

Going down the road — to Ottawa

Lisa Raitt worked her way from Whitney Pier to Harper's cabinet

By STEPHEN MAHER Ottawa Bureau

Lisa Raitt grew up, the youngest of seven kids, in a two-bedroom wooden house on Matilda Street in Whitney Pier, a short walk up the hill from the International Coal Piers, where her father, Colin MacCormack, worked on the scales, weighing coal loaded on ships for export.

After her father died in 1979, she was raised by her mother, Christina, on two small pensions — less than \$11,000 a year.

Ms. Raitt, appointed federal minister of Natural Resources in October, now makes more than that every month. She lives in Oakville, a posh suburb of Toronto, and spends her days dealing with captains of industry, senior politicians and civil servants.

Ms. Raitt and Premier Rodney MacDonald will speak to the Sydney and Area Chamber of Commerce at noon today at the Membertou Convention Centre. At 2 p.m., she will have a meet-and-greet at Whitney Pier Memorial Junior High.

"My return to Cape Breton," she said. "I'm very excited."

It will be an emotional homecoming for Ms. Raitt, whose life has taken her far from her impoverished childhood in the Pier.

"I understood very well about budgeting, about staying within your means," she says. "There were no credit cards in our family. You worked. You paid your bills. And you measured your money, but there was no going into debt and there was no credit."

There was no car, no family vacations to Florida, but the MacCormacks didn't feel sorry for themselves.

"Didn't know the difference," she says. "We were from the Pier. We knew we were from the Pier and Sydney had the money, on the other side of the overpass."

To get to the federal cabinet table from the Pier, Ms. Raitt worked like a pit pony.



"I've always worked," she says. "I've been working since I'm 11 years old — odd jobs, summer jobs."

She got a chemistry degree at St. Francis Xavier University, then a masters at Guelph, then found there were no jobs in chemistry, so she got her law degree from the University of Toronto.

All along, she worked part time — sometimes at the Sydney Dairy Queen — and lived frugally.

She never resented that she had it tougher than her classmates and colleagues.

"I believe that a person takes responsibility for their life," she says. "You have a choice. Either you can change your circumstance or you can wallow in self pity."

"When I was really in debt and really worried about how I was going to make it through grad school living in a basement in a horrible little apartment, you deal with it. It makes you a better person."

After law school and a year in England in 1999, she went to work for the Toronto Port Corporation, eventually becoming CEO. She pushed hard to expand the Toronto Island airport and help Porter Air establish its successful service there — against strong opposition from a community group and local politicians, including Mayor David Miller.

In October, Ms. Raitt picked another fight. She took a leave of absence and ran for Parliament in Halton, an upper-class suburban Toronto riding, against Garth Turner, an outspoken former Tory.

Mr. Turner was a formidable opponent and the campaign was hard-fought and bitter. In the end Ms. Raitt won with a comfortable margin and Mr. Harper gave her the challenging and high-profile Natural Resources portfolio, overseeing a department with 4,000 employees.

She is the highest profile woman in Mr. Harper's cabinet, sitting in the House of Commons in the seat that Rona Ambrose used to occupy, so that she appears over Mr. Harper's shoulder in TV clips.

But nobody would describe her as a token. Along with three other top ministers, she has been helping the government plan the massive stimulus package that will be unveiled next week, criss-crossing the country, working more than 80 hours a week.



That often keeps her away from her family. She's married to Second City comedian David Raitt, and has two sons, ages seven and four.

Ms. Raitt is down-to-earth with a sharp sense of humour but she projects a quiet self-confidence.

Her toughness, she says, comes from the knowledge that she could always get another job.

"I was never afraid of losing my job," she says.

"Not because I thought I wouldn't be fired, because it could happen at any time. But I knew, self-resource-wise, I could always work in the Dairy Queen."

That doesn't mean she doesn't sometimes doubt herself.

"Every six a.m., that's where I have my doubts," she says. "And sure, you go through those moments when you think, what the heck am I doing. But you keep going. But it's the true Maritime way of life, in Cape Breton, and Nova Scotia, you encounter obstacles, you push through them."

So does that mean she doesn't think Atlantic Canadians have a culture of defeat?

"I would never say that," she said, laughing. "I have no idea to what you're referring."

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