



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

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

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## GRACE SYDNEY VAUGHAN



MLC South-East Metropolitan Province 22 May 1974–21 May 1980 (ALP).

Grace Vaughan was elected to the Legislative Council to represent the Australian Labor Party for the South-East Metropolitan Province for the term commencing 22 May 1974. Her election, along with that of Liberal Margaret McAleer (q.v.), brought to three (including Lyla Elliott [q.v.] who had been in the House since 1971) the number of women in the chamber, the first time ever there had been more than one woman member of the Legislative Council. However, after only one term in the Council, and hampered by an unfavourable redistribution, Grace lost her seat in the 1980 election. During her short parliamentary experience she developed a reputation as a forthright speaker passionately concerned with those whose needs were the greatest. In the words of one colleague she was an ‘old-fashioned Labor member’ while one of her political opponents had nothing but praise for the manner in which she had handled an initially unsympathetic audience in the wheatbelt town of Woodanilling. In his view she was able to bring the audience around to the view that ‘Here is a woman with absolute courage and something to give the State’.<sup>1</sup>

She was born Grace Ingram in Neutral Bay in Sydney, New South Wales in April 1922 and was educated at Cammeray Public School, North Sydney Girls High School and then at the Universities of New South Wales and Western Australia, completing by her early fifties a Bachelor of Arts, a Masters degree in social work and a Diploma of Sociology. Between the ages of twenty and forty she had been employed in a variety of capacities including trainee nurse, assistant industrial officer, mail contractor (at a time when her husband was out of the workforce) and community liaison officer at a radio station in Sydney. From 1964 to 1968 she was administrator of the community service centre in North Sydney before moving to Western Australia where she was employed as a family welfare officer with the Department of Community Welfare, and as a community social worker and planning consultant. Subsequently, she served for several years as national president of the Australian Association of Social Workers, and was president of the International Federation of Social Workers for one year in the early 1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> WAPD (LC) 22 March 1984, p. 6459.

After leaving Parliament she was secretary of the Council on the Ageing, vice chairman of the state government welfare review committee, executive member of the Australian Council of Social Service, and a member of the Senate of the University of Western Australia and the board of management of the Royal Perth Hospital. Within the ALP she was a member of the Nedlands branch and a delegate to the party's federal conference in Terrigal in 1975.

At the outset of her very first Parliament speech Grace expressed reservations about the step she had taken in entering the Legislative Council:

I am very touched by the tradition which surrounds this House. But to me, tradition is a useless abstract unless it shows us development from the past and how we can learn from it. Unless it involves a learning process, tradition is useless. Perhaps I did not think seriously enough about this before I accepted endorsement and, to the surprise of some people, was elected to this place, despite the fact that I was of the wrong sex; but it seems to me that I have landed myself in the strange position of being in the type of House that would be better suited to the days of the rotten boroughs of England, some centuries ago ...<sup>2</sup>

Concerning those who had been elected under 'an Electoral Districts Act which is reminiscent of the rotten boroughs operating centuries ago' she expressed the hope that:

... they will bend their minds to the welfare of the people of this State and not in their decisions reflect this quite monstrous inequality between the representation of city people and that of country people.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most striking initiative of her relatively short parliamentary career came in 1977 when she introduced a Bill to decriminalise homosexuality that passed through the Legislative Council by 18 votes to 10 with half of those supporting the Bill coming from the non-Labor benches—the Bill subsequently perished in the Legislative Assembly.

The question of the state's attitude to abortion was also a matter of considerable personal concern to Grace as when she became very impassioned in the aftermath of a raid by the WA police on the premises of the Abortion Information Service:

The abortion clinic has been seeking cooperation and, in fact, has obtained cooperation from many organisations, people in the Government, and from the semi-Government hospitals, in order that these desperate unhappy women can receive some counselling instead of all the gobbledygook that normally goes on in regard to the question of whether a woman is able to decide upon her own fertility ... It is considered to be beyond the pale, firstly to be pregnant when one does not want to be and, secondly, to have the temerity to think that one might be able to decide whether or not one wants to have the child.<sup>4</sup>

Grace was married twice—first in 1942 to Walter Vaughan by whom she had three children, two sons and a daughter, and then in 1975 to George Yewers. For many years she played an active role in the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association, and she became a keen golfer with membership of the Rottneest Island Country Club before her relatively sudden and unexpected death in Nedlands in January 1984. At her funeral federal Labor politician John Dawkins

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<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 31 July 1974, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 27 November 1974, p. 3749.

suggested she was more of a ‘political activist’ than a ‘politician’, more concerned with building community support for reform than participating in the parliamentary process per se.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career*

Grace Vaughan was one member who had known poverty more than once during her life, more especially during the Depression years of the early 1930s and again during the 1960s. It was hardly surprising then that unemployment was one subject on which she could speak with passion based on personal experience as in her speech on the appropriation Bill in her last year in Parliament:

A matter which must be prominent in one’s mind when one is speaking on the Estimates is unemployment. I was interested to listen to what the Hon. Neill McNeill said recently. He said the present recession is not in line with the patterns experienced during the Great Depression. Certainly during that time the unemployed were to be found mostly amongst the breadwinners. That was a terrible time, and I have personal experience of it because my father was out of work for a matter of five or six years at a time when unemployment was at 35 per cent. That of course was a depression which approached the proportions of a catastrophe or holocaust; and I am not saying we are in any way in a situation like that.

However, we are in a situation ... in which employers are looking for experienced people and, therefore, are much more likely to employ older people who by definition are more likely to be breadwinners and supporters of families.

So we find the crushing weight of the unemployment situation falling on the young people. Thus in a society which is depending very greatly on the work ethic and its respect by the community, unemployment among the young is not auguring very well for the future. If we follow the usual trend of capitalist economies with troughs and booms, we may find when we get another boom that young people have perhaps decided that this uneven type of economic situation is not to their liking. They may be decided on different life styles, which will make it very difficult for this country to find the people for the jobs ...

We find that the sorts of factors which are perhaps covering up this very serious situation of young people being most highly likely to be unemployed are quite interesting to consider. In 50 per cent of Australian families both parents are working. This means among other things that they are able to support unemployed children. So this hides the fact of unemployed children.

If we had numerous young people—and many of the underprivileged countries do—wandering around uncared for, living by their wits, and getting into all sorts of trouble, this would be an obvious thing needing correction.<sup>6</sup>

As already indicated, social issues such as community attitudes to homosexuality and abortion had a high priority in Grace’s political agenda. During the course of her second reading speech on her private member’s Bill, the Criminal Code Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1977, she paid tribute to some of her Liberal Party predecessors, most notably Hon R.J.L. Williams, who was elected to chair an honorary royal commission into the issue shortly before Grace was elected to Parliament. In the

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<sup>5</sup> Judyth Watson, *We Hold Up Half the Sky. The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament*, Perth: ALP (WA Branch), 1994, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 1 November 1979, p. 4284.

latter stages of the speech she made clear the basis of her decision to take the initiative in having legislation passed on the subject:

Members can imagine the anguish of homosexuals who do not realise their sexual nature until reaching sexual maturity. They have no choice, but know they are in conflict with accepted 'norms'. They struggle to conform, often doing great damage to personality due to the neuroses which the conflict induces. Many commit suicide at this point. Some are imprisoned because continual repression of their sexuality causes them to do foolish things which, with satisfactory adjustment, would not occur. Some even enter marriage in the vain hope that this will 'cure' them. Thus they drag others, spouses and maybe children, into the morass of their personal problems ...

Homosexuals within the work force are in a most vulnerable position. Many have, like heterosexuals, outstanding talents in many areas ... but these are often wasted, thus impoverishing society as well as diminishing the homosexuals themselves ... Discovery is an ever-present dread... These attitudes lead to a double life style, double standards, and often clandestine sexual liaisons ... Violent action against homosexuals is justified by those committing it, because of the criminal nature of homosexuality.<sup>7</sup>

A third issue on which she felt strongly was the need for a greater measure of what she described as 'participatory democracy'. In her Inaugural Speech she expressed sympathy for those farmers, who a few weeks earlier had demonstrated in Forrest Place against the Whitlam Government:

I support the Forrest Place protest because it was a manifestation of what the people felt. They considered they were impotent and they wanted to express their opinion. The fact that the farmers were demonstrating because their hip pocket nerve was affected does not detract from the principle ... It is a little difficult for one to be objective when one has an eye full of pie, is showered with Coca-Cola, and has an overripe tomato trickling down one's back. Nevertheless, I say that I support the people who feel they must protest ... This is a part of community involvement and it is a way we can obtain the opinion of the people. However, I do not believe that people should have to reach the point where they feel they must protest in this way. As legislators we should be sounding out the people and listening to their views. We should be getting out into our electorates to meet the people whose opinion is indicative of the grass roots of the electorate.<sup>8</sup>

In 1979 during the Address-in-Reply debate she reflected again on the same issue:

This decline in participatory democracy ... which can be more widely interpreted as declining democracy, has probably been brought about by what in itself is a good thing; that is, the emergence of the two-party Westminster system, or rather the exaggeration of the two party system within the Westminster system.

This has led to too much reliance on representative democracy in which the people feel themselves as being powerless, and simply cast a vote every three or five years, depending on the type of Parliament, in order that they will be represented. They lose touch. Quite often they see this as being democracy; that is, simply by putting a ballot paper into the ballot box. It is not good enough to regard that as democracy.

... [T]his decline in democracy has perhaps arisen because the electorate has relinquished its democratic right of rule by the people, by relying too heavily upon its representatives at a time when Cabinet Government is in full swing ... Perhaps we need something new in the way of

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<sup>7</sup> WAPD(LC), 7 September 1977, pp. 1126–1127.

<sup>8</sup> WAPD(LC), 31 July 1974 pp. 106–107.

participatory democracy, in which the people have vehicles by which they can truly be said to be taking part in the decision-making processes of our society ...

Cabinet Government has evolved as a result of the Westminster system ... So, the Cabinet sees itself as governing in its own right. I believe it has even been said in this State that the people, who are not Ministers but who belong to the party of the coalition which gave the strength to the Premier to form a government, are not seen as Government members but rather as Government supporters ... People who still wish to influence the Government are finding they have to go either to the Cabinet or to the parties themselves ... The reasons for this are, firstly, ... that parliamentary representatives have lost their power to speak up in the House. Secondly, there has been a continued lowering of the prestige of the occupation of a politician or parliamentarian as a result of which... [W]e are seeing a lower standard of person coming into Parliament ... [and] we are not drawing the candidates from a big enough pool to ensure that we obtain in Parliament a normal distribution of the different types of people in the community. That is, if we do not take members of Parliament from all strata of society, we do not obtain a representative group ... We have far too many school teachers and too few women as members of Parliament ... [and] we do not have adequate representation of the large number of people who were born overseas.<sup>9</sup>

While in Parliament, Grace considered herself as a legislator chosen to seek to make changes to advance the rights and interests of those she served. Sadly, from her point of view the electoral process cost her the opportunity to continue her work for a second term.

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<sup>9</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 3 May 1979, pp. 1038–1041.