

A Mostly Professional Retrospective

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B.Sc. (Hons) 1985; L.I.B. 1988

Having enrolled in the science/law double degree course in 1981, I thoroughly enjoyed 4 years of chemistry and immediately charged heedlessly into the other, well, legal part of my studies. At least the charge was all downhill at first ...

Chemical daze

“Honours” was a thoroughly enjoyable year. Mind-expanding thesis work and guest lecturers were complemented by the broad-minded staff, especially my supervisor, Bob Armstrong, who taught me to think “outside the box” – especially when explaining how I managed to ruin yet another set of expensive quartz cuvettes. At the time, we were using Resonance Raman Spectroscopy to investigate heme protein geometry at the active site. The crisp, monochromatic certainty of our laser probe contrasted nicely with the bucolic haze of long lunches at various Uni bars and Alchemists’ functions with chemical friends and associates, not to mention the rigours of College life at St Johns.

A perhaps over-expanded mind during that year brought on a desire to see a “birds-eye” view of research, rather than pursuing individual research projects – but more of that later.

Legal baze

Undergraduate law was another experience entirely. My fellow sufferers and I had stumbled into an academic grinder, blearily attending mind-numbing lectures packed with reams of case law and statute and haunted by incomprehensible exams. As law attracts eccentricity – maybe it’s a survival trait – relief was found in the wit and wisdom of my teachers and fellow students. Teachers ranged from silks (senior barristers, a couple of whom later became judges) to a seriously entertaining lecturer best described to those who read the Sunday comics of the time as “Prince Valiant in a suit”. I eventually got the hang of law exams, but father’s predictions of a pretty dry run through undergrad law remained accurate (my dad was a lawyer too).

On graduating from law in 1988, I immersed myself in intellectual property law in Melbourne (1988-89) and later resources law and then environmental law in Sydney (1989-91). My interest in the scientific and technical subject matter underlying the legal issues continued unabated. A highlight was conducting a series of on-site “legal-environmental audits” at 12 industrial sites across Sydney during 1991. Market forces put an end to this avenue and my spouse and I escaped relatively unscathed to Canberra to raise a family.

Government maze

“When in Rome ...” they say, and when in Canberra, where else to work but government? I spent seven enjoyable years in marine resource management, mostly as a government lawyer (until 1997) and then as a research manager (until 1999). In the latter role, I assisted a statutory board allocate research funding among an amazing range of marine science, economic and other more arcane research projects. I gained that “birds-eye” view of research, albeit into marine resource management. Seeing how this research fed into environmentally sustainable management of fish stocks and how that linked to community and industry expectations, was both personally and professionally quite satisfying.

I also grew to appreciate the stark importance of politics in the today’s competitive funding process. Success in obtaining funding was often the prize of those who not only had deserving research, but were willing to actively participate in setting overall research priorities.

Personal ways

1999 was a watershed year for me in other ways as well. The recent arrival of two young boys (nicknamed “Mayhem” and “Chaos” in no particular order) and a protracted tangle with ill-health triggered a move back to the law and into a flat. Now a youthful 43 – if you ignore the increasing albedo of my cranium – I’m currently working part time with a team managing the information resources of a dynamic bunch of government lawyers. I wonder where things will lead next.