

But it wasn't the Expo alone that spurred the permanent shift in Brisbane's identity. It was what happened after; what Sallyanne helped make happen. The original plan was to sell off the Expo site to developers, but like Eagle Street, Sallyanne was adamant it remained accessible all along that stretch of the river that goes for about a kilometer. She wanted to save it for open spaces, public parklands, walkways and outdoor dining.

SA:

One of the things that I had to do was fight several premiers to get it. I mean, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, God bless him, had said, "Expo is not going to cost the people of Queensland anything at all, because we're going to sell off that land for commercial real estate." And once again bringing my town planning hat, we did not want to have a sort of a second CBD across there as they have in Sydney. We always learn from other cities. And so, we had to sort of struggle hard to get Expo kept, you know, as South Bank, and we did.

WL:

After the success of South Bank, Sallyanne set her sights on other spots along the river. She wanted to open up more places to the public.

SA:

I remember when we allocated that walk in front of the heritage hotel at the end of Edward Street. We specified that they had to leave a certain amount of land as public walkway in front and the hotel operators, oh, nearly had collective nervous breakdown. "Oh, we're going to have riffraff coming into the hotel" and "Oh dear, it'll be terrible." No, it's been a wonderful success, it was the same with the Botanic Gardens. That was another thought. There was a fence, a huge fence between the Botanic Gardens and QUT, the university. And getting that taken down took years and years because the Botanic Gardens people said, "Oh, we'll have students playing football on our lawns. Oh, couldn't have that". And the QUT people said, "Oh, and we'll have the riffraff, the hobos of the city will be coming into QUT." Well I walked down there yesterday, and it's great that you can just walk alongside those buildings at QUT and just sort of fall into the Gardens, as it were.

WL:

By saving all of those river frontages for public use, people can walk from the Eagle Street Pier, along the Botanical gardens, over the bridge to South Bank, and up to Kangaroo point. We've embraced the river, and life alongside it, just as Sallyanne hoped.

MUSIC

WL:

Sallyanne served two terms as Lord Mayor of Brisbane, during which she established Australia's first ever cultural policy for local government. But when she ran for a third term in '91, she lost by a surprisingly large swing to Labor's Jim Soorley, who ended up expanding on her vision for Brisbane. She was shattered by the loss but picked herself up and eventually accepted a role as Australia's Senior Trade Commissioner to France.

SA:

And I can remember agonizing over that, you know, because it was leaving, you know, and kids but Eloise, my daughter said, "Mum, how many women of your age get off for three years in Paris?". Okay, all right, I went.

WL:

Her youngest was 21 at the time, and it was time for Sallyanne to begin a new adventure. Sallyanne never did achieve her dream of becoming Miss Australia, but she's okay with that. She's lived a very full, stimulating life, and she gets to reflect on Brisbane's transformation quite often. Her apartment isn't far from South Bank.

SA:

And I go down there most days, I'm usually walking to something or other. And it is really wonderful to see that so many people can use that to picnic, there are families picnicking, there are people in the pool. Sometimes there's open air, you know, cinemas there. It is so well used. But what I like about it is it's used by people who perhaps couldn't afford to do it otherwise, and it's free. And that's terrific.

MUSIC

WL:

For now, Sallyanne remains the only woman to have been Lord Mayor of Brisbane, a distinction she hopes changes soon. And the Lord Mayorship isn't the only glass ceiling she's broken. She was also the first woman on the boards of a number of companies. Honestly, the woman hasn't stopped. She was the special representative for Queensland in Southeast Asia, the Chair of Queensland Tourism, she's written a book, been given an Order of Australia. You get the picture.

She's also the current Chairman of Museum of Brisbane, which presents this podcast. I don't think Sallyanne will ever stop raving about her city. So, to end this episode, here she is gushing over one of her favourite things about this place.

SA:

We have I think the best arts hub of any city in the country and probably one of the best in the world, with the performing arts at Southbank, the Performing Arts Center, the Museum, the Library, the Gallery, all close together and within walking distance of the CBD. I mean, how good is that? But, you know, I just happen to believe that the arts are very important because they're an expression of how people are and they inspire people. So they raise people up, they also give people a chance to express themselves.

END

For more on this episode and the rest of the *Where I Belong* series, head to museumofbrisbane.com.au and click Watch & Listen under the Explore tab.

Thanks so much for listening. If you liked what you heard, please recommend us to your friends, write us a review and go listen to the rest of the series.

Where I Belong is written and produced on Turrabul and Yaggera land by me, Wendy Love.

Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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