



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

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

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and
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HELEN MARGARET MORTON



MLC East Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2005 (Lib). Shadow Minister 2005–2008. Parliamentary Secretary 2008–2010. Minister of State from 14 December 2010. Chair Select Committee on Obstetric Services 2008–2009; member several standing committees from 2005.

Helen Morton was elected to the Legislative Council from first position on the Liberal Party ticket for the East Metropolitan Region at the 2005 state election. Since the early 1970s she has lived in Kalamunda, a suburb in the electorate she represents, and has developed a range of community links. Her career has encompassed several senior executive positions in health, a number of which had been located within the East Metropolitan Region. Her impressive résumé had included being regional director central wheatbelt, midwest and Gascoyne health regions between 1989 and 1994; director of the South Metropolitan Health Authority in 1994 and 1995; general manager (finance and resources) of the Health Department of Western Australia; general manager Armidale Health Service 1997–2002; chief executive officer of the Mount Gambier and then District Health Service in South Australia in 2003; and, immediately prior to becoming an MLC, the chief executive officer of Kalamunda Community Care.

To speak of Helen's employment posts overlooks several other professional contributions in the health services domain. From 1995 to 2002 she was the chairperson of the Occupational Therapy Registration Board of Western Australia; chairperson of the Occupational Therapy Boards Registration Boards of Australia and New Zealand between 1998 and 2001; member of the Metropolitan Health Services Board from 1997 to 1998; president of the Occupational Therapy Association of Western Australia from 1981 to 1989; and member of the Board of Management Head Injured Society from 1981 to 1989. In 1988 she was presented with the Elizabeth Adams Award for services to the occupational therapy profession.

Initially, though, Helen Morton had a rural background. She was born to farming parents Arthur and Brenda James of Frankland on 30 September 1949. Her parents owned a war land service farm at Frankland, where she attended the local primary school. At Frankland River Primary Helen was assigned a project on Papua New Guinea, where her father had served 20 years earlier. At the prompting of her mother, young student Helen was encouraged to write a

letter to Paul Hasluck, the federal Minister for Territories. The Minister responded and provided some photographs and resources which led to the achievement of top marks for the project.¹ It was an experience that has reminded Helen of the importance of responding to even the smallest request from constituents. At the same time Paul Hasluck's response had obviously struck a chord enhancing her interest in politics.

Secondary schooling for Helen took place at Albany Senior High School, where she was a boarder as her parents had moved to a sheep station north-west of Meekatharra. Later her parents returned to a sheep station at Sandstone, which after some seven years, Helen and her husband, Allan, who have two sons and a daughter, had operated for some time. Thereafter they purchased a small farm at Pingelly which enabled them to keep links with the horseracing industry. In her Inaugural Speech Helen indicated to her parliamentary colleagues that 'we are a sports-loving family. The three generations of our family have been involved in tennis, netball, basketball, athletics, football and horseracing'.² She recounted how on a particular Mother's Day after watching her grandson's under-8s football match, she had walked onto the ground at quarter time and was embraced by the team's coach, her 30-year-old son, and then by the umpire, her 24-year-old son. It was a reminder of 'the pleasure of seeing my sons continue our tradition of service to the community'.³

Helen graduated with an Associate Diploma in Occupational Therapy from the Western Australian Institute of Technology, later Curtin University, and had worked as an occupational therapist throughout Western Australia and interstate with the clinical application of her skills being in the field of mental health rehabilitation. This prompted her to observe:

Despite increased spending on mental health, strengthened community treatment and support services, reduced isolation of mental health from mainstream health systems and the expansion of psychiatric disability support services, mental health still represents a major public challenge in Western Australia, and that is an area to which I remain strongly committed.⁴

When the new 'Alliance' Government Ministry led by Premier Colin Barnett was announced in September 2008, there was a claim by a departing Liberal MLA that Helen had been wrongly denied ministerial rank.⁵ Upon her election to the Legislative Council from 22 May 2005 Helen had immediately assumed the role of the shadow spokesperson for mental health and public sector management given that her career in public health and the public service had equipped her to make an impact in these sectors, and when the 'Alliance' came to power, she was appointed as a shadow Minister in this area of responsibility. Thus it came as no surprise that, with the resignation of Donna Faragher from the Ministry, Helen, in December 2010, was appointed as the Minister for Mental Health and Disability Services. As Parliamentary Secretary she had worked with the Treasurer and Minister for Commerce, Science and Innovation, and Housing and Works as well as the Ministers for State Development, Water and Mental Health.

¹ WAPD(LC), 25 May 2005, pp. 2266–2267.

² Ibid., p. 2269.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Harry Phillips, 'Executive Control of the Legislature: Is the Legislative Assembly on a Government Leash? A Report of the ASPG Western Australian Chapter Dinner Seminar: 11 June 2009,' *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2009, Vol. 24 (2), p. 221.

Since her election to the Legislative Council Helen had also been very active in the Legislative Council's extensive parliamentary committee system. At various times she served on the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, the Standing Committee on Legislation and the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges, and notably was the Chairperson of the Select Committee on Public Obstetric Services. She was well equipped for this role given her commitment to health matters and women's interests. The select committee found, among other things, that it considered 'more work is required to assess the adequacy of pregnancy care and after child programs and to develop strategies to improve the care provided to disadvantaged women'.⁶

Of course when Helen first entered the Legislative Council, her political party was in Opposition with Labor, under Premier Geoff Gallop and then Alan Carpenter, holding the reins of government. While serving as a shadow spokesperson for a range of portfolios including mental health, public service management and women's interests, Helen adopted a strategy that has become standard in Opposition, whereby the questions on notice procedure is used to seek information on specific matters from portfolios across the breadth of government. In November and December 2006 she sought details about the termination payments of public servants. This was followed by a question pertaining to the transfer of functions of a wide range of government agencies. A question concerning members and remuneration of advisory bodies within Ministers' portfolios was also asked, resulting in a response from Government for over a score of Ministries. Boards of management of governance provided a focus as did parental leave of public servants. Not surprisingly when Helen became a Minister the same strategy was employed by the new Labor Opposition on particular subjects such as mental health services and emergency department services for hospitals across regional Western Australia.

When she first took her seat in Parliament, Helen applauded the initiative of the four public watchdogs, the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, the Auditor General, the Ombudsman and the Corruption and Crime Commission to work closely together and streamline their efforts to ensure integrity within the public sector. Another portfolio for which she was given responsibility in Opposition was that of women's interests. This prompted her to refer to baseline information provided by the Office for Women's Policy in March 2004 about women in business, education and elected positions in government. It was clear that women were under-represented in elected positions across all tiers of government. Reference was also made to the gender pay gap and how some seven per cent of women had experienced violence in the home. Indeed, a range of statistics had made clear the scope to pursue better outcomes for women in Western Australia.⁷ Helen observed that four of the five members for the East Metropolitan Region were women. Significantly, with the increase in the number of seats in that region from five to six from May 2009, within a year all six seats were held by women, helping to make the percentage of seats held by women in the Legislative Council at 47.2 per cent, the highest ratio of any legislature in Australia.⁸

Upon becoming a Minister, Helen hit the ground running. She was soon reported to have criticised her own Government's delay in releasing a controversial report into services for the mentally ill. In Opposition she had been highly critical of such delays and hence wanted to

⁶ Report of the Select Committee into Public Obstetric Services (2007), Hon Helen Morton (Chairman), Legislative Council, p. ii.

⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 5 May 2005, p 2269.

⁸ Janet Wilson and David Black, *Women parliamentarians in Australia 1921–2009*, Background Note. Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Australia, 2009, p. 45.

make it clear that as Minister she would make the tabling of such reports, together with the subsequent government response, a priority.⁹ She soon made significant appointments in the name of former Disability Services Commission Chairman Barry MacKinnon and former Labor Party environment Minister Dr Judy Edwards (q.v.), as heads of the state's first mental health advisory council. The council was to provide 'high level independent advice'¹⁰ to Western Australia's Mental Health Commissioner, Eddie Bartnik, who had been appointed in July 2010 by Dr Graham Jacobs, the previous mental health Minister.

Premier Colin Barnett indicated that Helen, who 'had done a lot of policy work in mental health and disability', would enable Western Australia to lead the nation from a policy point of view in mental health which was gaining significance on the national agenda.¹¹ Then in August 2011 when the Federal Government announced a long-term \$6.5 billion disability reform agenda to improve national disability services she 'seemed to offer an olive branch'¹² on behalf of the 'Alliance' Government, despite the fact that Premier Barnett had initially expressed reservations about dismantling any of Western Australia's disability services. By this time Helen had become a senior Minister in the 'Alliance' government and given proof to those who had contended that she should have been in the first Barnett Ministry of the thirty-eighth Parliament from September 2008. One major step in her ministerial career as Minister for Mental Health was her launch on 16 December 2011 of the draft Mental Health Bill 2011 for public comment. The consultation period was planned to end on 9 March 2012 and it was hoped that a final Bill would be introduced in Parliament during 2012.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

From an early age I believed I had an inherent interest in politics which may have been linked to my country upbringing where an interest in the wellbeing of your community was part of my parental upbringing and educational experience. Nevertheless I did not have a plan to enter Parliament until Derrick Tomlinson, a former highly respected member of the Legislative Council, when considering his retirement as an MLC for the East Metropolitan Region asked me to give consideration to stand for the upper House. He felt that my wealth of senior executive experience in the public service, particularly health, my community involvement and my role as a grassroots party member would stand me in good stead. In fact, my membership of the Liberal Party had been quite long and had encompassed many roles. I had been president and vice-president and secretary of the Kalamunda branch. In the wider Hasluck division I had been president and involved in the women's division. Moreover, I could mention four years of state council membership, and I had also served on the membership services committee.

At that stage I must confess that I had never seen the Legislative Council in action. Nevertheless, I was attracted to the review and refinement, policy development and application of legislation roles, which I realised were performed by the Legislative Council. This is not to question the ideas function of the Legislative Assembly. Another preference I had was to be a state parliamentarian rather than to be a senator or member of the House of

⁹ Cath O'Leary, 'New chief criticises report delay,' *West Australian*, 15 December 2010, p. 11.

¹⁰ Natasha Boddy, 'Mental health roles', *West Australian*, 14 January 2011, p. 19.

¹¹ 'Mental health being given priority,' *Western Suburbs Weekly*, 21 December 2010, p. 8.

¹² Neale Prior and Andrew Tillett, '\$6.5b reform descends into a political punch-up', *West Australian*, 12 August 2011, p. 13.

Representatives. The travel and absence from home places great strain on federal parliamentarians. In my view, too, if I was to be successful at the 2005 poll for the Legislative Council, our three children were beyond school age and old enough to be sufficiently self sufficient, to enable me to fulfil my long hours at Parliament and in the electorate without concern about their wellbeing. Moreover, my husband, Allan, was well placed to continue his career in concert with myself. As we know, we can't always decide the timing of our entry to Parliament, but from a woman's perspective I am glad that my opportunity to enter Parliament came later rather than earlier in my life.

Speaking of a woman's perspective, there is a case to be made for the proportional representation (PR) voting system, as used in the Legislative Council, having facilitated the election of women to the upper chamber. Modern political parties need to demonstrate they have balanced tickets, so women have to be in the team with winnable places on the party ticket. In the East Metropolitan Region in the thirty-eighth Parliament all six members are women, a possible record for any PR upper house in Australia. Admittedly for the East Metropolitan Region this came about by the untimely death of Labor MLC Jock Ferguson in 2010, whose seat in the Council was taken by Linda Savage in a casual vacancy. As had been frequently mentioned, the percentage of women representatives in the Legislative Council (in 2012) has risen to 47.2 per cent, the highest ratio of any legislature in Australia. In my view it can be said that women often provide a different representational perspective than men. Women do give greater weight to the social consequences of legislation and politics whereas for men the economic consideration is more often the first consideration. If the elected Parliament was composed of all women, which I do not propose, I would assert that prostitution legislation would take a different form.

The 2008 general election for the Legislative Council, commencing business on 22 May 2009, with two women leading the Liberal Party ticket—myself and Donna Faragher—in the East Metropolitan Region, resulted in a swing to our party of 5.5 per cent, the best swing to the Liberal Party in any of the six regions throughout the state. This campaign was a focused upper House campaign, suggesting that including the identification of women's issues for swinging voters is a campaign strategy that can be effective. Nevertheless, I am not an advocate of quotas for women candidates such as the formula adopted by the Labor Party.

A very important function of the Legislative Council is the role of its standing committees and select committees, which are ideal settings for the expression of women's interests. Almost immediately upon being sworn into office (in my case, on 22 May 2005) most MLCs are allocated standing committee membership. My appointments encompassed the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Public Administration, Standing Committee on Legislation and Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations. When I had gained a better grasp of the standing orders and procedures of the House, I became a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges. When possible consideration is given to the expertise and interests of members. This was evidenced when I was appointed as the Chair of the Select Committee on Public Obstetric Services.

It is disappointing that the significance of the work of parliamentary committees is often overlooked. I notice that the media is beginning to report more of their activities but there is scope for much more publicity. Committees do undertake detailed analysis of public policy and matters of consequence to the Parliament. It is an opportunity for members to 'make a difference' with issues of state wide and sometimes national significance. Generally the

approach of members in committee tends to be collaborative with preparedness to achieve consensus. Without doubt the value of participation for members is invariably educative.

While I am a strong advocate of the work and general approach in Council committees I also quite enjoy the more combative chamber. At times, too, it is possible with thorough research to reveal shortcomings in the arguments or performance of your political opponents. In one instance I can recall detecting serious oversights in a major piece of legislation being proposed by Hon Kim Chance when he was a Minister presenting the comprehensive Public Interest Disclosure Act review.

Of course parliamentary life is demanding and the holding of ministerial office further extends the hours and ‘pressures’ with far less recompense than your senior bureaucratic officers. It is necessary to ‘pace’ yourself and to date I have not had one sick day as a parliamentarian and Minister. I find I can tolerate the late evenings and nights but I must concede such late hours are more manageable when I have been able to be transported home in a ministerial car.

In terms of preparation to be a Minister for Mental Health and Disability Services from December 2010, I had the advantage of several years of senior public service in the health bureaucracy. In my view my earlier appointments as Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer; Minister for Commerce, Science and Innovation, Housing and Works; Water and Mental Health were valuable opportunities to gain insight into governance practices. A later addition to the list of Parliamentary Secretary roles to that of the Premier provided a very broad insight to the macro politics of the state, particularly as it was coupled with the Treasury portfolio. To be a Parliamentary Secretary gave me the opportunity to be part of the government’s team. Experience as a shadow Minister when in Opposition in my first term of Parliament from 2005 also was part of the ‘learning curve’. My shadow portfolios had encompassed being the opposition spokesperson for public sector management, women’s interests and my special career interest, namely, mental health.

As has often been the case, shadow portfolio experience is no guarantee of a ministerial appointment if your party wins government, particularly if there has been a change of leader and even if you are the number one ticket holder in your Legislative Council region. However, it has to be recognised that Premiers, as with Prime Ministers, have to take so many matters into consideration when appointing a Cabinet or Ministry. Experience and expertise, region, gender, upper and lower house membership, are some of the main considerations. Politics is a competitive business and the same applies to party preselection where there are also no guarantees.

What is clear about politics is the need for parliamentarians to stay grounded and connected. Attention to detail is also necessary. All electoral requests have to be considered with my electoral office staff playing an important role. Given this consideration I decided to move my electorate office from my home base of Kalamunda to Maddington to help ensure contact with the broader electorate. My broad life experiences, which include having been poor, help to maintain the necessary contact with the electorate of shades of opinion. To date the quest to ‘make a difference’ has been a rewarding challenge.