



Top dealmaker from the west gives Future Fund a boost

John Poynton has enjoyed an action-packed career

ANDREW BURRELL
PROFILE

PERTH'S business community has long viewed John Poynton as the epitome of the well-connected dealmaker and corporate adviser.

The executive chairman of investment bank Azure Capital is close to many of the city's movers and shakers and has long managed the election campaign finances for his good friend, federal Liberal deputy leader Julie Bishop.

So, few were surprised this week at the Abbott government's decision to appoint the energetic Poynton, 62, to one of the key roles in his action-packed career: as a member of the Future's Fund board of guardians, a body that manages \$96 billion in assets.

Wesfarmers chief executive Richard Goyder says Poynton will bring an essential perspective from economically strong Western Australia to the national fund.

"It's a good appointment for the Future Fund because John is smart, he's been around, he's a good thinker," he tells *The Weekend Australian*. "He's done the NED (non-executive director) bit and the executive bit.

"John will bring a bit of perspective from over here as well, which I think is important in terms of investment strategy and how people are seeing the environment. Presumably that's one of the reasons why he's been invited on to the board."

Poynton works hard and enjoys the trappings of his success in business: he flies helicopters, collects vintage cars and owns an impressive Margaret River estate.

But 40 years ago he started his working life as a labourer on his family farm outside Perth, later joining the public service in the

lowly role as a complaints officer in the West Australian Department of Consumer Affairs.

It was the mid-1970s, at the height of the economic malaise of the Whitlam era. Conditions were so bad that Poynton, in his early 20s, couldn't even score a job at his father's blue-blooded Perth stockbroking firm, Hartley Poynton.

That soon changed and by the boom years of the 80s Poynton had emerged as a dominant figure in Perth's stockbroking scene, securing work on the high-profile floats of Bankwest, West Australian Newspapers and SGIO. He was kicked out of Hartley Poynton in 1996 after a bitter dispute over strategy with his fellow partners and quickly moved on to set up his own firm, Poynton & Partners.

Four years later, however, Poynton and his five fellow equity partners sold the firm to a South African management consulting group, sharing \$35 million in proceeds and plenty of champagne between them. By 2004, Poynton had established Azure Capital with another of Perth's best dealmakers, Mark Barnaba, and the two were able to employ their contacts and expertise to capitalise on the biggest resources boom in Australian history.

Poynton is viewed as the antithesis of the stereotypical wild west corporate cowboy but he did attract plenty of unwanted attention in 2007 when, as chairman of former state-owned gas utility Alinta, he spearheaded an attempted management buyout of the firm.

Under fire over a perceived conflict of interest, Poynton resigned as chairman to pursue the MBO, which was eventually rejected by the Alinta board in

favour of a rival offer from controversial investment bank Babcock & Brown and Singapore Power.

Poynton remained unrepentant, insisting that he acted in the best interest of shareholders all along and chiding those who tut-tutted about a company director taking on such a risk.

"When you get a situation where there's no upside at all to having a go (and) it's all about status quo, I think then you've got a problem in terms of where corporate governance heads — and indeed whether people like me and others actually want to be there," Poynton said at the time.

About the time of the bungled MBO, Poynton was also suffering from personal upheaval: he underwent surgery for prostate cancer and went through a divorce after admitting publicly that his private life had been "a bit out of control". (He has since remarried, to former ABC journalist Di Bain.)

Seven years later, Poynton is a picture of health and appears more settled.

He sits on fewer boards but is still a director of James Packer's Crown Perth and chairs Giving West, a body dedicated to encouraging philanthropy among Perth's wealthy set.

The Future Fund role is not Poynton's first national role: he was appointed to two terms as a member of the payment systems board of the Reserve Bank.

Coincidentally, it was then federal treasurer Peter Costello who appointed him and it will be Costello who will be chairing the Future Fund when Poynton attends the fund's first board meeting in coming weeks.

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RICHARD GOYDER
WESFARMERS CHIEF EXECUTIVE





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