



HIGH NOTE

Elisabeth Bowes shares the full-circle moments that have taken her from the United Nations and World Trade Organisation to serving as second-in-command at Australia’s High Commission in London

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

IN A PREVIOUS CHAPTER of her career, Elisabeth Bowes worked as a legal officer at the United Nations Compensation Commission [UNCC] in Geneva, dealing with the aftermath of Iraq’s world-shaking 1990 invasion of Kuwait. “The invasion had an impact on a huge number of countries in the region,” explains Bowes, who was responsible for the Saudi Arabian government’s claims. “My very first meeting in Saudi Arabia was at the National Guard – the [country’s] preeminent security organisation,” she shares. “Uniformed men were all on one side of the table and I was the only woman in the meeting. At the end, our host said to me,

‘You’re only the second woman to walk into this building’. I said, ‘Who was the first?’ And [he] said, ‘Madeleine Albright.’” Following in the footsteps of the US’s first female Secretary of State is just one of the many accomplishments of Australia’s Deputy High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, a post Bowes has held since January 2023. Before assuming the position, she served as First Assistant Secretary and Chief Negotiator of the Free Trade Agreements Division at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It was in this capacity that she represented Australia in negotiations for the Australia-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement, which came into force in May 2023 and eliminated tariffs on more

Photography: Jenny Magee.

than 99 per cent of Australian exports to the UK. “It was the first free trade agreement from scratch that the UK negotiated post-Brexit,” notes Bowes. The talks, which began in mid-2020, were occasionally logistically challenging. “We never had a proper face-to-face meeting for the entire negotiation,” she reflects. “It was almost entirely negotiated virtually.”

Before that posting, she was in Washington between 2016-19 as Minister-Counsellor overseeing the Australian embassy’s trade branch. From 2012-2016, as head of the Tobacco Plain

International Relations at the University of Oxford in order to, as she describes it, “bring a broader perspective to my legal training”.

“I was really fortunate [that] a job came up with the United Nations in Geneva at the end of my studies,” she says. The opportunity made for a full-circle moment for Bowes. “It was just on 10 years to the day from when I visited Geneva the first time [that] I started as a legal officer at the UNCC.” From there, she moved to Hamburg to work as a legal officer at

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Packaging Taskforce in DFAT’s Office of Trade Negotiations, she defended Australia’s trailblazing legislation around plain packaging of tobacco products – which saw boxes rendered bland or blazoned with graphic health warnings – at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) against actions brought by countries with significant tobacco industries.

“We were the first jurisdiction in the world to implement plain packaging and, because of that, we attracted a lot of pushback from the global tobacco industry,” recalls Bowes, whose involvement in the litigation lasted four years. “And that just took us through to the first phase of the litigation – not even into the appeal.”

Ultimately, Australia came out on top in 2020 after numerous rounds of appeals. “It really demonstrated the type of work that you can do as a public servant for the benefit of all Australians,” reflects Bowes of the victory.

In 2021, she was awarded the Public Service Medal – a decoration bestowed by the Governor-General for “outstanding public service” – for her contribution to international trade policy, in particular for her work at the WTO.

Bowes’ first inklings that her future lay in international diplomacy came at age 18, when she headed to Switzerland as an exchange student with Rotary International. “We went to Geneva [to do] a tour of the United Nations and learn more about its work,” she recalls. “I just had this lightbulb moment of, *This is where I want to work.*”

Bowes subsequently returned to Australia, obtaining Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Law degrees at the University of Queensland, followed by a Master of Philosophy in

the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and then back to Geneva as Counsellor to Australia’s Permanent Mission to the WTO between 2009-2012.

Having spent decades shoulder-to-shoulder in diplomacy and international law with colleagues from myriad countries and cultures, Bowes finds that her Australian identity often proves of benefit. “There is almost universal high regard for Australia and that’s something we can use to our advantage to achieve solutions [and] to create goodwill that then helps those difficult conversations,” she offers.

“[Australians] are quite direct. And I think that helps in achieving results because we say what we mean. I know in dealing with my bosses in the different UN organisations [that] my frankness was appreciated. I wasn’t just telling them what I thought they wanted to hear, I was providing [what] I thought was the best advice possible.”

Reflecting on that 18-year-old aspiring international lawyer, Bowes would encourage her to see opportunities rather than impediments and to keep all paths open.

“I’d applied [at] DFAT when I was at university as a graduate trainee and I didn’t get in,” she shares. “I thought, *Well, I’m going to look at other opportunities*” – which brought her to post-graduate studies at Oxford and work abroad.

“Then, in 2006, a job came up as a legal specialist at DFAT,” she continues – a role she landed. “I actually did end up at DFAT, but some 10 years after I’d originally applied. I gained so much experience in the international system that I could then bring with me to my new role. That non-linear path was really helpful for me.” HB