

FARMING EQUALITY

Alana Johnson has made a career out of putting women in their place on the farm: as true partners and leaders in their own right.

STORY GENEVIEVE BARLOW PHOTOS NEIL NEWITT

Alana Johnson parks her Subaru XV in a back lane carpark in the heart of Melbourne. She's timed the two-and-a-half-hour journey from her farm near Benalla in north-east Victoria perfectly.

There's time to sort through her wardrobe (four shirts and four sets of pants hang in the back, plus a range of boxed shoes), select a white shirt and coat and quickly change into professional mode. Five minutes' walk later she arrives in the fifth-floor boardroom of government headquarters, sets down her bag, helps herself to tea and a pastry, unpacks her iPhone and iPad, tunes in to her fellow board directors and launches into an opening one-liner about the footy.

She's got two board meetings today, between hosting an afternoon tea for volunteers at the Victorian Women's Trust, which she chairs, and will stay overnight before flying to Canberra for two days to support Victoria's contender at the National Rural Woman of the Year award dinner (the winner of which she's helped select), rendezvous with her long-time friend, Federal MP Cathy McGowan, and attend various networking appointments. She'll be back on her 450-hectare Angus cattle enterprise at the foot of the Lurg Hills with her husband Rob Richardson in four days. It's spring and the early 20th century farmhouse Alana and Rob converted years ago, adding big windows to flood their living spaces with light and restful views, is a picture. The garden spreads seamlessly, fenceless, into the rich improved pastures dotted with magnificent eucalypts, to where cattle bound for the European meat market or as breeders in China graze.

Raised in Victoria's Western District as the second of five children on a farm her father managed, Alana didn't consider farming as a career. Instead, she became the first in her family to go to university, completing an arts degree, with sociology and social work majors. "I don't think I had a concept then of wanting to be a farmer because until the late 1970s

there were very few women who thought that way," she says. "The female farmers I knew then were widows or women who'd been left farms. All the women I knew, including my grandmother, were farmers but no-one would have conceived of them that way. They did all sorts of farm work to keep their farms going – my grandmother made butter and sold chooks and eggs – but they were called farmers' wives."

Educated by nuns in Hamilton at a girls Catholic school, Alana's role as one of Australia's most influential advocates for farming and rural women was already taking shape when, for her final year of school, she was sent to the boys' equivalent, Hamilton's Monivae College, in its push to become co-educational. "That was probably one of the most significant events in my life. There were 21 girls among 100 boys that year and sexism was the norm," she says. "The way those boys treated us was just abominable – putting us down in class, talking over us and feeling very free to make unacceptable comments. Back then, boys didn't believe girls were as smart as them and I thought, well I'm going to show them. I don't think I would ever have done as well in my final year if I hadn't been put in that environment."

She hit university in the Whitlam era, and when she and Rob headed into marriage and a farming life after graduating, she took off-farm work in government departments, stopped to have two sons – Jock and Alistair – and resumed paid work when each was six months old. "If you are a mother and are at home, the expectation is that you'll always be there," she says. "The only way for Rob to take total responsibility was for me not to be there."

The pair shared farming. Alana took a huge interest in it but was never going to settle for the isolation her mother and grandmother had known on their farms. She built networks, found like-minded others and she and Rob relished their young lives. "I found other women like me who had gone to university



Alana Johnson outside the Oxley Hall, in the heart of the north-east Victorian Federal electorate of Indi.



Alana and her husband Rob Richardson on their farm near Benalla.



Alana (second from right) with her four siblings as children on their family farm near Hamilton, Vic.

and who were back in the country not wanting to live the lives their mothers lived,” she says. “There was also a change in our expectations about how we should be treated by our husbands, other men and also by the ag department. Back then, the ag department put on lots of events and they were always for men. We felt we were being sidelined and we weren’t going to accept that. We saw ourselves as equal partners on the farm.”

It was in Alana and Rob’s dining room that an early meeting of what was to become the Victorian Rural Women’s Network was held in 1986. Alana recalls there being half a dozen women, mainly locals, there. They weren’t alone. All around Victoria at that time female farmers were starting to network. Women on Farms gatherings were underway. “We were part of a momentum that was building,” Alana says. “The biggest social transformation in Australia’s farming history happened because our generation went to university. Education made the difference.”

When the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) agreed to allow two votes per membership, Alana and her colleagues, among them a young sheep farmer from a family of 12 (10 sisters and two brothers) also from north-east Victoria, really started to feel the ground shift. That young sheep farmer was Cathy McGowan. “Cathy was active in the VFF and she hounded the then president Peter Walsh about the fact that in the VFF there was only one vote per farm and it always went to the male farmer,” Alana says. “So Peter led a change that other state farmer organisations eventually followed – to give two votes per farm. That was our first big political win. That was huge.”

It was an early achievement for Australian Women in Agriculture, which also ran the world’s first International Women in Agriculture conference in 1994. This, Alana proudly adds, was and remains the biggest farming conference ever held in Australia. With Cathy and others, she travelled to India, the US and Ireland sharing learnings from farm women’s networks around the world. “Do you know there are no female farmers in India, despite 2.4 million women rearing and milking cows,” she says.



Alana works in the living room of her home, a peaceful farmhouse with views of the mountains beyond.

Thirty years later, the effects of Australia's Rural Women's Movement continue to ricochet locally and internationally as women step up to start and run farms, farming enterprises and demand recognition as food producers. During that time Alana worked at a rural Centre Against Sexual Assault and with families on farm succession planning – experiences that revealed “the contemptuous results of structural inequality for women”. She also studied family therapy, where she learnt the power of story as therapy and applied it to helping families work out how to hand over to the next generation. She discovered that obstinate, crusty old blokes who'd planned not to let anyone know what was in their will would open up if asked the right way.

Along the way she came to know the extraordinary power that came with knowing how to get people, especially in the farm sector, to see the possibilities and opportunities of change. She's won state and national awards, been invited to join state and federal government women's advisory councils and helped establish Australian Women on Boards, which helps women understand how to position themselves to get on boards. Her focus is clearly and sharply rural.

In 2012, Alana made the *Australian Financial Review's* inaugural 100 Women of Influence list and today she sits on at least six boards and committees, among them the Victorian Ministerial Council on Women's Equality, the Victorian Catchment Management Council and a major regional irrigation statutory authority. She is the first rural woman in 30 years to chair the Victorian Women's Trust. Half her work is paid, the rest she does pro bono.

Perhaps the place where she's most felt the strength of people power was in leading Voices for Indi, the movement that in 2013 unseated the Liberal Party from the north-east Victorian federal electorate. Alana is certain the change happened because people began a series of very deliberate conversations around their kitchen tables seeking to understand their common ground and what they valued and wanted for their part of the world.

Months later, Cathy McGowan won the seat on a knife edge. Celebrations planned for the Oxley Hall at the heart of the electorate were postponed daily until, 10 days later, the result was officially declared. “It was euphoric,” Alana remembers, “because no-one could possibly believe that within six months of us doing some work we had transformed an electorate that had voted one way for 80 years into a marginal seat. We were absolute winners that night.”

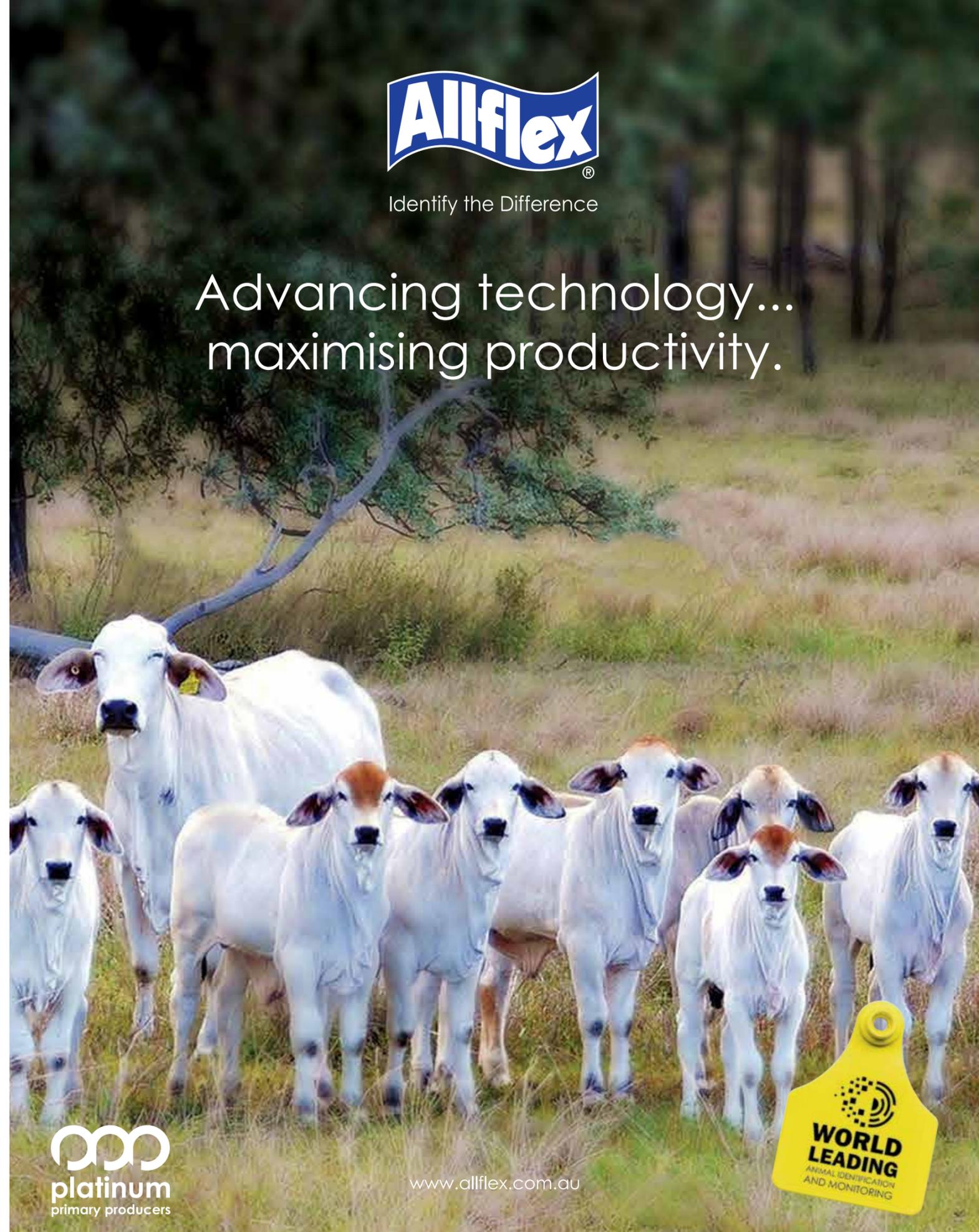
Today, people from all over the country call on Voices for Indi, asking to know their secret and how they lifted people from feeling helpless to taking charge. “You have to transform a community to do that; I think it's really hard for people in other areas to replicate Cathy's success without understanding that it was strategic, well thought-out community development work that actually achieved that.”

Alana believes this same approach could work nationally and unite country people behind a powerful push for change – one that demands MPs representing rural and regional electorates “put rural and regional first” on vital bush issues, such as fast and effective NBN, rather than toe their party lines. “There is so much potential for us to be empowered. It's just a bigger play than Indi.”



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