



**MAKING A DIFFERENCE—A FRONTIER  
OF FIRSTS**

**WOMEN IN THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN  
PARLIAMENT 1921–2012**

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and  
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## **LINDA ROSEMARY SAVAGE**



MLC East Metropolitan Region from 22 March 2010 (casual vacancy) (ALP). Member Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People from June 2012.

Linda Savage took her place in the Western Australian Legislative Council in March 2010. Her appointment marked a new milestone for women in Australian politics: as of that date the Western Australian Legislative Council had the highest ever proportion of women of any Australian Parliament, at approximately 47 per cent of members. In her own words, she was immensely proud to join the ranks of Western Australian women parliamentarians and to be part of this milestone for women in politics.

In 2008, Linda had been endorsed by the ALP for the number three position on the East Metropolitan Region (EMR) ticket. Three and a half years earlier the ALP had won three of the five vacancies in the region but in the September 2008 election her final tally, after preferences, was approximately 4 000 votes behind that of Greens (WA) candidate Alison Xamon. Then in February 2010, former state secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, John (Jock) Kilday Ferguson who had been elected for the East Metropolitan Region from the number one position on the EMR ALP ticket, died unexpectedly. On 23 March 2010, Linda was declared elected to fill the vacancy for the remainder of the term following a recount by the WA Electoral Commission. The historic nature of her appointment was further confirmed in that for the first time ever all six members of one of the Legislative Council regions were women—three Liberals, two ALP and one Green.

Linda was born in Perth on 14 January 1957, the second of twin daughters to well-known general practitioner Dr Stanley Savage and his wife, Mrs Roberta Savage (nee Wyatt). Her father was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland—'a place he never returned to after he left in his mid-twenties' although, despite that, he never lost his strong Irish accent. Notwithstanding the

apparent stigma of accented speech in a society so defined by class, as Linda told the Legislative Council in her Inaugural Speech on 30 March 2010:

...he considered himself one of the lucky ones. He got a chance to have a decent education through opportunities offered by the state, and then became the first member of his family to reach...university and eventually a new life in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

The transforming opportunity of education also played a crucial role in the life of Roberta, Linda's mother. Growing up in modest circumstances in the (then) small country town of Waroona, south of Perth and named after Roberta Jull, the first woman doctor to set up practice in Perth (in 1897), Roberta, with the support and determination of Linda's grandmother, managed to defy her circumstances to complete school and obtained a bonded place to study at Claremont Teachers Training College. At the end of her first year, Roberta was chosen to go to the University of Western Australia to complete a degree. This was an opportunity Roberta would never have had otherwise, and one for which she was always grateful.

In Linda's words:

... my parents met ... and even as their lives grew more prosperous, they never forgot that it was the opportunity for an education that had transformed their lives.<sup>2</sup>

The recognition that lives can be, and should be, transformed by opportunities available to every child irrespective of origins, gender and/or income is a determination that Linda has taken from her parents' experience through to her current role in the Legislative Council, along with the most acute awareness that 'those of us who had opportunity, or could make our way, should never forget that many others did not have those opportunities or faced disadvantages, or obstacles through no fault of their own'. The drive for education, social justice and in particular that every child should have a fair chance to grow up to become a responsible and contributing member of society, combined with a belief in individual effort, hard work and taking responsibility for oneself, are values that Linda absorbed early in her home, particularly from her mother, 'whose intelligence and wisdom has been most influential in my life'.<sup>3</sup>

Educated at St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls in Mosman Park, Linda went on to complete a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honours at the University of Western Australia, majoring in politics. Subsequently, her interest in politics, honed early from her parents' progressive views, has been the dominating influence in her employment and career choices. Days after finishing her degree, she started work for the late Senator Ruth Coleman as her research assistant and speechwriter. From working with Senator Coleman, elected as a Senator for Western Australia in the Australian Parliament in 1974 (at that time only the eighth woman elected to the Senate) and from the regular trips to Canberra, Linda 'gained an insight into politics and politicians that no amount of study could ever provide'. Along with the (sometimes justified) criticism of politicians, Linda also saw parliamentarians trying in 'good

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 30 March 2010, p. 1108.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

faith to address the pressing issues of the times’ and realised that while it’s easy to sit on the sidelines and criticise, it’s much harder ‘to be part of finding the solution to complex issues’.<sup>4</sup>

Linda took on one of the complex issues of the 1980s when undertaking further study in 1982. After leaving Senator Coleman’s employment and winning a place at Cambridge University to study for a two-year post-graduate law degree, she wrote her thesis on the enforceability of surrogate parental contracts. Looking back on this work in an interview for the WA Law Society magazine *Brief*, Linda commented:

This was 1983, when the topic was very new and coincided with the growing area of *in vitro* fertilisation and the beginning of profound changes about what constitutes a family. This began a lifelong interest for me in bioethics—I have done work in areas including childbirth, euthanasia and abortion law reform.<sup>5</sup>

In these and related areas of reform which have been her main interest and focus, to date Linda has written over a dozen published articles and papers, and in collaboration with others, while working on the Women’s Advisory Council to the Premier, has written and published two books—*Women in Labour: 32 Personal Accounts of Childbirth*<sup>6</sup> and *Abortion—Breaking the Silence*.

In her speech on the budget on 17 June 2010 Linda returned to the abortion issue in response to a proposal that women seeking an abortion should be compelled ‘to view a coloured ultra sound of the foetus’. Noting that she had not expected to have to return to this issue following the passage of laws in 1998 which she considered reflected ‘then and still does the views of the vast majority of West Australian both men and women’, she spoke about the situation which had prevailed prior to 1998:

In the mid-1990s approximately 8 500 abortions were performed in Western Australia each year. In the main women were able to access safe abortions despite their dubious legality, but the legal right to abortion was questionable and there was always the danger that the laws could be enforced strictly to deny access to safe and legal abortions. While the laws were open to interpretation, those organisations that provided contraception and counselling services, such as those provided by Family Planning Western Australia, remained underfunded. More importantly, while the subject of abortion remained a taboo, women’s real life experiences were denied. They often felt shame about what had happened to them and were unable to speak to others about their experiences.<sup>7</sup>

After returning from the UK in the mid-1980s, Linda completed articles and was admitted as a legal practitioner in Western Australia. Subsequently, throughout the period encompassing the birth of two children, living in America for her husband’s work, the birth of a third child and another period overseas, Linda has worked as a lawyer in a range of positions. For several years she was a member of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, then its Director from July 1999 to December 2001. Later she was appointed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> *Brief*, 2 April 2011, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Davis, Jo-Anne Byrne and Susan Cullen, *Women in Labour: 32 Personal Accounts of Childbirth and Abortion*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 17 June 2010, p. 4006.

over the years Linda has also completed a Certificate in Bio-Ethics and is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Upon entering Parliament, Linda wrote a paper for WA Labor calling for 'an early childhood policy' based on the compelling evidence concerning the crucial impact of the earliest years of life on a person's health and wellbeing. This paper, 'The Health and Happiness of Our Children: A New Approach for the Early Years', led to her appointment in 2010 as party spokesperson for early childhood years, and she subsequently formulated the party's 'Growing Children Well' policy commitments that were announced in October 2011. As she said in Parliament:

We know that the first three years of life are crucial, affecting even the development of a child's brain and having a lifelong impact. We do not need research to confirm that a safe and nurturing environment with an adult who is consistently caring provides the best chance for a child's development, just as we know that poverty and dysfunction will diminish a child's long-term wellbeing. But children and their needs have been low on the list of priorities. The previous Labor government recognised this and appointed Michelle Scott as Commissioner for Children and Young People, and she has been effective in consistently raising issues as they affect children. But many voices are saying that far more must be done.<sup>8</sup>

Her advocacy in this area bore fruit in early 2012 when responsibility for the newly created shadow portfolio Early Childhood was given to a senior member of the shadow ministry.

More broadly, during the approximately 30 years following graduation from the University of Western Australia to her appointment to the Legislative Council, Linda was consistently active in many areas of law reform and advocacy of social justice issues. In addition to her time on the Women's Advisory Council to the Premier from 1991 to 1993, Linda was a founding member of the Women's Legal Service Steering Committee and convener of the Management Committee to establish the Women's Legal Service of Western Australia (1992 to 1996); member of the Steering Committee and Taskforce of the (then) Chief Justice David Malcolm's Taskforce on Gender Bias, established in August 1993 and reported in June 1994; member of the Executive of Women Lawyers WA (Inc) since 1994 and vice-president 1997 to 2000; and member of the task force to report to the Attorney General of Western Australia on the establishment of the State Administrative Tribunal of Western Australia (2001–2002). From 2002 to 2005, Linda was a member of the Reproductive Technology Council of Western Australia, and since 2008 has sat on the board of the Western Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society and the WANSLEA Family Service Board. Previously, in 1997 she had been awarded the Law Society of Western Australia's annual award for Outstanding Service in the Community, and in 2010 she was named as Woman Lawyer of the Year by the Women Lawyers of Western Australia.

Significantly, in her Inaugural Speech, Linda, while acknowledging the enormous gains made by women over the last 50 years, noted that these gains had not translated equally for all women. She pointed to the failure:

... to recognise and value the unpaid work overwhelmingly done by women caring for children and running households. The failure to do so has had far-reaching ramifications for women and children, and society in general. The failure to truly value what is regarded as the traditional

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<sup>8</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 30 March 2010, p. 1109.

work of women also affects those in the paid workforce and is at the heart of what is known as the gender pay gap.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, Linda from the outset of the parliamentary career championed the particular cause of education assistants as an example of a group of predominately female workers. She spoke in particular of the need to amend the industrial relations framework ‘so that the traditional undervaluation of work on the basis of gender is a factor taken into account when considering pay claims’.<sup>10</sup>

In her Inaugural Speech Linda also spoke about a current issue, the proposed and contentious Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill 2009—the so-called stop-and-search laws—saying:

It is alarming to me as a new member of this Parliament, that, in the twenty-first century, a government in a democratic country is seriously considering removing from its citizens the fundamental protection that the requirement of reasonable suspicion provides.<sup>11</sup>

In another major area of interest, Linda, a long term supporter of culture and the arts and a previous board member of the Art Gallery of WA, has continued to champion its importance since entering Parliament. In speaking to her motion—‘That this house calls on the government to immediately increase funding for culture and the arts in Western Australia to compensate for cuts made in the 2009–10 and 2010–11 budgets’—she said:

Since we have been recording these things, the arts, in all its expressions, have been the way that people have expressed what it is to be human, the common humanity we share, the frailties we all have and, of course, what we can aspire to. Artists have always played a very important role in politics too through literature, film and theatre. Often, they have been at the very forefront of expressing values such as tolerance, the rule of law and respect for human rights ... we have seen that particularly in recent times in the Arab world and also in countries such as China. This is obviously a tradition that goes back as far as the Greeks, when there were many plays that I am sure members are familiar with that dealt with war, philosophy and power ... perhaps some members are familiar with the books of Sally Morgan, the play *Jandamarra* and the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. All these stories have educated the last generation or two about our Indigenous history and helped many of us come to terms with it.<sup>12</sup>

Linda had first joined the ALP for six years from 1983 and then again in 2005. After entering the Parliament, she was elected on 22 April 2010 to the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review. During her first year in the chamber, while speaking on a motion to refer the Prohibited Behaviour Orders Bill to a committee, Linda spoke on the parliamentary committee system saying that ‘a strong and active committee system’ was not only an asset to parliamentary democracy but ‘one of the few justifications for a bicameral system with an upper house such as this’.<sup>13</sup> More generally as one who had practised as a lawyer she believed that it was incumbent on the Parliament to ‘make the legislation understandable and fit for purpose in a form that will address the concerns and policy behind it’.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 1109.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 31 August 2011, pp. 6421–6422.

<sup>13</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 9 November 2010, p. 8276.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Within the range of complex and important issues that are Linda's focus—social justice, law reform, the gender pay gap, preserving the protection of an individual's legal rights under the law, and funding and protection of the arts—one that continues to grow in prominence reflects her belief that no child born in Western Australia should be condemned or disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth. Greater resources and a clear strategy for WA's youngest citizens would ensure all children get the best possible start and chance to become the responsible and contributing adults we need them to be. As she concluded in her paper "*The Health and Happiness of our Children: A new approach to the Early Years*":

... it is hard to imagine what the role of government is, if it is not to do its best to ensure all children get [that] opportunity.

In May 2012, the ALP announced its endorsements for a number of Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council seats for the 2013 election and Linda did not secure a place on the party ticket. As reported in the *West Australian*:

Ms Savage said this morning that she 'always knew' her chances of pre-selection were poor after she decided not to join a faction.

'Whilst I understand why people choose to join factions and respect their right to, I chose not to', she said.

The decision to overlook the unaligned Ms Savage ... has angered some in the party keen to broaden its talent pool beyond unionists and staffers.

Mr Mead [the state ALP secretary] said Ms Savage had made a strong policy contribution but 'the party chose to go in a different direction'.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

I have been asked to reflect briefly on my experience as the *most* recently elected woman to the Legislative Council of the Western Australian Parliament. The Western Australian Legislative Council (the Council) is now distinguished by having the greatest proportion of women that any Australian Parliament has ever had. This is of real significance to me, both personally and professionally, having worked in the early 1980s for Senator Ruth Coleman, who, at that time, was only the eighth woman ever elected to the Senate. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of growing numbers of women who make our Parliaments more reflective of society.

The real increase in the number of women in Parliament is part of the enormous change that has occurred in our democracy in the past 30 years. For the first time we are actually attempting to create a political community on the assumption that everyone has the right to be heard and the right to belong. Just as women in now significant numbers are participating in decision-making, so are other groups whose voices have never been heard. No longer are people as deferential or cowered in the face of traditional authority figures or institutions. And for all those who decry the times we live in, I believe in Australia we have never lived in a more tolerant, safer and inclusive society.

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<sup>15</sup> *West Australian*, 22 May 2012.

As a member of Parliament, the challenge that concerns me most is how to develop policies and make laws that are effective, relevant and fair to this expanded group of competing interests. This includes, how to inform and align policy, for example, with the overwhelming evidence about the profound effect the experience in the womb, and in the first few years of life, has on a person's future health, wellbeing and capacity to be a responsible and contributing member of society—as well as the ballooning cost of the failure to do so. Similarly, how can one ensure, for example, that growing income inequality is addressed and so shore up our liberal democracy?

I am sure I am not the only member of this Parliament who has grappled with the question of how to make a worthwhile contribution. Despite many years in the workforce, I have, since entering Parliament two years ago, been on a steep learning curve simultaneously establishing an office, scrutinising legislation, being a member of a committee of the Council, and dealing with the constant contacts by email that all politicians now experience, amongst many other demands. In this respect, given that decisions made by politicians impact so significantly on the economic and social wellbeing of the state, I am surprised that there is so little formal induction into the role and no ongoing education. This seems very out of step with other professions and areas of employment in both the private and public sector.

Parliaments are distinguished by their law-making powers and notably since World War II there has been a proliferation of legislation. As a lawyer, I know that the solution to many of the complex problems society faces is not more legislation. Despite this, the need to be seen to be taking a problem seriously can at times result in a rush to legislate. At times this rush to legislate may be little more than an exercise in PR—to be seen to be doing something. At its worst it can result, as it did for example when I first entered Parliament, in the possibility that the so called stop-and-search laws would be passed. As I said in my Inaugural Speech:

It is alarming to me, as a new member of this Parliament, that in the twenty-first century, a government in a democratic country is seriously considering removing from its citizens the fundamental protection that the requirement of reasonable suspicion provides.<sup>16</sup>

The failure of this legislation to progress was a powerful illustration to me of the value of the Legislative Council's committee system and one of the justifications for its existence. It is of real concern that since then attempts to refer other contentious legislation to this committee have been defeated by the Liberal/National Government.

Since entering Parliament I have become more concerned about the growing community disdain towards MPs, something that has always existed but seems to be becoming increasingly vociferous. With so few people joining political parties and so many so openly hostile, I often hear the comment 'why would anyone ever enter politics'. Whilst there still appears to be no shortage of people prepared to enter politics, I am inclined to agree with former Prime Minister Bob Hawke's recent comment that the decline in the standing of MPs is a growing threat to the integrity of our parliamentary democracy.

My own observation has been that most MPs work extremely hard. The positions of Premier and Ministers who oversee budgets in the billions and shoulder often enormous responsibility and demands are extremely onerous. That being said, it is of course a challenge that most MPs would love to face!

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<sup>16</sup> WAPD(LC), 30 March 2010, p. 1110.