



Anne Aly reinvented herself many times. And then came politics

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Highlight: If there is such a thing as a traditional path into parliament, **Australia**'s first Muslim federal female politician did not take it.

Body

Within minutes of sitting down for lunch with **Anne Aly**, she has invited me to join her for lemon chicken tagine at her house next time I am in Perth.

And just moments later I seem to have crossed some unspoken social convention by asking her if she has ADHD. She hasn't.

One thing is for sure, there will not be too many barriers standing in the way of a free-ranging conversation. Which is just as well because so far, things aren't going according to plan.

[Link to Image](#)

Tracey Nearmy

We had arranged to meet at Zeytin Turkish Cuisine on the foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin.

But when I show up at noon sharp, not a sign of life.

I'm busily texting Aly's people when, luckily, we run into each other - Canberra is a small place - so we amble a few metres along until we come to a cafe on the corner that seems, well, convenient.

We grab a table outside and Aly immediately launches into a monologue about how to make a lemon chicken tagine which involves soaking the tagine pot in a bath for 24 hours, rubbing it with oil and then cooking the middle-eastern deliciousness for another 24 hours in a very low oven.

We are scanning the menu and Aly announces she "doesn't do rice" which is a staple of middle eastern cuisine and which make her some sort of pariah at family events. She opts for the grilled fennel chicken (no butter please) and a very hot almond milk cappuccino. I choose the zucchini fritters and a bean-a-colada, which, disappointingly has neither booze nor beans.

Aly, let it be said, is prone to the odd swear word, as am I, and over the next 60 minutes our conversation is peppered with F-bombs.

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The thrice-married Aly had already lived a complex and somewhat haphazard life before she decided rather spontaneously to run as the Labor candidate for the West Australian seat Cowan in 2016. She managed to turf out the Liberal incumbent Luke Simpkins by the finest of margins.

"It took 10 days to count the vote," she says.

In 2019, she increased her margin and by 2022 she harnessed 46.9 per cent of the vote adding more than 9 per cent to her 2019 numbers.

Of that first campaign, she remembers standing at a train station with a picture of herself while waving at cars. A year ago to the day, she had been invited to speak at the White House at a countering terrorism conference.

"All I could think was from the White House to Greenwood station. What have I done?"

The migrant experience

Aly was born Azza Mahmoud Fawzi Hosseini Ali el Serougi in Alexandria, Egypt in 1967. The daughter of a nurse and a textiles engineer who immigrated to [Australia](#) in 1969. They were among the last migrants to be received at the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre in Albury Wodonga - which, having made the world's headlines two decades earlier over the death from malnutrition of 13 children, had improved conditions considerably.

The family moved first to Marrickville in Sydney's inner west and then, just on the cusp of shifting to Texas, they relocated to Brisbane where Aly's dad got a job with the Jennings factory, which produced corsets and women's underwear.

They bought their first house in the very un-chi chi West End.

"And then in 1974 came the flood. My parents came from a desert country, they had never seen anything like this," Aly says.

"But it was a defining feature of our Australian story because what we found was a community. It was almost like they became Australian through the tragedy."

The 'rational, calming voice'

Moments like that, she says, stand in stark contrast to other moments of division and rancour that have characterised the same-sex marriage plebiscite, the Voice referendum and uncontained racism following the 9/11 attacks in New York.

The current situation in Gaza is confronting, she says. Aly joined Ed Husic last month to warn Gaza's 2.3 million residents were being "collectively punished" for the crimes of terrorists.

As the Israel-Gaza war becomes more divisive, Aly says she is trying to demonstrate how "important it is that we recognise each other's humanity and show compassion to each other even when we are hurting the most".

"I've spoken and met with the Muslim community and members of the Jewish community. And what I say is to communities here, who have intergenerational trauma, and accumulative trauma and who are hurting, is that sometimes the hardest thing to do is to be the rational, calming voice in a room of people who are hurting so much that the only thing that they can do is shout," she says.

The problem with early childhood

As the minister for early childhood education, and also the minister for youth, Aly has a lot on her plate as she marshalls through two [reviews of the childcare and early learning sectors](#).

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The government is moving, slowly, towards adopting a model of universal access. In July, it increased the maximum subsidy rate to 90 per cent for families earning up to \$80,000 and a sliding scale in subsidies for every family earning less than \$530,000.

"The fact is [Australia](#) is one of the [most expensive places](#) for early childhood education and care," says Aly.

"We have a quality system that is world-class, and a quality framework that has been in place for 10 years. The issue is the cost and the fact that the [market isn't behaving the way you would expect](#). It doesn't go to where the demand is, it goes to where the money is."

The delivery of the Productivity Commission report this week and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's investigation will ensure childcare remains one of the hot button issues for the Albanese government in coming months.

One of the problems the government has commissioned the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to address is price gouging, which could see the benefits of more generous subsidies to parents whittled away to zero by higher fees.

"We're going to be watching. People who are making a lot of money out of early childhood education and care at the expense of it being affordable and accessible for parents need to know we are watching," Aly says.

She says the complexity of the system ranging from ASX-listed corporations to mum-and-dad small businesses, make it difficult to navigate but that her goal is to find a system "that works for everyone".

"That could mean different kinds of service delivery in different areas and even different kinds of services. But it's where parents are confident of the quality and safety for their children."

A face you'll know

Aly will be familiar to most people, even if they haven't connected the name to the face. She is the petite dark-haired, dark-eyed woman in colourful clothing who sits behind Prime Minister Anthony Albanese during question time. Aly is an active listener. She nods. She laughs. She scowls and boos. She never drifts off or checks her phone.

Always impeccably well-dressed, Aly's choice of clothing has taken a twist in the past couple of years as she took up crochet and knitting as a form of meditation and mindfulness as she takes endless flights between Canberra and Perth.

The white jumper she wears to lunch is handcrafted (and has a matching skirt) as was the crochet long dress to this year's [Mid-Winter Ball](#). She is already working on next year's which will feature a crocheted flower, each unique, representing every woman who died from domestic violence during the year.

[Instagram link](#)

"Then I will auction it off for a domestic violence charity," she says.

Aly has her own story of domestic violence, one that is told in her 2018 autobiography Finding My Place: From Cairo to Canberra - the irresistible story of an irrepressible woman.

She had married young, at the age of 20, while living back in Egypt where she was studying English literature, with a minor in acting. The marriage wasn't arranged, as was common for girls like her. Rather, it was a way of escaping the strictures of being a single woman in a Muslim country.

"The marriage gave me a freedom that I didn't have living under my parents' roof. It gave me the freedom to be a respectable married woman in Egypt. It meant I could go camping with friends, I could go to parties, I could come home when I wanted to."

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There were red flags which she ignored - or didn't know any better.

But after moving to Perth, the violence and contemptuous behaviour escalated.

"There was a bit of martyrdom on my behalf. But there are a lot of stereotypes around women who are survivors, a lot of us are high achievers. The feelings of responsibility and humiliation; we expect more of ourselves," she says.

"I remember driving away once and saying out loud to myself: 'you must be just the kind of woman that men hit'. I'd resigned myself to it.

"I describe domestic violence as this crack in a bone somewhere in your body that you carry with you through your life.

"It's hard to imagine myself as the person I was. I'm much more like me now than I was back then."

She finally kicked him out of the family home after six long years and began the next chapter as a broke single mum of two young sons, Karim and Adam. They only found out about the history of abuse when they read the autobiography.

Keeping hearth and home together with a string of unskilled jobs, she retreated to her safe space: education. In all, she has four degrees, including a masters in education and a PhD on counter-terrorism and security.

Which, to circle back, might help explain the inappropriate ADHD comment, having completed the two-year masters in nine months and the PhD in two years - which typically take four to seven years.

"I'd put the boys to bed, study until 3 or 4 am and then get up at 7am."

That led to another chapter, as a world-renowned researcher and eventually professor specialising in countering online violent extremism. It also got her invited to Oxford University and the White House to speak.

Her political spark was ignited after the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment across the world, witnessing one-too-many instances of casual racism in suburban Perth, and becoming a target of death threats because of her profile as a researcher in anti-terrorism.

"Some days I felt broken and beaten by it all - by the death threats and the calls to 'hang [her] from a tree', 'drown her in pig's blood' and 'put a bullet in the bag'," she writes in her autobiography.

The university moved her team to unidentified offices twice during the course of a year with strict instruction not to reveal the location.

A lot left unsaid

I have set aside 90 minutes for lunch, but after an hour a staffer taps Aly on the shoulder and says we have five minutes to wrap it up.

Heavens, we haven't even got on to husband number two, or heaven forbid Dave Allen, who is husband number three. (He is a Canadian-born former ice-hockey player, policeman and intelligence officer who she met while working in the WA public service and married in 2012).

We need to talk more about childcare, whether the big for-profit corporates are price gouging, why the market is failing (and what to do about it).

We need to talk about the experience of working as a woman in Parliament House and whether she has witnessed or been subjected to misogynistic or sexist behaviour (she has).

Ten minutes later, there is another tap on the shoulder. She really must go, her next appointment is unmovable.

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I feel a bit cheated. It's been a rollicking fun lunch. I will be knocking on her door for lemon chicken tagine next time I'm in Perth.

Graphic

From broke single mum, to world-renowned terrorism researcher and **Australia**'s first Muslim federal female politician, **Anne Aly** has a complex CV.

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