

The Glass Ceiling

By Lloyd Nelson

ONE

Maxine Carthew is finishing her working life today, not that it's a premature retirement. She's 83 and the real big boss of her Firm - Australian Primary and Secondary Conglomerate Smothers Holdings Pty Ltd. She's given many interviews in her time, all on matters strictly business. She has been happy to inform the market when pressed to do so on her brisk and busy firm's new innovations in some related field or other. She has always closely refrained from any interviews on her private life, except on pastimes. Thus when one of her race horses wins a big one, she is quite happy to talk on the trials and tribulations of getting them up to such an event. Similarly, if she has trounced someone at real Championship Chess or Bridge, she is prepared to prattle on a bit about this, and as the press concedes, she does it both wittily and well. Today she is relaxing a bit, it's nearly all over.

The interviewer is getting a tad personal.

"Ms Carthew," she pontificates, "You have had an amazingly successful career in business, a marvellous pastimes career as a winner, and the one term you served as a Senator of the Australian Parliament, is still held up by politics lecturers as a Tour De Force never equalled in this country. Why did you not go on, you were a certainty for re election?"

La Carthew cogitates this question. It will, she fears, lead to many more. She sits back a bit more and lights up a long dark cheroot taken from a silver Grecian box.

"Miss Interviewer, you are becoming a tad prolix.

This is my last day at work and I'll miss it like all hell. But the time comes for everything, like the famous passage in Ecclesiastics 3, which I am known to have quoted a bit at Eulogies involving friends and close friends that have moved on as it were: For everything there is a season. However, I will answer your question and allow you just one more. I'm retiring you know, not becoming garrulous.”

This interviewer like many others in the Australian Media, has suffered in the past trying to get information out of this rich and famous woman and has her nose metaphorically bloodied in the attempt.

“I was asked”, she said, and “to complete the unexpired part of the term of the well known Senator who went to Iraq just once too often. The P.M. gave me the baton, pointed the direction of the day, since I might say well proved to be the right one and said, ‘Run Senator Rabbit, Run’. So I did. After Iraq and the new improved Kyoto, I could see only a long period of unexciting Parliamentary work, and I had better and more profitable things to do at Smothers Holdings Pty Ltd.”

“But you knocked back being Ambassador to Greece”, she says.

“Is that your last question?” Ms Maxine asks.

“No”, says the girl, “an addendum to the one I’ve initially asked.”

“You’re sailing close to the wind girlie,” the tough old bird says. “Hmmm, it lacked challenge and I don’t like Greek food.”

“My last question.” the interviewer says.

“It had better be.” the interviewed one says.

“Well you have succeeded so spectacularly, that you seem to have disproved the long held opinion in this country, that the glass ceiling prevents women succeeding in corporate life.”

And she goes on, “It seems that you have done

away entirely with the glass ceiling in your huge company, where every C.E.O is a woman, as are your board members. Yet again with women achieving so much spectacular and profitable success under your stewardship, you totally preclude them from entering into businesswomen's' associations, giving interviews, lectures and playing a part in service clubs and so on. And despite all that back turning on the tribal rites of passage in the business world, you personally gave last years series of Boyer lectures and

Maxine holds up her hand like a traffic policeman.

"You're over the top and now, out girlie," she says, "But I will make a final comment on your comments, and I mean final! Firstly, the glass ceiling is always there, it's there all over this sorry world, but if you're quick enough and smart enough, you can recognize it as being only a barrier, and like all barriers, it can be ducked around, or replaced."

"How replaced?", the girl asks.

Maxine is launched now and just shakes a reproving finger at her persecutor. "The big thing is," Maxine says, "is that women are complex creatures and have just so many more complex decisions to make than men do. They can also juggle the many demands of home and work, and they are much more able than men, whose path is simple, yobbish and undemanding. Our country is seemingly committed to importing high price dudes. Look at our telecommunications companies, banks and so on. We just hunt the world to finds dudes and give them high cost sinecures and soft billets. Would any half sensible housewife approved our joining with the Yanks on the Iraq Disaster, privatizing A.W.B, putting that mob in charge at Telstra, and so on? Turning to your Rites of Business passage, would any half sensible housewife approve top money for top jobs and then let the saviours

they hire, piss off in every direction on business councils and business seminars, Rotary Club memberships and do little successful work. Oh I know, it's all judged on the bottom line. Just look at how the banks screw their customers on charges, and their staff on unpaid work to achieve this. And if the shares go up and down, it's usually due to the vagaries of the market, the intrusion of equity funds and so on. Short of an abysmal disaster, the super duper C.E.O's don't have that much effect on the bottom line. Finally, I'll wrap this up by saying - show me a business disaster of magnitude, and I guarantee I can say, of course it's a disaster, its run by a man. My mob is super successful, they are all women, and they well know that survival in our, or any business is to give the customer what they want. That and dealing honestly is all the business intelligence that anyone, anyone at all, needs."

TWO

She rises and nods to her secretary to show her interviewer out . The secretary is a male. Maxine takes wry amusement from this. Even some of them have their uses, she thinks. Maxine is not anti men (away from the business world) in fact she has had quite a varied career with men, here and there. She sits back in her chair, opens the drawer and pours a stiff glassful of Cognac. She sips and casts her mind back to the glass ceiling. It's quite a trip.

She comes from a farming family, goes to school at Gundagai. In fact, she still owns the family town home there, not the farm, of course but an interesting step roofed brick



cottage, which in later years, she has a very good interior designer do over, and a very good garden designer plant and reticulate. She goes up there once a month for a restful weekend, or when she has a lot of papers to read and absorb. It's dead quiet and and very pleasant, particularly in the green season, with a good tile fire going, and the snugness and cheerfulness of a place in the country in winter.

Maxine is a long limbed girl, gracefully long limbed. If she was a horse, it might be said, to have a bad head, that is to say she doesn't have a great profile. It's a bit off kilter with her outstanding long body, but she is not bad either. She realizes the power women have over men, in first year high school. She's tried the boys out a bit, here and there, finds them inept, gauche and not very satisfying. She decides to try a man.

Mr Travers, the Geography Master, keeps her back from after school sport one afternoon, to discuss her relatively poor performance in his subject. She sits in a front row seat until he is ready for her, and when she has his attention, she crosses her long, long legs. She's wearing only her short, pleated green sports tunic and under that only a G- String. His eyes roll around his head.

She stretches her legs and opens them a tad.

"Come on," she says, "but I'll expect much better marks in the future."

He drowns in her and also wakes her up to men/women things. He's a man and not without experience, while she has had little. They zap in and go and go.

It's very, very satisfying to both parties, although Maxine thinks later, she has earned her good marks in Geography.

It's a discreet arrangement and she keeps him discreetly on hand when she wants him, for the next four years, when she goes off to Sydney and then Melbourne, to qualify at Accountancy. Which she does, through, common in that time, Technical Schools. Once out, and with her Diploma, she goes banking. Can't see of a lot of future in it, works then for accounting firms and gets involved in auditing. It's all excellent experience and as before, she picks out a man that suits her (again a married man) and beckons when she wants him. It's not a bad arrangement. It fills needs without stupefying situations and she is as discreet as , very discreet as.

THREE

Her auditing firm, huge and international, can see a rising star when one comes along and they ship her off to England to work out of their Cripplegate Building. She thus audits firms of every shape and description and lives in a subsidized flat at the Barbican. Arthur Chesterton and Company treat her very well indeed, and for her part she contributes to the firm in no small way due to her ability to spot possibilities for improvement.

For the firm workers to have this willowy and not seemingly pushy girl working with them and joining in the firm romps here and there is a very acceptable thing. She becomes an item with the Chairman of one of their biggest clients, and again, he's married. Very nice house at Virginia Waters, a cottage in the Cotswolds, and a house in the Dordogne. She gets quite an insightful peek at the lives of the rich and famous and thinks their sex leanings are a tad kinky, but, when in Rome.

Maxine is also a very fine water colour artist and in later life, fine scenes she depicts so well, bob up in her collection and later in Australian exhibitions. It's quite a lucky hobby, as she stays relatively true to her English

man of choice and when the unavoidable commitment of wife, family and titled in-laws grabs him up and occupies his time, she simply picks up her sketching gear and does wonderful little London scenes; paints in the Dales and in the Lakes District. Perhaps her best work, and it is her very best, is what she does on Dartmoor, wonderful water colours of the unusual tors that dot this grim and graphic landscape.

At this time computerization is getting a go in England. It's slow starting, but eventually brings about a revolution in office work and office workers. Almost as drastic as what Rupert Murdoch's newspaper technology at Brixton does to the newspaper industry.

Maxine has accounting clients in the street of the fleet and spends time after work, drinking with clientele, workers and cronies in the marvelous little pubs that dot the area.

She also sees the scene and thunder of the production side; telephones ringing off the wall and desk, 80 to 100 people typing on all types of manual and electric typewriters - clatter, clatter everywhere. It all of course, goes with Murdoch, who pitches out every typewriter in the place and goes to dead quiet computers. As one journo famously says, 'A sea of quiet descended on our land.'

While Maxine is looking hard at computerland, she can see that the off line computers being sold in thousands, by I.C.L and others are big and bulky. She looks at the Kray and I.B.M huge main frame jobs in the Universities, and sees clearly that this step is only of an interim nature. She thinks the clever old Japanese, with their bent to making things compact, will blitz this field sooner or later.

FOUR



After three years, many fine painting's and much of this and that best not talked about, Maxine is recalled to Sydney life. They are pleased to have her back and bury her in a huge project involving some of their best

customers, who are huge in the booming new industry the Building Societies. The banks have been inward looking for years, management is very, very conservative. This is before the banks wake up from their long sleep and de-regulation shakes off the cobwebs and shackles. The Building Societies are doing what Maxine ever after advocates in later life for business success - give the customer what they want .

The banks trade five days - no Saturdays, are tight with their home loan lending and in general, a bit off putting for Joe Public's taste. Thus the Building Society pays daily interest; opens before 8.00a.m, works to 6.00p.m and is open Saturday mornings; lend with backing mortgage insurance up to 90 % of value and lend up to thirty year terms. They are flexible, very flexible, and business booms.

So much so, that two big societies have come to Arthur Chesterton and Co for help with a new development plan. The auditing firm taps their rising star for inputs. Boy, does she understand what it is they want. She works only and entirely on this interesting project, and in 14 days wraps up a position paper that changes the face of retail small banking in Sydney, and further

afield as time goes by. She advocates that both societies build a joint use computer centre, midway geographically between the two, go to passbook and investment certificate products to house the customers' money, and to take the revolutionary step of going directly on line, i.e. the computer interfaces with the customers passbook or investment certificate.

All computer work is put on discs three times a day, and stored away from the computer facility. It's all done with telephone lines, with the signals coming and going through a modem. Just one society, the Woolwich has been doing this in England, and saying little about it. Maxine, however has been through this with a fine tooth comb and knows it works. The discussions are intense, verging on being more intense. Sir Frank Lorimer, not so young but very bright, is won over. Lorimer is a big, handsome man; lives on Middle Harbour and sails in every Sydney - Hobart on his huge wooden huller, 'Pride of Pendragon'. His wife, Mary, is reputedly going down with breast cancer, which has spread.

After a very intense discussion which involves both the huge building society and the company structure members, and with plenty of opposition to the largely negative gurus staffing the three entities, Maxine carries the day.

She gets together a memorandum of understanding signed by Lorimer and McCatchnee, his counter-part at the other big society, Thus equipped, she flies out the following week to organize the poaching of the computer man running the Woolwich programme, and to the U.S.A to organize the computers for the work. It takes 22 weeks from agreement to pushing the first button. She buys the programme for huge money from Woolwich, and sternly adjures the computer nerds to alter nothing. She is very Oz in her directive.

"Please gentlemen and ladies," she says, "please

refrain from pissing in the soup. The world is at our feet in this industry provided and provided only, that we don't tinker with a proven product."

It's a huge success. Chesterton's lend her to the societies two days a week and farm her abilities out to McLachlan Merchant Bank for the other three. While she has been impressed with the earning capacity of the building societies, the earnings of a merchant bank quite astonish her.

Some weeks later Lorimer invites her out to lunch at his house, overlooking middle harbour. It has a beautiful flag stone terrace looking down through trees to the water. Maxine is a super fast water colourist, and while they are having a drink on the terrace, she retrieves her sketching gear from the boot of her Ford Fairlane. She knocks off the bones of a great scene from the terrace, putting swatches of colour on another sheet of block, to allow her to colour the painting up later.



FIVE

Sir Frank tells her Mary, is now in the Sydney hospice. They have a nice lunch, along with a splendid white wine, served by a house servant, there on the terrace in dappled sunshine. Mary doesn't last long and Sir Frank calls in Maxine for a discussion when the inevitable occurs.

"It's like this Maxine, the formalities have to be observed and my unimaginative, rich mans secretary can handle the details, but there's competing names for eulogies. I don't quite know what to do."

Maxine can be very definite when this is called for.

“Sir Frank, I expect that Lady Mary gave you everything in life, or married life you ever needed.” He raises a finger.

“Not quite,” he says, “she would never consider having children.”

This stops Maxine a bit. “Perhaps, Sir Frank, she has spared you much pain and trouble in the long run. I’ve no children either, but I can tell you of many of my contemporaries where children and trouble arrived in their lives concurrently.”

“Yes....perhaps,” he says, “but let’s get back to the eulogy.”

“Sir Frank... Frank,” she says, “I’ll write you one here and now. If you like it, walk around the office and practice it. Why in the world would you farm out a eulogy to some asshole who doesn’t really know anything but the public face of your marriage, when you can do it yourself? In fact, kids or no kids, I think you owe it to Mary to do so.”

He walks over to his reversible book case, spins it around and takes out a brandy decanter and a couple of fine glasses.

“Have a snort to start off,” he says, “and I’ll sit here while you do it.” Maxine digs out a typewriter from the outside office and begins.

‘For everything there is a season,
And a time for every matter unto Heaven
A time to be born and a time to die.’

Frank gives this beautifully, in a packed St Mary’s, a few days later . ‘The Australian’, in a great act of deference to this Sydneyite, famous yachtsman and captain of commerce, prints this in its entirety.

SIX

Something of a fight next crops up when the

general manager, of the big society, carks it with a sudden heart attack. The world tosses their hats into the ring for the job; Maxine among them. In reality, she should be a shoe-in as she has been the architect of all this success. She dips out - the glass ceiling again. Sir Frank bats pretty hard for her, but to no avail. Frank lets a decent interval of time go by, and rings Maxine.

“I know you are due at your Gundagai weekender this coming weekend. I'll be back through there on Sunday evening. I'm shooting at the Skeet Nationals down the road a bit, at Wagga.”

“Hmm,” Maxine cogitates, “alright. There's a stone cottage, Swallows Roost, they call it, twenty miles Wagga side of Gundagai. It's right on the Murrumbidgee, and they serve a fine Sunday evening roast. Shall we say 8.00p.m for 8.30 and I'll organize a decent meal.”

So it's arranged. Maxine has many thoughts running around in her head at this stage. This can perhaps be the catalyst to a lot of things of pith and moment. Frank arrives at dark. He's spruced himself up after a couple of days on the clay target range and gives her a shoulder hug and a peck on the cheek.

They sit in an intimate, dark, small leather booth. In the dim lighting, Frank looks at Maxine appreciatively. She is a fine long-boned woman and she is giving the right signals. They have several stiff brandies. He is very admiring. She is wearing a magnificent Annie Lampe floral dress. It's a real beauty and is quite décolleté. In fact, she is wearing nothing under the dress at all. Frank makes this delightful and inviting discovery when he places a hand on her knee. She has unbuttoned her skirt a bit .

“Try the inside running Frank,” she says.

He does, and slides his hand along her thigh.

“My God,” he says, “you're not”

“No I'm not,” she says.

Frank's eyes glaze. “Can we skip dinner?”

She laughs a silvery laugh.

“Sir Frank, a pleasure deferred is a pleasure doubled,” she says, “and here's our entree arriving now.”

They leave the restaurant in his car (she has had a friend give her a lift out the cottage, she's planned ahead). He is pushing along a bit, and has a hand on her thigh, when they come onto a hopeless tangle on the main highway. A semi trailer has jack-knifed with a huge load of rolly bales and the road is impassable.

“My God,” he says, “I can't wait much longer. It's been so long since I've made love to a girl.”

“Well yes,” she says, “We're launched and I'm keen too. Tell you what... do a very smart u-turn and there's a nice little bush reserve, back a couple of miles.”

The traffic is already backing up behind him, but there is of course no down traffic so he does as she says and a little later, he pulls off the paved road into the reserve.

“It's quite deep,” she says, “just keep driving along a bit and we'll find a covering log,”

They do. Sir Frank stops, she opens her door and says,

“Perhaps a rug in the boot,”

“No,” he says, “Nothing, damn it.”

“Oh, that's fine,” she said, “We'll pull the seat covers off. They'll make an excellent deep pile rug.”

Minutes later, she shucked the seat covers from her side and Frank his. She shucks her dress.

“God, you look enticing by moonlight,” Frank says.

“Mmmm,” she says, “Frank, we'll be busy and distracted for a while I expect, and this reserve is said to be the spot where the Redfern Drug, wholesalers

distribute to the Wagga Wagga drug retailers. Best get your shotgun out too and bring it along. “

Sir Frank laughs. “Jesus Maxine,” he says, “if that happens, have I got something for them.”

They move smartly over to a big gum log and make a bit of a love nest behind it. In later months, she comes out, and water colour paints a sketch of this log, and the big standing gum nearby. It hangs now in her Gundagai cottage. They get down to cases. They move even smarter in the cover of the big log and are really picking up the pace, when a darkened car, very quietly pulls up near Franks Mercedes, (a huge, sleek thing). Two lowlifes get out and start to ransack the car, trying for the stereo, etc. The duo grind to a halt. Frank stand up a bit and yells,

“Oy”, leave my car alone.”

The lowlifes put a pencil torch on him.

“Oh,” they say, “We’ll come over for your keys and wallet next . You look as though you're busy wanking yourself, but if there’s a girl there we'll have her too.”

“Bastards,” Frank says.

He sweeps up his shotgun and lays a tongue burst of flame over, barely over, the head of the leader, using shot gun tracer shells. These are now illegal, as they can start bush fires, but all the old sweats have a few boxes of these things in their storage safes for the odd bit of fun.

The lowlifes leap into their Vintage P76 Leyland and go for broke. Frank leads them a trifle and then says,

“I think the petrol tank’s about here,” and fires the next sunset shot into their boot. No better target can be imagined or a bigger petrol tank to shoot at . Luckily they are clear of the Mercedes and just keep leadfooting.

The explosion, when it occurs, is about a quarter mile down the road.

“God Frank,” Maxine says, “you’ve probably

killed them.”

“We’ll, I hope so Maxine,” he says.

These old Yachties sure play for keeps.

They jump into their clothes and get back on the highway. Which, thanks to a local farmer with a huge loader, is now clear.

“Home James,” Maxine says.

They pull up at the cottage.

“We’ve hardly got started,” she says, “come on in and look at my glass ceiling.”



SEVEN

He does, and his jaw drops when he perceives in the dim light of the bedroom, that Maxine has fitted ceiling mirrors to every inch of the bedroom ceiling.

“Wow,” he says, “Wow again, let’s get going.”

Later she says, “Sir Frank, you are indeed a surprise packet. What on earth are you on?”

He gives a belly laugh.

“Oh, Raggedy Goat Weed, which I get from Woolworth’s Health section, dash of Viagra, dash of cocaine, and from then on its Mafeking night.”

She is stunned. “Why,” she says.

“Oh,” he replies, “my secretary demands it. She’s a deal younger than us.”

“God in heaven.” Maxine says, “That ice maiden would only give you I should think a strychnine sandwich.”

“Very likely if I married her.” Frank says. “Hey, what about us marrying? I still have plenty of this mix left.”

“Frank,” she says, “let’s be a weekend item. I’m too busy during the week and now that you’ve seen my glass ceiling, you can help me get past that to let my potential run.”

He gets serious. "And you suggest what....?"

"A joint venture. Old Frank Smothers, whose books I audit, is going down with prostate cancer. I've optioned his Merchant Bank for \$750,000. It's cheap at that. I can cover it myself, but a joint venture would make it easier."

"Done," Sir Frank says. "Snap it up. This sort of license to print money is extremely hard to get."

Maxine acts quickly, and is out of auditing, and behind the desk at Smothers Holdings within the month. She moves into fields she knows, launching Aintree Home Loans (We'll jump any hurdle to get you the Home Loan you need).

The money all comes from the banks that are losing the Home Loan race, and they need a lateral looking firm to joint venture home loans. Maxine recruits all the stars (all women) from the two big societies that she has been associated with, and also launches Australian Primary Lending, using Swiss money to get together a huge financing book of farming land, which the Swiss regard as the best security in the world. It's mainly interest only lending and up to 90% of the value, and boy, does the business roll in.

EIGHT

Maxine suspects the Swiss are laundering very dirty money but the Reserve Bank have no objections, so she pushes on. She then gets into speculative financing for the construction giants, again Swiss money, and selectively grows her book in this tricky, but oh so profitable market. She does almost nothing, but make huge money over the next ten years.

She remains an item with Sir Frank on weekends only, but they sometimes do something during the week also, as she eases her work load a bit.

She eventually floats Smothers Holdings Pty Ltd on the Market, becoming a zillionaire as she does so, but retaining a majority holding and the chairmanship.

From there, she steps into Federal Parliament overnight, to serve out the remaining term of the famous senator, who went to the witches' cauldron of Iraq, just once too often in his work on the Senate War committee. She has hardly got going in this role, when the Prime Minister asks her to give the senate eulogy on the demise of Sir James Killebrew. The chap down to do this, books off sick, so she does. This not so small effort off the cuff is also her maiden speech as it were. She stands,

“Ladies and Gentlemen of this House. Today I quote from A.E. Houseman. Houseman's poems need no spruik from me, they speak and speak so well for themselves. She quotes:

‘Into my heart an air that chills, from yon far
country blows

What are those blue remembered hills,

What spires, what farms are those.

That is the land of lost content, I see it shining
plain,

The happy highways where I went, and cannot
come again.’

Mr Speaker, we are painfully aware of the wind that chills. It has chilled our hearts, and reminded us of our mortality in carrying off our beloved Sir James. The far country, the hills and spires remind us of the area that Sir James represented here, with diligence and honour for so many years. They remind us that those who have sat on his front verandah for a cuppa or a shot of something, could easily view his home town cathedral from there. There is no content on the loss of Sir James, and there is no doubt of the happy highways here in Parliament that he shared with us. They were highways to honest and hard working representation. They were to

him very happy highways. Regrettably they are those on which he will not come again.”

And she concludes on the words,

“Killegrew, in the minds of all, you were magnificent. We cannot say we will never forget you, as James Hilton said in his seminal work - Goodbye Mr Chips, all things get forgotten in the end but you will be a long time getting forgotten.”

The House is chuffed with this off the cuff speech, and the Australian prints it in its entirety. It's her last hour in the Chairperson's role, she lifts her brandy glass, "Here's to Glass Ceilings," she says, and it's all over.