



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

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

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DONNA EVELYN FARAGHER (nee Taylor)



MLC East Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2005 (Lib). Shadow Minister 2005–2008. Minister of State 23 September 2008–22 November 2010. Parliamentary Secretary from December 2010. Member Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and General Purposes (then Statutes Review) 2005–2008.

Donna Faragher was first elected as Donna Taylor to the Legislative Council at the February 2005 State Election enabling her to assume her seat on 22 May 2005. She was born on 12 September 1975 to parents Don Taylor and Joan Taylor (nee Light). Both parents had occupations with police links, her father being a detective superintendent in the Australian Federal Police, while her mother was also a police officer. Donna was married on 10 December 2005 in Mount Lawley to Scott Faragher. Initially Donna was trained and employed in the education sector before gaining some notable firsts upon her election as a Liberal Party member for the upper house East Metropolitan Region. In fact, she was the youngest woman ever to represent the Liberal Party in either House of the Western Australian Parliament, and the third youngest from any party elected to either House, and in 2008 became the youngest woman ever appointed as a Cabinet Minister in Western Australia.

Donna Faragher has strong links to the East Metropolitan dating back to her great grandfather, Scottie Jamieson, who was a local councillor for 21 years and also the Mayor of the then Midland Junction Municipal Council. Donna was born at Swan District Hospital, and lived in Bassendean until her election to Parliament in 2005. After attending Guildford Grammar Preparatory School, she was educated at Perth College. During her study at the University of Western Australia, she held a range of part-time jobs in the region, ranging from pulling beers at the Rose and Crown Hotel to waiting on tables in the Swan Valley.¹ Her university degrees comprise a Bachelor of Arts (with honours), a Diploma of Education and a Master of Education (with honours) directed towards research in psychology.

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 May 2005, p. 2356.

As a trained teacher and school psychologist Donna developed a concern about issues such as education, law and order and the future of Australia's youth. She spoke at some length in her Inaugural Speech about the need for quality schooling. She recognised the significance of parents and immediate family but understood the great responsibility assigned to teachers inevitably facing pressures from a great range of sources. In her view the standard of education 'directly influences both learning outcomes and the opportunities that young people will have in the future workplace. Education also impacts on the quality of Australian democracy and the values that its citizens possess'.² Moreover, while many suggest that the focus of schooling should be at the secondary level, Donna believes on the basis of research evidence 'that early childhood and the primary years of schooling are the most critical [for] it is at this time that a young child's skills such as literacy and numeracy, are developed and it is these same skills that are vital for a child to inevitably cope in their high school years and beyond'.³ She goes further to indicate that around one child in 10 has some form of learning difficulty and failure to diagnose disorders can affect a child's self-esteem and confidence, with the possibility even leading to problems such as criminal behaviour and drug abuse.⁴

A major concern for the new MLC was an apparent increasing acceptance of the cannabis and other illicit drugs in the community, particularly by young people. As a former illicit drugs strategy advisor to the federal Justice Minister, Chris Ellison, Donna was able to cite statistics that one in five young Australians smokes cannabis every week and 10 per cent of those become addicted. Of particular concern was the term 'harm minimisation' rather than the phrase 'harmful drug use', which commentators, researchers and policy makers have increasingly begun to use. In Donna's judgement, 'there is no acceptable level, and we must have one united and unequivocal message: that illicit drug use in any form should neither be promoted nor deemed acceptable to society'.⁵ 'Illicit drugs,' she said, 'represent one of the greatest scourges on our community ... Research suggests that for those who are vulnerable, cannabis use can lead to mental illness, paranoia, suicide and distress and can be exacerbated if the user starts early in life'.⁶ Citing disturbing statistics from the United States of America, it was Donna's view that 'Australia must not go down a similar path'.⁷ Interestingly, when addressing these distressing avenues followed by some youths, she advocated greater use of mentoring programs as an avenue that Governments of all persuasions should actively encourage in schools as a form of early intervention 'to hopefully put a child on the right path to a happy and productive life'.⁸

In outlining her main concerns and hopes for the future Donna indicated that one of the main reasons that led her to join the Liberal Party was voluntary student unionism (or VSU). She recognised that opponents say that VSU 'is just an ideological obsession of the Liberal Party'. This was not the case according to Donna:

rather, it is simply a pursuit of one of the fundamental principles upon which liberalism is based: that of freedom of association, including an individual's right to choose whether to join

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 2357.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

a union or not. Universities should not be seen as closed shops and the notion of no fee, no degree is, simply, unjust.⁹

She attributed credit for this policy in Western Australia to Hon Norman Moore, a former Liberal Minister for Education, who, as Leader of the Government in the upper House, was sitting in the chamber for Donna's first speech. As a proud member of the Liberal Party, Donna made reference to John Howard and the party's earlier history, going back as far as Sir John Forrest, Sir James Mitchell, Sir David Brand and Sir Charles Court. From more contemporary times Richard Court was mentioned, as were Hon Derrick Tomlinson and Hon Peter Foss 'for their encouragement and advice'.¹⁰ Her parents were said to have 'instilled ... important values akin to our Liberal beliefs, from personal responsibility to being good to others and creating opportunities through hard work and effort in both employment and study'.¹¹

Donna joined the Liberal Party in 1993 and had been president of the Perth Women's Division. She was also president of the WA Union of Liberal Students in 1998, as well as federal secretary of the Australian Liberal Students' Federation in 1997. In 2001 she was a member of an Australian political exchange convention to Germany, but her real induction to everyday politics was several years as a policy and parliamentary adviser to Western Australian Liberal Senator Chris Ellison. Immediately upon taking her parliamentary seat on 22 May 2005, she was nominated as the opposition spokesperson for youth and drug abuse strategy. Other shadow roles she fulfilled were in disability services and culture and arts, and she was also the Parliamentary Secretary to the shadow Cabinet. Moreover, she was soon an active member of the standing committees of the upper house. For most of the thirty-seventh Parliament she was a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review.

Having worked for Senator Ellison, Donna was particularly aware of the role of second chambers. As she said:

I understand the importance of a bicameral parliament and appreciate the necessity of the differing roles of the two houses. Checks and balances upon governments, such as the use of a second parliamentary chamber, are an essential part of our philosophy and the philosophy of all democracies.¹²

At that stage she did not reflect upon the wisdom of Cabinet Ministers being members of the Legislative Council. The Commission on Government (COG) had recommended 'that the number of ministers permitted in the Legislative Council should be reduced to one, the minimum required at present by the *Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899*'.¹³ However, there was no political commitment to this proposition. Little did Donna realise that as a consequence of this recommendation being ignored, following the election of the 'Alliance' Government led by Colin Barnett in September 2008, she would be allocated the major portfolio of Minister for Environment and Youth.

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2356.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 2358.

¹³ Report No.5, Commission on Government, August 1996, Recommendation 109, p.175.(8.3.5)

Premier Barnett had placed considerable faith in his young woman Minister. There were some early problems with appointments to her office but Donna soon energetically met the challenges. She was in a relative comfort zone with the youth affairs portfolio, making announcements that included launching a 2010 Positive Image Award and encouraging communities across Western Australia to apply for funding to hold an event during National Youth Week 2010. The environment portfolio was understandably broader in its scope and responsibility. There was its share of recognising community volunteers and tidy towns, as well as government initiatives such as the development of a Kimberley science and conservation strategy, a ministerial statement about which was made in the Legislative Council on 18 March 2009.¹⁴ As part of this initiative Donna, in company with Premier Colin Barnett, announced on 3 October 2009 that a marine park would be established at Camden Sound in the Kimberley to protect a portion of the humpback whale ‘maternity ward’. This announcement led a spokesperson from the Wilderness Society to suggest:

... these kinds of conservation initiatives present a way forward for providing genuine employment for Indigenous people on Country, in direct contrast to the false expectations for Indigenous employment in the specialized, mainly ‘fly in fly out’, oil and gas sector’.¹⁵

Donna was very careful with her public statements in the aftermath of the Boorabbin bushfire tragedy east of Coolgardie in which three truck drivers lost their life on 30 December 2007—before she took office. She required her Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) to make a full response to the coroner’s findings and took a number steps, which included a comprehensive bushfire preparedness report and the passage of the Bush Fires Amendment Bill. However, Donna was not environment minister when two major bushfires broke out in 2011—those in the Perth Hills in February and in Margaret River in November—as she had resigned from the Ministry in November 2010. This decision was occasioned by the birth of her first child, Clare Evelyn Jean, in partnership with husband Scott, whom she ‘thanked for his love, enthusiasm and ever-enduring encouragement’.¹⁶ Important work continued, however, with her appointment on 14 December 2010 as Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, meaning she remained close to the hub of power. As the youngest woman ever to become a Cabinet Minister in Western Australia, it is likely that she is destined in the years to come to continue to ‘make a difference’ in Western Australian politics.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

With it being more than 90 years since Edith Cowan became the first woman to be elected to any Australian Parliament, it is timely to reflect on how far we have come. Indeed, with women currently representing one-third of the Liberal Party’s Legislative Council membership and 47 per cent of the Council’s entire membership, it is clear that the ledger has moved since the time when only five women entered Parliament in the subsequent 50 years after Edith Cowan’s election.

While I firmly believe that there must be equal employment opportunities in the workplace, I have always retained the view that gender equality should not be determined by a quota system, rather by merit. Notwithstanding this, it is very pleasing to see the number of women

¹⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 18 March 2009, p. 1972.

¹⁵ <http://www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/kimberley/welcome-201cfirst-step201d-camde> 7/4/2011

¹⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 May 2010, p. 2358.

in our Parliament continuing to increase. I certainly see one of my roles is to encourage women, particularly young women, to make the most of opportunities and to always believe that they can make a difference in whatever field they have an interest.

For me, to be a member of Parliament representing the East Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council is both an honour and a privilege. To be the youngest Liberal woman ever elected to the Western Australian State Parliament, at the age of 29, and to then, at 33, become the youngest woman to ever serve as a Minister in the Western Australian State Cabinet is, I hope, a demonstration to other young women that they can make a significant contribution to the community, irrespective of age or gender.

Since 2005, I have had the opportunity to work for, and advocate on behalf of, the East Metropolitan community. Some of this work is at the individual level, helping constituents on a variety of issues. Other work is broader in scope, whether that be supporting schools and community groups or pursuing positive initiatives for the benefit of the wider community.

Advocating for improvements across a range of policy areas as a government and opposition member, a Minister and shadow Minister, has also been important. In my first speech to Parliament, I spoke about the importance of the primary years of schooling, particularly the early years, tackling illicit drugs in our community as well as the positive role that mentoring can play in helping young people, particularly those at risk, to improve their lives. Being a Minister and prior to that, a shadow Minister, enabled me to give effect to some of these and other issues even more actively.

On reflection, I want to give just a couple of examples and how they relate back to those policy areas that I outlined in my first speech. As a shadow Minister, I developed the Liberal Party's 2008 election platform relating to illicit drugs which included proposed new laws to protect children harmed through drug manufacture, an issue I raised in that first speech:

The cocktail of often volatile chemicals used for amphetamine production, with all their fumes and susceptibility to explosion, also increases the danger to innocent bystanders and nearby residents ... it is incumbent upon governments at all levels to continue to respond swiftly and effectively for the wellbeing, health and quality of life of Australia's children and young people.¹⁷

This policy has now been implemented by our Liberal Government. The second example came about when I was Minister for Youth. In that same speech, I said the following:

One thought I have long held, whilst not directly related to education but undoubtedly linked, is the need for greater use of mentoring programs. Unfortunately, we do live in a society with ever increasing family breakdown, crime and isolation. As a child I was fortunate to have had a happy and caring upbringing. This is not the same story for many other children. Some live in homes characterised by violence and drug abuse; others are lacking in appropriate or positive role models. Not all mentoring programs have a positive effect on every child in need, but often they can, from increased participation in education and improved self-esteem to better social skills and behaviour. Sometimes a child might just need to talk to someone who listens in a non-judgmental way or have an opportunity to participate in a positive activity which he or she might not otherwise be able to share with a family member.¹⁸

¹⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 May 2005, p. 2357.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

As youth minister, the delivery of the first funding increase in 14 years to the highly successful Cadets WA program to provide further training, leadership and mentoring opportunities for secondary students across Western Australia and to expand it to include a new junior cadet program for young people in years 6 and 7 was very important to me.

The role of a Minister is of course both rewarding and challenging—often all at the same time—and clearly no different from when June Craig (q.v.), a Minister in the 1970s, who said in a previous edition of this book:

Responsibilities: ministerial; parliamentary; electoral; party; public; Government representative at functions (separate from those associated with portfolio and electorate; home and family; interviews; meetings throughout the state; media—the list was endless.¹⁹

Difficult decisions sometimes have to be made as a Minister but the opportunity to make a positive difference in key policy areas that will benefit the wider community is one that is a privilege. In looking back, the delivery of the Government's Kimberley wilderness parks, the renewed focus on the importance of our national parks, the establishment of the Office of the Environmental Protection Authority, securing funding to ensure that the tall ship STS *Leeuwin II* remained afloat as a significant youth-development program as well as increasing the Cadets WA funding were particular highlights during my period as Minister for Environment and Youth.

At a personal level, since my first election in 2005, there have been some significant changes. Upon entering Parliament, I was engaged to be married. Today, I am a wife and mother to a 16-month-old baby girl, Clare Evelyn Jean. In considering these changes in the context of my parliamentary career, the latter has of course had the most significant impact—that being my decision to step down from state Cabinet less than one week before Clare's birth. In reaching that decision, I had taken the view that it was important for my family to have a little time after her birth to establish a good routine without the additional requirements that inevitably come with being a Minister. For me, it was the right decision, albeit the most challenging personal decision I have had to make since becoming a member of Parliament.

While I stepped down as Minister, my role as a member and now Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier has enabled me to continue to work hard for the community and to assist the Premier on a range of policy and administrative issues, most particularly the State's involvement in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Perth in 2011.

There are many outstanding examples of achievements by women. We all have a role to play in encouraging women to continue to make a difference in our society.

¹⁹ David Black and Harry Phillips, *Making a Difference: Women in the Western Australian Parliament, 1921–1999*, Perth: Parliament of Western Australia, 1999, p. 93.