



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

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

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and
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ALANNAH JOAN GERALDINE MacTIERNAN



MLC East Metropolitan Region 22 May 1993–21 November 1996 (ALP). MLA Armadale 14 December 1996–20 July 2010 (ALP). Shadow Minister 1994–2001. Minister for Planning and Infrastructure 16 February 2001–23 September 2008. Member Standing Committee on Constitutional Affairs and Statutes Revision 1993–1996; Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee 1997–2001; Joint House Committee 1997–1998; Parliamentary Services Committee 1998. Chairman Community Development and Justice Standing Committee 2008–2010.

In 1996, after only one term in Parliament, Alannah MacTiernan followed in the footsteps of Kay Hallahan (q.v.) in transferring from the Legislative Council to the seat of Armadale in the Legislative Assembly. She quickly established a reputation as one of the party's most articulate spokespersons, shadowing first Productivity and Labour Relations, then Transport and Fair Trading, and subsequently Transport and Planning.

Born in Melbourne, Victoria, on 10 January 1953, Alannah MacTiernan was educated in Victoria at St Bernadette's Primary School in East Ivanhoe and Our Lady of Mercy College at Heidelberg. She came to Western Australia at the age of 18 and worked in a variety of jobs while returning to Victoria twice for six months on each occasion. After completing an Arts degree at the University of Western Australia, she worked in Aboriginal Employment and Training for the commonwealth department of employment from 1977 to 1981 and again in 1984 both in Western Australia and in the national office. Between 1981 and 1983, she established and ran a suburban newspaper, the *Mount Lawley/Maylands Express*. She completed a law degree in 1986 and practised in the commercial department of Dwyer Durack from 1987 to 1993, joining the partnership in 1992.

Alannah first joined the Australian Labor Party through its University branch in 1976 and then the Perth branch in 1979 before founding the Highgate branch in 1981. She was a delegate to the Perth Electorate Council from 1975 to 1993, and to the State Executive in 1981 and from 1984 to 1998.

From May 1988 to 1993, Alannah was a member of the Perth City Council. In addition, between 1989 and 1991 she was also one of the inaugural appointments to the Heritage Council of Western Australia, and a member in the same years of the Perth Theatre Trust, as well as of the Rod Evans Senior Citizens Centre from 1990 to 1993, the Irish Club of WA from 1979, the Irish–Australian Congress and convenor of the Inner City Residents’ Action Group. She was actively involved as a player and official of the University Soccer Club between 1975 and 1994 and was for many years the patron of the WA Women’s Soccer Association.

Following the decision of Kay Hallahan (q.v.) to contest the Legislative Assembly seat of Armadale at the 1993 state election, Alannah was selected to head the ALP team for the Legislative Council East Metropolitan Region and she took her seat in May 1993. Following in the footsteps of a pioneering predecessor Ruby Hutchison (q.v.), Alannah used her Inaugural Speech on the Address-in-Reply motion on 29 June to attack the continued existence of the House to which she had just been elected:

I propose to commence my career in this place by putting on record my belief that this House is an anachronism, and that its existence falsely suggests that important checks and balances required in the parliamentary democracy are in place. Accordingly, I take the view that this House should be abolished and that its membership and function be incorporated into an expanded Legislative Assembly.

... I take the view that...this House in its very conception is undemocratic...This House has always fiercely protected property and conservative rural interests, which is hardly surprising given that it is the direct spiritual descendant of the House of Lords... [and] the Legislative Council has not during any period of conservative government this century provided any real fetter on the power of the Government of the day. Indeed, it has been the servant, or even the poodle, of the conservative Executive.¹

Alannah’s proposal² was for a unicameral Parliament on the lines of the German Bundestag with a majority of members elected from single-member constituencies and the remainder from party or group lists, and with government members not eligible for appointment as Speaker or to the chair of review committees. This, in her view, would limit the power of the Executive Government, provide opportunities for the detailed review of legislation and allow for a greater diversity of representation within a unicameral system.

In the same speech she cited some of her reasons for belonging to the Labor Party:

[T]he Labor Party understands that the desire and the need for short term economic gain has to be tempered by environmental imperatives...and [at the same time] represents an opportunity for justice for those who are so often wrongly marginalised.³

In the weeks and months that followed, Alannah quickly developed a reputation as a frequent and articulate contributor to debates with a particular emphasis on issues arising from industrial relations and corruption and concerning accountability at all levels. Indeed, in this context, and after only 18 months in Parliament, she participated with such vigour in an urgency debate on government accountability that she was suspended from the service of the House for the remainder

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 29 June 1993, pp. 492–493.

² *Ibid.*, p. 494.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

of the sitting.⁴ Over the years she made numerous contributions to debates on ‘matters of public importance’ and constantly crusaded on matters such as those connected with the Wanneroo Shire Council during the so-called ‘Wanneroo Inc’ period and with the Builders’ Registration Board, which she regarded as less than effective in many instances. It was hardly surprising that the ALP was anxious to have her transfer to the Legislative Assembly with the retirement of Kay Hallahan (q.v.), and in the August 1999 shadow ministry reshuffle, Alannah became a member of the Opposition’s main strategy group.

From 1997, Alannah was an active member of the Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee since 1997 and prepared a substantial academic paper, ‘Contracting Out of Government Services—Keeping the Bastards Honest’ for the conference of Public Accounts Committees held early in 1999. She explained the title of the paper as follows:

For [Don] Chipp the bastards were the representatives of the two main political parties. For Parliamentary public accounts committees, usually made up of the representatives of those major political parties, the bastards have been the members of executive government and the bureaucracies that serve them... However, the executive government generally has no statutory or inherent control over the private providers of publicly-funded services... hence it is necessary in our time to cast the accountability net far wider, and include in our definition of those we need to keep honest, the private providers of government services.

In rounding off her paper she contended that:

What I hope I have demonstrated is that we have failed to develop accountability mechanisms that ensure that in this new environment Governments are meeting their obligations to provide services in an efficient, equitable and ethical manner.

What we have to decide, she argued, is:

... how far we want to trade accountability for potential economic efficiency... There is no doubt that extending the full force of accountability mechanisms to the private sector providers would reduce their competitive advantage and no doubt would see quite a number of players withdraw from the market in horror.

But I believe that...accountability in this State has been eroded to an extent that is unacceptable... This level of erosion is not conducive to good government and it undermines the very functioning of democracy’.⁵

Alannah’s determination to be in the thick of things irrespective of the circumstances and the risk was never better demonstrated than when she visited East Timor in September 1999 as a United Nations–accredited observer during the critical days after the UN-supervised independence vote and then on her return to Western Australia participated actively in advancing the cause of East Timorese independence. Seventeen months later, her opportunity came with the election of the Gallop Government and her inclusion in the cabinet as Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. She retained these portfolios throughout the more than seven and a half years during which the Gallop and then Carpenter Governments were in power. In this period, what became the signature

⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 15 Dec 1994, pp. 9780–9790.

⁵ Extracts from unpublished paper presented by Alannah MacTiernan MLA to the Australasian Council of Public Accounts Committees, 5th Biennial Conference, 21–23 February 1999.

achievement of her political career was her role in administering the construction and initial functioning of the landmark Perth–Mandurah railway, which attracted a great deal of political controversy during the construction years but which has become one of the most generally lauded achievements of her party's tenure in office. Other achievements associated with her period as minister included the extension of the Joondalup railway to Clarkson as well as numerous extensions on major freeways and highways. A further area of activity was her promotion of the use of deliberative assemblies in order to make government planning decisions acceptable to and reflective of community opinion.

Back in opposition in September 2008, Alannah was included in the ALP shadow Ministry as shadow Minister for Regional Development, Strategic Infrastructure and Climate Change. The latter portfolio reflected the fact that during her term as government minister, Alannah had been associated with a number of developments to promote new energy techniques and to reduce carbon emissions, especially in transport and residential developments, and in 2010 she joined the board of the Sustainable Energy Association.

However, in the previous August she had announced that she would resign from the Legislative Assembly to contest the House of Representatives seat of Canning, which encompassed her former state parliamentary seat but where she would require a swing of more than four per cent to win the seat. She resigned from the shadow Ministry on 26 February 2010, and from the Legislative Assembly in July 2010, two days after the timetable for the federal election had been announced. In the election itself, Alannah achieved a swing in her favour of more than two per cent compared with the 2007 result, but the strong swing generally against the ALP ensured her defeat by the long-serving sitting member Don Randall. Subsequently in October 2011, she was elected Mayor of the City of Vincent.

For all but the first 15 months and final four months of her 14 years in Parliament, Alannah served in either a Ministry or shadow Ministry. Between 2001 and 2010, her role on the floor of the Legislative Assembly was largely confined to answering or asking an unbroken stream of parliamentary questions, but her work at an executive level and in community affairs had established for her a reputation which continued unabated in her post-parliamentary years.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(The excerpts which follow are from Alannah's Reflections written in 1999.)

Representing the community in Parliament is an awesome task. The community does not speak with one voice—there are myriad competing philosophies and conflicting interests whose proponents all understandably seek our support.

Our job is to develop policy and responses to the issues of the day that balance these competing interests while making judgements about fairness, social and economic justice and a longer term vision of the direction in which our society should be heading.

A Parliament that is made up of a broad cross-section of the community has more chance of getting that balance and those judgements right.

That is why it is important that women are properly represented in Parliament. Women have as wide a diversity of philosophical views and experience as do men. The abortion debate in the Western Australian Parliament was a powerful example of this. But there is no doubt that, as a group, women have some experiences and shared propensities that differ from men—when considered as a group.

If we want to truly represent the community and advance the interests of all citizens, those experiences and perspectives must be taken into account. One amusing, if relatively trivial, demonstration of this was the attitudes shown towards a planned deregulation of the hairdressing industry. An all male inter-party committee recommended it—with the Minister introducing the legislation explaining that the difference between a good haircut and a bad haircut is one week. Women, being not so confined to short back and sides, had a very different perspective of the consumer impact of substandard work. The legislation was subsequently defeated.

Having women in public positions of authority and influence can be psychologically empowering for other women, encouraging their full participation in all levels of social and economic life. It should also help men adapt to and accept women as decision makers.

I acknowledge the folly of presenting women as essentially more virtuous than men. However, it is my experience that although women can be as tough as their male counterparts, women are more inclined to attempt to reach a consensus position: to aim at win–win rather than take no prisoners. As more women enter Parliament, this propensity has the potential to modify the culture of the Parliament for the better.

How well such a changed culture will sit with the adversarial nature of our political system remains to be seen. With some luck, the result of this tension may be, not the failure of women to survive but the evolution of a system that provides more consensus-orientated outcomes.

In these 1999 ‘Reflections’, Alannah also cited at some length her Inaugural Speech and discussed at length the issue of unemployment—‘one issue that has a claim to be perhaps the single most important issue for the people of Armadale and the people of Western Australia generally’. In her view ‘job creation must now be embraced as a long term strategy not just a short term measure adopted for one year and dropped the next’.

(The following Reflections were written for the 2012 volume.)

Seventeen years in State Parliament: I have been asked to reflect on the experience. What was it like and what have I learnt that may be of use to others?

It was the best and worst of times. Politics is a very tough game and you either need tremendous ambition or commitment—usually a combination of both—to stick with it, to deal with the internal dynamics of your own side, the barrage of the Opposition, the media scrutiny and the demands of the electorate. I always say my first four years delivering the new MetroRail project was like being on the Somme. Indeed, it was reflecting on what the blokes on the Western Front endured that kept me going when it all seemed too hard.

But the rewards of being able to do good are enormous. We had opportunities to help thousands of punters get a fair deal. Sometimes it is just securing an outstanding wage payment achieved in a single phone call. Other times we would work for years to secure a reversal of an unjust conviction or new homes for victims of shoddy builders. Sometimes doing good was simply honouring community events, adding to the sense of occasion by participating. Occasionally, punters just wanted someone to listen compassionately about the rough hand life had dealt them.

In my first four years, the rewards very much outweighed the grief. It was fun.

I was elected to the Legislative Council. As one of only a few new members in the Labor team, I was given enormous freedom and opportunity to stake out territory, to build issues and policy—I would always recommend starting your political career in opposition. And without the responsibilities to a geographic electorate that absorbs a lower house member, we were free to create action groups, run hotlines for home buyers, rallies for building subbies and Constitution challenges for Rastafarians wanting their cannabis consumption acknowledged as a matter of religious freedom.

My second term was in the Legislative Assembly, as the member for Armadale. Being directly elected as a lower House member gives a quite different set of connections with the electorate. I always had a very deep conviction about my responsibility to advance the cause of my electorate—to make sure they received their fair share of the state's resources and attention.

From the beginning of the second term, I served as opposition Minister for Transport and then added Planning. It was a great opportunity to lead debate on critical issues to the state and to develop Labor's policy.

But to be honest, going into the 2001 election after eight years in opposition, I questioned whether I could do it again. The need every day to get up and expose shortcomings in government policy and practice comes at a personal price. It is very debilitating to have to be in negative mode most of the time. But under our system, if you don't do it and do it well, you do not get the opportunity to take your turn steering the ship.

But the hard work paid off and in 2001 we won government and I had the great privilege of serving as the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure.

During that time, we doubled the size of the metropolitan railway network, we massively expanded port and road infrastructure across the state and totally revitalised Geraldton and Armadale. Across the state, we added creative and strategic thinking to many areas of government. We led the way in deliberative democracy, engaging tens of thousands of West Australians and giving them the opportunity to participate more meaningfully in decision making.

It was extraordinarily disappointing that Labor lost the 2008 election but I had the very real opportunity to develop policy and practices that I believed made a positive contribution to the lives of West Australians.

For me, one of the key lessons of politics is the complexity of community. The categories that we create to try to manage our understanding of the population are too often treated as gospel and political conversations dumbed down accordingly. Presumptions, for example, that Evangelical

Christians are right wing, that Aboriginal people support Labor, that Middle Eastern migrants would oppose Hansonite politics, led to groups being ignored, taken for granted.

We make presumptions that people concerned about large migration levels are racist, whereas if we listened more closely, we could hear that there are quite rational fears people may have about their ability to prosper into the future and whether they or their children will have the ability to compete in a changed environment.

I believe we need more leadership in politics. Democracies need representatives who are not just weathervanes of popular opinion. Being a good representative requires deep listening and understanding of the aspirations and fears of one's community. But this is not so we can just repeat these back to the community. This listening and understanding needs to be combined with a sound knowledge of how our system of government, our economy and our environment functions. Only then can we develop creative and constructive policies—and go out and build the constituency for those ideas.

We should be more honest with people—and more direct about the complexity of issues. Politicians should be much more than 'shock jocks'. We should respect the community's intelligence by challenging the simplistic and the silly formulas that might gain popular currency.

At the same time, we need to make sure that we are putting into Parliament representatives that have got the ability, the drive and the creativity to find the better ways of delivering a place in the sun for us all. No-one should just be a bum on a seat.

And for democracy to work, we need a critical mass of people who give a damn—that understand the process and think the outcomes are important. So we need to give much greater emphasis to civics education. A year 6 visit to Parliament House is not adequate preparation for an engaged citizenry. We need a meaningful and engaging program for every senior school student.

As we are learning in Afghanistan, democracy is not created by a set of laws. It requires a cultural commitment to the principles. The biggest enemy to democracy in the west is not the Taliban, it is apathy.