

Embracing change:

A conversation with Carolyn Tremain



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As a teenager, she wanted to be a police officer. Instead, Carolyn Tremain, Chief Executive of MBIE, ended up in top roles in the private sector, including Air New Zealand where she broke the glass ceiling as the airline's first female GM, and then in the public sector. An expert in leading large, complex organisations and change management, she talks with ROSE NORTHCOTT about her very successful career to date and the need to grab even the left-field opportunities.

What happened to those police force aspirations?

As a teenager I was keen to be a police officer but at the time Police wanted people with a little more life experience and one of the things they recommended was some form of military training. So, after travelling overseas for three months when I left school, I went into the Air Force. I guess I was drawn to uniform services of some sort!

I also completed a Bachelor of Arts at Victoria University, majoring in politics. By the time I completed my degree I had left the Air Force. Our family then relocated to Auckland where I started working as a personnel officer for a South Auckland heavy metal and plastics manufacturing business - nothing to do with politics.

Tell us about that experience and what it led to.

What I had was a combination of really good grounding from the Air Force and the ability to get on with people. I realised I didn't want a career in law or accounting. I was actually much more interested in people and workplaces, so I decided to establish a career in HR.

It was the period of Rogernomics and the manufacturing organisation I worked for reduced from around 700 staff to 27. I saw the impact exogenous effects could have on industries that didn't have a fundamentally sound business model. That was a salient lesson I learnt quite early on. It taught me a lot about change management in trying and difficult circumstances and, despite a difficult environment, I was quite successful at helping people adjust and find new roles.

I then moved into retail with Farmers and did a lot more change management and restructuring work as a corporate HR professional. From there I went to Air New Zealand for 13 and

half years.

How did your career evolve during what were very significant years for Air New Zealand?

I started as an HR professional working in the domestic airline and also had a period leading a business improvement team. By the time I left, I was head of HR and Organisational Change for the Air New Zealand Group. I was the first female direct report to the Chief Executive from early 1991 through to when I left.

I was at Air New Zealand during the 90s, which saw significant growth in the international airline, and I was there during the challenging Ansett period. Between working in manufacturing, retail and Air New Zealand, I developed a real capacity for change management and optimising businesses. I became skilled in industrial negotiations and working with organisations to change their operating model and build greater employee participation in the workplace.

Why did you leave a successful private sector career for the public sector?

Our family had grown with the arrival of a third child and after leaving the airline I decided to spend a little more time focused on my family. But after a few months off I was approached to take up a role with Inland Revenue, which was somewhere I'd never thought I would work. I had been very much a private sector career person. But after having had some time out, I was clear I wanted to do something broader than just HR.

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IR contacted me about a role in corporate services. I was really impressed by the CE at the time, David Butler, and felt I'd love to work with him. We formed a team that included Colin MacDonald and Naomi Ferguson and a couple of other really strong tax professionals, Robin Oliver and Martin Smith. It was a great team to work with and David was a great leader. This was one of the best teams I had ever worked in. I learnt a lot from him about being a leader and working in the public sector.

From starting in corporate services at IR, I moved into service delivery and then moved to Customs NZ as Chief Executive in 2011. And from there I moved to interim Chief Executive at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment in July 2017.

What attracted you to the Customs CE role?

I thought that it would be a terrific role and a good fit for me where I could add value. Customs has a clear purpose and such a strong brand in New Zealand and through my airline work I had a lot of regard for the Customs people I'd met, and of course I understood how airports operate. Customs also does tax collection work and I felt it was a nice combination of what I'd learnt at Air New Zealand and IR. It was also an organisation that was ready to modernise, which drew on my strengths.

How did you modernise the Customs service?

There was a lot of modernisation in the IT space, including the joint border management system - the electronic platform where customers interact with Customs and MPI. That was a huge piece of work across the Ministry for Primary Industries and Customs. There was also a change to the Customs & Excise Act, with the final stage of that going through Parliament now.

The third part of the modernisation process was the workforce career structure and how people move through a career service. I found my experience of being in the Air Force really helpful in that I understood how uniformed services worked; there is also some commonality of language between the two organisations.

Is the policing aspect of Customs increasingly challenging?

Customs is responsible for detecting illegal things coming in to New Zealand. I have been amazed at the creativity of criminal syndicates in finding new ways of trying to evade Customs. Customs continually refines its practice, and criminal syndicates are continually trying to find ways around the obstacles we put in the way.

It is a very challenging organisation to work in on that basis. Customs officers are passionate about keeping our borders, families and communities safe.

What sort of organisation is Customs today?

Customs regularly gets commented on internationally as well as in New Zealand on how professional it is, and how much friendlier the New Zealand Customs Service is [compared to its international counterparts].

Customs is a very old organisation - 178 years old. It's our oldest government department and as Comptroller I felt a real sense of continuity of guardianship and the importance of that organisation in protecting New Zealand's borders. I felt a real sense of privilege to be the Chief Executive and Comptroller of that organisation.

Has your private sector experience helped in your public sector roles?

It has really helped. Most of my roles have had a theme of being customer-oriented; that was definitely the case at IR, and also at Customs, and again at MBIE, which is a very business-oriented organisation. I have a good understanding of how business operates, and that has been very useful to me in the public sector.

Has it been challenging leading MBIE during a change of government?

The change of government has been a major process for MBIE - we produced 16 BIMS (Briefings to Incoming Ministers), which I think is a record! We also had a good number of items in the government 100-day plan. The largest of those, and the one I feel most proud of, was the establishment of the Pike River Recovery Agency. I think the team did an extremely good job - they worked very well with the families within a relatively tight timeframe to have the agency established by the end of January 2018.

We also had a number of other significant initiatives under government's 100-day plan. We established two new units in MBIE, one the Provincial Development Unit responsible for administering the [\$1 billion] Provincial Growth Fund, and we are also the incubator for KiwiBuild until the Housing Commission is established.

Delivering on the new government's vision has taken quite a lot of effort across MBIE.

The great thing about the New Zealand public sector is that it is politically neutral. We have worked with the new government to understand their work programme and focused and worked strategically to implement it. That is a real strength of our public sector.

Do you feel you have a role to play in helping other women advance?

As a senior woman leader, you do feel an obligation to do your part in helping pull up other women into the senior ranks. I felt that quite keenly during my time at Air New Zealand. I was the first female GM of the airline and I think I have been lucky in some respects, but it's not all luck. It's about having good mentors, taking opportunities when they come up. I try to encourage women to always take opportunities and try things that are different. I would have never thought I'd go to Inland Revenue, but it opened up a whole different career opportunity for me at a time when otherwise I would have gone overseas, and perhaps stayed overseas for quite a while. For me, IR was a great opportunity to stay in NZ and bring up my children, and that was something I really wanted if I could have it.

