



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

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

David Black
and
Harry Phillips

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HELEN HONG HUI BULLOCK



MLC Mining and Pastoral Region from 22 May 2009 (ALP). Member Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review 2009–2010; Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People 2009–2012; Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation from 2010.

When Helen Bullock delivered her Inaugural Speech to the Legislative Council on 3 June 2009 she told the House that it was a double honour for her ‘not only to be afforded the opportunity to represent the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region, but also to be, I believe, the first person born in communist China to be democratically elected to a seat in an Australian Parliament’.¹ Her entry to the House on 22 May 2009 had come as a result of her success in winning a four-year term in the state’s upper House from second place on the ALP ticket. At the same election, National Party candidate Wendy Duncan (q.v.) was successful and with former ALP member Shelley Archer (q.v.), they are to date the only three women to have held Mining and Pastoral Region seats in the Parliament.

Helen was born on 16 May 1965 in Nanjing City in Jiangsu province, daughter of accountants Bin-Hai Dai and Wen-Hua Gao. Her early childhood during the years of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a period in which a great many Chinese including her parents were subject to ‘periods of deprivation’ and imprisonment. This had the effect that Helen was often as a child ‘despatched to live with my grandparents and my extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins in the countryside’. Yet ‘safe in the arms of my extended family’ she described these as ‘among the happiest days of my childhood’ and reading western literature helped her ‘to appreciate the world outside China’ and decide that she ‘must experience this world’.²

After attending Nanjing Railway High School, Helen gained a professional qualification in accountancy only to find when she reached Western Australia on 26 January 1991 that her ‘hard-earned Chinese qualifications counted for nothing’ and she ‘needed to gain employment

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 3 June 2009, p. 4576.

² *Ibid.*

upon the bottom rungs on the labour market' which meant for three years working 'in restaurants, as a cleaner and as a factory hand'.³ She also found, however, that Australia was 'a country of boundless opportunity, and one in which the superficial barriers in the path of a new arrival can be readily overcome if one is possessed of the determination to do so'. Support came in particular from the union movement and on 2 July 1994, after joining the Food Preservers' Union, she married the secretary Joe Bullock and subsequently for a time devoted herself to full-time study. After obtaining a TAFE diploma, she graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce (with distinction) from Curtin University and then completed a postgraduate Diploma in Business and qualified as a certified practising accountant. She then spent more than 10 years working as a public practice accountant and senior management and financial accountant with engineering, mining and construction and mining companies until she entered Parliament in May 2009. To a certain degree she believes that the experience she gained as a fly-in, fly-out employee with the mining companies has served to shape her way of thinking with regard to the Western Australian mining boom.

On the political front, it was in 1993 that she first joined the Food Preservers' Union as well as the ALP and in the years that followed she served at various times as vice-president of the South Perth branch, delegate to the Swan Electoral Council and to the state executive, state conference and national conference.

After outlining aspects of her life story, Helen used her Inaugural Speech to deal with a number of specific areas of interest including the mining industry (in her words 'those who would oppose the development of the mining industry bear a heavy onus'⁴), trade and China, education, multiculturalism, the trade union movement and family. With particular regard to multiculturalism, she contended that she had left China 'to embrace Australia, to embrace its cultures and values, and to become an Australian citizen'. The Australian culture she contended is 'dynamic and evolving' but 'needs to be further enriched by absorbing into itself the best of what new Australians bring with them. It is integration that must form the basis of any meaningful multiculturalism'.⁵

During her first two and a half years in the Legislative Council, Helen served on three standing committees, the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review from June 2009 to April 2010; the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People from June 2009 to August 2012 and the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation from April 2010. In September 2010 in one specific reference to her committee work, in this instance the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation, she observed that in her view the committee was a very peaceful committee in that for a four-month period it did not disallow 'a single regulation' nor produce a report.⁶ However, speaking on another report concerning regulations made under the Fish Resources Management Act, she strongly supported the findings of the committee that certain licence fees imposed under the regulations did in fact amount to taxes and duties and did in fact breach the 'Constitution of the Commonwealth'. In this respect, she suggested that the standing committee, 'one of the largest', was carrying out its duties 'very diligently and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 4577.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4579.

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 8 September 2010, p. 6083.

thoroughly' but she pointed out that it would be unlikely that the recommendations of the committee would be adopted.⁷

Helen's first opportunity after her Inaugural Speech to express some of her core values came in August 2009 during debate on the Criminal Code Amendment Bill 2008 designed to provide for mandatory sentencing in cases of assault on a police officer. Her concerns about the bill were summed up early in her short 10-minute speech:

Members in this house know that we are here as legislators; we are here to make laws. After we have made the laws, we pass them on to judges who interpret and execute the laws that we have made. This is called the separation of powers. However, by passing this bill it seems to me that we will be telling judges what to do instead of leaving them alone to do their job. This legislation takes discretion away from judges. It also runs contrary to the provisions of the Sentencing Act, section 6(4) of which states, in part—A court must not impose a sentence of imprisonment on an offender unless it decides that...The key words here are 'must not' unless subsequent conditions are met on a case-by-case basis...Imprisonment is a sentence of last resort. It is not the only way to punish somebody who has done wrong.⁸

In the following year amidst a heated and controversial debate about the Voluntary Euthanasia Bill, introduced by the Greens, she delivered a short speech often quoted by organisations opposing euthanasia:

The Voluntary Euthanasia Bill raises the question of whether our election to Parliament gives us the right to sanction the killing of other human beings in circumstances other than self-defence or defence of the nation. This is not a difficult question. The answer is simple. No. We do not have such a right. We do not have the right to sanction the killing of our fellow human beings. For that reason alone, I oppose the bill.⁹

Throughout her short parliamentary career, Helen has persistently called on the government to focus on investing in infrastructure and local content to utilise the economic benefits of the boom; for example, by building the Kalgoorlie–Boulder intermodal freight facility, with sealed road links between the goldfields and Great Northern Highway and by building Australia's own value-adding downstream processing and manufacturing industry.

Helen's view that Australia should build and protect its own manufacturing industry reached a pinnacle in her speech in February 2011 about the resource sector and the provision of local jobs:

Over the past 30 to 40 years Western Australia has been selling natural resources without any value-adding. During this period we have had countless opportunities to establish our downstream processing and value-adding manufacturing industries. Instead, we continue to export our natural resources because we think it is too hard to do anything with them and it is too hard to process them by ourselves. It is much easier just to import everything using the wealth we generate from selling natural resources. Today we are completely selling out our steel fabrication and manufacturing industry. Once we have done that, this industry will be gone forever. Nothing has changed for us during the past 30 to 40 years. We are still doing the same old thing—that is, dig the dirt out of the ground, load it on the ship and send it off. We have been doing that for the past 30 or 40 years.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 6083–6084.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 19 August 2009, p. 6128.

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 22 September 2010, p. 7028.

A country that has been buying our cheap dirt for the past 30 or 40 years finally has had its dream come true. What is its dream? Yes, I am talking about China. It has been waiting for this day ever since it started to buy our dirt 30 or 40 years ago. This is what it has been doing: import raw materials, because it does not have them; establish its steel production industry, which is well established by now; and then develop its fabrication manufacturing industry. It has streamlined the whole process from steelmaking to steel fabrication. It has also established other related value-adding industries associated with steel making. It has it all now. Not only is China dominating our import market, but also, without much notice, it is quietly creeping into our finance market. It is lending back the money that is generated from the goods it sells to us. It is gaining the control of not only the international trade but also the finance market. With the wealth generated from the trade and finance, it is moving into the high-tech field. China is no longer a nation of shoemakers now; they are bankers and investors. Not like us; we are still the dirt diggers. We have not changed much.

It is a real worry that after the mining boom, in perhaps the next 30 or 40 years, we will have nothing left. We should have been doing what China has been doing for the past 30 or 40 years. The lack of vision, lack of longterm planning and lack of patience will be our downfall.¹⁰

Despite her concerns over the government losing control over local industry and local content, Helen was inspired by the Norwegian wealth fund. In a speech in June 2011 she called on the Government to focus on creating a wealth fund for Western Australia:

Western Australia also started its own iron ore development in the early 1970s but compared with Norway, not only have we not managed to establish any kind of savings fund, but also today we are \$14 billion in debt and we will be \$20 billion in the red in 2014. We are using the proceeds from our resources to fuel both private and public consumption, which is exactly what the Norwegians thought should not be done. We are simply spending too much—far more than we should be and far more than we have...What is wrong with state ownership of those big resource companies? We do not have legislation in place to prevent jobs that are generated from our natural resources going overseas, let alone the legislation to prevent those resource companies having headquarters outside Australia; why do they need to do that?¹¹

Helen also participated actively in August 2011 in debate on an opposition motion calling for stronger government action in terms of 'the development and uptake of renewable energy resources'. She strongly believed this was another opportunity for the Government to boost the manufacturing industry and strengthen jobs locally. From her perspective:

Although Western Australia has abundant fossil fuel natural energy resources, the ever increasing demand for fossil fuels will require us to question ourselves about our future energy security...Our source of energy is affected by demand and supply on the international market and this will affect our future economic growth ... we need to find another means to build an independent energy industry free from price fluctuations on the international market and that will reduce our reliance on fossil fuels as our primary energy source. The solution lies with the development of renewable energy sources...it is not all about saving the environment; saving the environment is just a by-product...the renewable energy industry should be seen as an opportunity to develop a world-class, highly efficient, hi-tech-based new economy in the manufacturing industry that will generate jobs.¹²

¹⁰ WAPD(LC), 24 February 2011, pp. 1051–1052.

¹¹ WAPD(LC), 28 June 2011, pp. 4970–4971.

¹² WAPD(LC), 31 August 2011, pp. 6406–6407.

Another area of importance to her concerned the broad issue of responsibility versus rights and this was first embodied in her speech on the Cat Bill in October 2011. She told Parliament that with the ownership of any object, animal or entity, responsibility was the norm:

At one stage I was very busy with my work and I neglected the budgies a bit...[but] I understood that when I took on those birds I also assumed a great responsibility for those tiny creatures. Later, one of the budgies got sick and I had to book an appointment with a vet, take a half day off from work and then spend \$120 on an injection and a further \$40 to \$50 on some kind of tablets that the vet told me to get. Only then did I realise that the responsibility was far, far beyond the level that I was prepared to take...I suppose I could, like some, push for the government to take some of the responsibilities off my shoulders and ask the government to provide some kind of subsidy for the medical costs for my pets, or, perhaps, for registration or caring costs. You see, Mr President, luckily I still have my common sense.¹³

Helen Bullock has clearly achieved her goal of being fully integrated into Australian society and using the opportunity to champion the causes of those in need as in September 2011 when she moved a motion concerning children's health and welfare issues in the northern goldfields. This only adds to the interest members would have had in her perspective on the country of her birth at a time when its economic fortunes are seen as the lifeblood of the Western Australian and ultimately the Australian economy. The views she expressed on where to place China in terms of economic rationale were forthright and clear:

The thing we must remember is that we are not dealing with a free market economy. All the rationales that apply to capitalism do not apply to China. China no longer refers to itself as Communist or socialist; we sometimes call it a capitalist society but it is not really. If members really want to call China capitalist, it is a capitalist country with considerable variations and it is completely different from ours ... but we do know that any fiscal, monetary or budgetary policy change in China will have a dramatic effect on Australia's economy...The Chinese government is facing many uncertainties and because we rely on China so much its uncertainties also become our uncertainties.¹⁴

Helen's strong involvement in various aspects of the mining industry and within the trade union movement made her a member who was able to make a significant contribution to parliamentary proceedings in a relatively short time. However, when pre-selection for the 2013 election became an issue in 2012, after considering initially to seek to transfer to a metropolitan seat, she eventually decided to serve out her term in the Legislative Council but not to seek re-election to the thirty-ninth Parliament. Given Helen's background and substantial experience in key sectors of the West Australian economy, she would still have a number of options in seeking to contribute to the future development of the state.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

Helen Bullock's entry into politics in May 2009 was not based on any ambition to achieve a long and distinguished parliamentary career. Instead, it was motivated by what she saw as an opportunity to bring to parliamentary politics her enthusiasm and business-like qualities. She did not enter politics to achieve any specific policy objectives but rather because of her desire

¹³ WAPD(LC), 18 October 2011, p. 8090.

¹⁴ WAPD(LC), 10 November 2010, p. 8425.

and enthusiasm to contribute towards enabling the government to operate in a manner reflective of her experience in the private sector.

Helen believes that whilst not perfect, the Westminster-based parliamentary system used in Australia is the best in the world. Although she believes that a bicameral system is absolutely necessary for democracy to flourish, she has come to realise that perhaps the ideal upper House would be one such as the Canadian Senate or the UK House of Lords. Each of these she sees as a proper House of Review and to base the Legislative Council on either of these two models would improve the quality of members through the process by which its members are selected. She believes that the outcome of such a model would be an upper House of Parliament containing a high proportion of members with considerable ability and in that sense it would be a preferable forum to be given the responsibility of modifying and improving legislation passed through the party-dominated lower House. In her view, a House which is genuinely independent and not one in which members are selected by a political party would produce a better legislative forum as a House of Review.

In the Legislative Council itself she believes that much more time should be devoted to debating bills rather than the numerous politically based motions, largely ineffective question time and other debating forms. With regards to parliamentary committees, she feels that the effectiveness of their work is constantly hampered by the political motivations of most committee members and that, in the long run, political gamesmanship stands in the way of really effective analysis of issues referred to committees and the drafting of appropriate remedies for the problems involved.

Helen also feels that both within Parliament and the community at large, there is still a measure of less than full acceptance of Australians not from a Caucasian background. This is prevalent because of the lack of appreciation of the challenges and sacrifices that those coming to Australia, for example, from various Asian countries, have to make to achieve professional standing in Australia. In her own case, as discussed in her biographical entry, having fully qualified in China in accountancy she had to spend quite some time in Australia working on the bottom rungs of the ladder and obtaining Australian tertiary qualifications before she was able to work in a variety of companies and gain experience and skills working in the mining industry.

Generally speaking, Helen has an open mind and appreciates robust discussions in dealing with difficult issues but on matters of personal faith, her views are strong and unequivocal. While this is not always in accord with the views of her colleagues, she believes that there is room in the ALP to allow for substantial differences on conscience issues such as euthanasia and the sanctity of life, which she believes are not open for debate. In terms of the representation of women, she has reservations with respect to affirmative action and believes that having appointments and endorsements based strictly on merit and ability is the best way to proceed if the legislative process is to achieve the kind of efficiency and long-term effectiveness which she has been looking for so far in her career.

Helen is proud of what she has been able to achieve so far, especially in dealing with the challenges involved in the transition from life in China to participation in the Australian parliamentary process. What the future will bring will become apparent only in the fullness of time but while she remains in the Parliament, Helen is fully committed to the passion for achievement and excellence which has motivated her for the greater part of her life.