



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

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

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and
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LJILJANNA MARIA RAVLICH



MLC East Metropolitan Region from 22 May 1997 (ALP). Shadow Minister 1997–2001 and from 2008. Parliamentary Secretary 2001–2004. Minister of State 21 September 2004–23 September 2008. Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council 2004–2008. Member several parliamentary committees.

Ljiljanna Ravlich was the first woman born in a non-English speaking country to be elected to the Western Australian Parliament when she won an East Metropolitan Region seat for the Australian Labor Party for a term commencing 22 May 1997. From virtually the first day in the Legislative Council she was a constant participant in debate and prolific in submitting questions to Ministers stemming from her immediate appointment as shadow Minister for Public Sector Management. She was quickly appointed to the Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development, which was the beginning of her very substantial committee service to the Parliament. Following the election of Labor to government in 2001, Ljiljanna served for three years as a Parliamentary Secretary across a range of portfolios before becoming the Minister for Local Government; Regional Development; Heritage; the Kimberley, Pilbara and Gascoyne; and Goldfields and Esperance. Then when Labor maintained office at the 2005 election she was allocated the major education and training portfolio, which she held until late 2006. Other Ministries held before Labor lost government in 2008 included, as before, local government and regional development; heritage; the Kimberley, Pilbara and Gascoyne, as well as Goldfields and Esperance. Throughout most of the period of Labor governance in the first decade of the new century she was a major political figure.

Born in Split, Croatia on 9 January 1958, Ljiljanna Ravlich, was the daughter of Ivisa Ravlich, a grano worker, and his wife, Ljubica. In 1962 her father migrated to Western Australia ‘in the interests of providing a better life for his family’, the remainder of the family arriving in the following year when Ljiljanna was only five; in her own words, at ‘a time of great growth and great optimism in Western Australia’ but also at a time when the absence of adequate support services for females of non-English speaking backgrounds meant that she developed ‘a real

appreciation of the struggles and aspirations of all minority groups within our community'. And, as nearly three decades later, she told the Legislative Council in her Inaugural Speech:

... in view of my own journey, I intend to bring to this place a perspective built upon the first-hand experience of the struggles and aspirations of all people, particularly minority groups, indigenous Australians and ethnic peoples in Western Australia.¹

Education for Ljiljanna commenced at Midvale Primary School followed by attendance at Governor Stirling Senior High School. She then completed a Bachelor of Arts (Social Sciences) with a major in economics and Graduate Diplomas in Education and Education Administration at Curtin University. Between 1980 and 1988 she taught in secondary schools, and from 1985 was deputy principal of Morawa high school and Bullsbrook District High School. In 1989 she was employed as principal education officer in the Ministry of Education and then over the next few years as principal policy advocate for the Minister for Productivity and Labour Relations, the Minister for Education, Employment, and Training, and the Minister for Family, Community, Youth Justice and Disability Services. Between 1993 and her election to Parliament at the 1996 election, Ljiljanna worked as director of the Joint Venture Consulting Group, dealing with clients such as the Catholic Education Commission, the Builders Labourers and Plasterers Union and the Western Australian Department of Training. An important initiative was her establishment of the Western Australian Croatian Chamber of Commerce to promote the export of Australian products and expertise to the Republic of Croatia.

As previously indicated, in her Inaugural Speech during the Address-in-Reply debate on 27 May 1997, Ljiljanna celebrated the multicultural nature of Australian society and the manner in which she combined migrants and Indigenous Australian contribution 'have defined and will continue to define the State's unique character'. Other major issues she addressed in the speech included the negative consequences of 'public-sector privatisation and a preoccupation with economic rationalism', the need for a comprehensive strategy 'to drive economic diversification and growth' and her concern about negative aspects of the Government's industrial relations legislation, especially on workers with non-English speaking backgrounds.²

Not surprisingly, given her teaching background, she participated actively in parliamentary debates on educational issues. While debating the Curriculum Council Bill in June 1997 she referred to her experience as a first year teacher in Aboriginal education in Norseman in 1980:

Having arrived at the school with no formal training in Aboriginal education, I quickly discovered that virtually no curriculum was available for the special needs of those students. My two teaching colleagues and I were left to cope as best we could with no direction from anywhere.³

As part of this process the girls in the afternoon were assigned to tasks such as:

... cooking, and sewing on brand new Bernina sewing machines, while the boys were taught how to mow lawns, use rotary hoes, fix motor bikes and the like ... [T]he irrelevance of the

¹ WAPD(LC), 27 May 1997, p. 3208.

² Ibid.

³ WAPD(LC), 12 June 1997, p. 3977.

curriculum was highlighted to me on a trip that I took to Cundelee during one of the holiday breaks, when it became very apparent that there were no ovens, no Bernina sewing machines, no lawnmowers and no rotary hoes.⁴

During debate on the appropriation Bill in 1997 Ljiljanna also expressed concern about the moves for increasing devolution from head office to the schools themselves. In her view there was:

... strong evidence that a lot of confusion exists about devolution and its impact on local school communities and students. In the time I have spent in the education sector there has always been a tug-of-war between exercising devolution and central control ... At one level people in the Education Department want local communities to accept greater responsibility for initiating projects which will assist with the resourcing of education at the local level. While they give schools a bit of power in that respect, they also like to keep things centrally so they can play big brother when they feel a need to. That is not good enough. The Education Department will often shift the goal posts and create a great deal of confusion.⁵

Ironically the education Ministry was to be allocated to Ljiljanna from March 2005, a decision that served initially to ignite a perennial debate about whether a schoolteacher should hold the education portfolio. With her keen knowledge of the schools sector Ljiljanna certainly set out to 'make a difference'. In a short space of time this was achieved in many ways but an educational initiative, namely so-called 'outcomes education,' soon became highly controversial. The issue was clouded by misunderstandings and a failure for the course of history on the issue to be understood. As Minister Ljiljanna tried to correct the record, at least from her perspective, when responding to a motion in the Legislative Council moved by future President Barry House 'calling for a moratorium on further changes to years 11 and 12, proposed from January 2006 and a full, independent review of the Curriculum Council and the merits and implementation of outcomes-based education'.⁶ In a response that depicts her challenging style the Minister contended:

I will give members some history. As we know, this curriculum framework was legislated for in this Parliament in 1997 and driven by Colin Barnett. At that time Colin Barnett made it clear that rather than be prescriptive about what must be taught, the curriculum framework would be used by schools to develop and implement their teaching and learning programs according to the needs and characteristics of the students. This framework had been in development for quite some time. As I understand it, almost 10 000 teachers, students, parents, academics, Curriculum Council Officers and members of the community contributed to its development ... If that system was so great, why were the Court government, and the then Minister for Education, Colin Barnett, and then Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Hon Barry House, so keen to move in another direction? Why did they bother to go down the path of having input from almost 10 000 people on the proposed changes to the former education system as we know it? I asked Hon Barry House—he has been a two-bit-player in this debate because its genesis is pure party politics—what system he would have us go back to. Of course, he could not answer that question because the simple fact is that the system that we moved away from simply did not serve the needs of all students. That is why the system was changed in the first place and why the Liberal Party's former leader Richard Court embraced this as a policy objective. It is also why Colin Barnett brought the Curriculum Council Bill

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 24 June 1997, p. 4504.

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 18 August 2005, p. 4198.

before Parliament in 1997, why the curriculum framework was developed and why the outcomes and standards framework was rolled out in 1998.⁷

Ljiljanna's term as Minister for Education and Training ended with a Cabinet reshuffle in December 2006 shortly before Geoff Gallop resigned from Parliament to be succeeded as Premier by Alan Carpenter. However, in the reconstructed Carpenter Ministry she continued to hold a range of exacting portfolios and when Labor lost office in September 2008 she was allocated a number of shadow portfolios including the emerging domain of mental health. Her workload was such that it still appeared there was little time for her to pursue her artistic pastime of painting. Even so, with the advantage of modern technology it is now possible to view some of her best exhibition paintings from the Labor Party website.

Ljiljanna Ravlich, the first woman elected to the Western Australian Parliament to have been born in a non-English speaking country, has been passionate in her assertion that:

Western Australia is a multicultural society built by the efforts of all people, including indigenous Australian and migrants from all over the world. Their combined contributions have defined, and will continue to define, this State's unique character.⁸

Not surprisingly she stands as one of the few Ministers of the Western Australian Parliament to have both parents of overseas birth from other than the United Kingdom, and especially from Eastern Europe. Ljiljanna has 'made a difference' and fulfilled her early promise 'not to shy away from the hard issues or be a shrinking violet in this place [the Parliament]'.⁹ A clear ideology has underpinned the direction of her policies as she had enunciated in her Inaugural Speech when she said:

I am proud to stand on this side of the chamber because I believe in the Australian Labor Party and its guiding values of equality, democracy, liberty and social cooperation. The Australian Labor Party is committed to meeting the aspirations of all Australians for a decent, secure, dignified and constructive way of life. It is a party about looking after the interests of ordinary people, and recognising their special needs and aspirations, regardless of sex, religion or race. It is a party promoting social justice and giving people a fair go. It recognises the role of the trade union movement in taking forward the struggle of workers against the injustices of the extreme right wing forces.¹⁰

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(The following is a short excerpt from the Reflections Ljiljanna wrote in 1999.)

To be an MP is an enormous privilege. What we do in Parliament has an enormous impact on the sort of society we end up with. I am confident that I speak for the majority of Western Australians when I say that I want to live in an egalitarian society, a society where workers and their families can afford quality health care; a society where the children of blue collar workers can access a quality education system—particularly tertiary education; and a society

⁷ Ibid., p. 4203.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 27 May 1997, p. 3208.

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 21 May 1998, p. 3212.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 27 May 1997, p. 3207.

where our senior citizens who have made major contributions to this state over a lifetime, can access good quality nursing home care without being fleeced in the process.

The economic, social and political policies that we pursue now will determine, amongst other things, the society we have in the future.

I am in Parliament because I want to make a contribution—to make a difference. I hope one day to look back and take pride in the contribution I have made to this state,

(These Reflections were written in 2012.)

Fourteen and a half years after taking my place as the first woman born in a non-English speaking country to be elected to the WA Parliament, it is only looking in a mirror that daily reminds me of the years now passed.

The speed at which time has passed since I entered the Legislative Council on 22 May 1997 as a member for the East Metropolitan Region, serves to remind me just how much I have enjoyed my roles as a representative of the people and as a legislator.

My incredible personal journey, which began in the Croatian village of Kozica and has taken me to a seat in the State Parliament, is testament to what this great nation can deliver.

My late parents, Ivisa and Ljubica Ravlich, could never have foreseen that their aspiration for a better life for their five children would have led to one of those children being elected to the State Parliament.

For me, serving as a member is as exciting today as when I first entered the Parliament. Not a day goes by that I don't remind myself of why the institution of Parliament is there and my role in it. When I speak, I do so on behalf of my constituents.

During my fourteen years in the Parliament, I have seen members come and go and, for the most part, I have enjoyed the variety of people who have passed through the Legislative Council chamber. They have each brought with them a view reflecting the constituents they represent.

And just as one constituency is different from the next and holds its own characteristics and flavour, so too do their representatives.

There have been many characters among them and irrespective of their political leanings, I have always believed that we are people first and politicians second.

Whilst our political ideology may differ and whilst we can be on opposing sides of an issue on any one matter, we can achieve the same end with a spirit of cooperation and a dash of good humour. I have enjoyed the generosity in spirit of all Council members.

There have been many light and funny moments in the chamber where we join for a laugh, usually at one another's expense.

One of the funniest for me was not long after I arrived. I stood to take the call to make a speech and I said to the President, ‘Mr President I think I am about to faint,’ which was followed by my dramatic collapse to the floor.

Proceedings were immediately suspended, as it was somewhat rare for a member to hit the floor of the chamber. I remained there while someone went to find a doctor from the other place.

When I came to, I was flat on my back in the middle of the chamber, my legs elevated on a chair and I opened my eyes to a sea of grey heads looking down smiling at me—very funny but frightening.

However, that was the Legislative Council of old; lots of middle aged grey headed men in suits. In 1997 there were only seven women, two of whom were Labor members, out of a total number of 34 members.

We can fast forward to the 2008 election where 16 out of 36 seats in the Legislative Council were won by women. In the East Metropolitan Region women now hold six out of six available seats, given the vacancy created by the untimely death of the late Hon Jock Ferguson.

Who would have thought back in 2007 that the Legislative Council of WA would lead the way, not only between our two state Houses of Parliament, but across the nation?

If I were to faint again, it would be a far different picture that I would wake up to compared with all those years ago.

The work of a member of Parliament has changed markedly in the time I have been there. However, some things remain the same.

The last time I made a contribution to *Making a Difference: Women in the Western Australian Parliament*, I recall saying that:

... [A]n aspect of Parliament that I look forward to on a daily basis is Question Time ... However, like many of my opposition colleagues I am becoming increasingly frustrated by the government’s lack of response.

Nothing new to report here.

However, possibly the biggest change that I and all other members have seen in recent years is the advent of technology and our need to adjust to it. Having arrived at a time when members of the upper House still often wrote their parliamentary questions in long hand on paper, I have witnessed a change that took some time for members to get used to. I think some never did get used to computers and a new way of working; they left just in time.

The rate of technological change and the power of technology means now we can work faster, and this becomes the new standard. Computers, iPads, mobiles all drive work volumes and speed. If you want to be competitive in politics, you need to attend to all.

Throw into the mix a one-hour news cycle and you quickly realise that the old promises of technology reducing work time and volume is just nonsense. No-one can escape the impact of technology now, not even the WA Parliament.

In my maiden speech I said:

I am here because I want to make a difference. I hope one day to look back and take pride in the contribution I made to this State. For that reason I do not intend to shy away from the difficult issues or to be a shrinking violet in this place. Rather, I look forward with enthusiasm to being an active participant in this Chamber over the next four years.¹¹

I take pride in not having shied away from difficult issues and I definitely have not been a shrinking violet in the chamber.

I have been fortunate to have been a Minister of the Crown holding a diverse range of portfolios and I have enjoyed the challenges that that they presented. I am particularly proud to have served as a Minister in the Gallop and Carpenter Governments and to have held the position of deputy leader of the Legislative Council over that time.

History will judge whether or not I have made a difference. Personally, I draw great personal satisfaction from being the first woman born in a non-English speaking country elected to Parliament. I take pride in leading by example for all other women who have come across the seas to make Western Australia home. I hope they see that they too can one day sit in this place, because this is Australia and she won't let you down.

¹¹ WAPD(LC), 27 May 1997, p. 3212.