



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

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

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ALISON MARIE XAMON



MLC East Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2009 (GWA). Member Standing Committee on Legislation from June 2009.

Alison Marie Xamon entered the Legislative Council on 22 May 2009, having become the first Greens candidate to win a seat representing the East Metropolitan Region. Previously, as a supporting candidate in number two position on the ticket, she had contested the seat unsuccessfully in 2001 and 2005 as well as representing the party on four occasions in federal contests—two for House of Representatives seats and two for the Senate. However, in the September 2008 election, in a close finish for the sixth seat, Alison, as number one on the Greens ticket, secured the major share of the transferred votes from the fifth elected Liberal candidate to secure the final East Metropolitan Region seat ahead of Labor's Linda Savage.¹ Previously the Labor and Liberal parties had shared the five seats from the Region except between 1997 and 2001 when Australian Democrat Norm Kelly had held the fifth seat. Despite the loss of the party's South West Region seat to the Liberals, Alison's success gave the Greens a total of four members in the Legislative Council, compared with two in the previous Parliament. Even more significant was the increased primary vote the Greens had achieved in the region—from 6.47 per cent to 11.65 per cent.

Born in Mundaring Western Australia on 8 June 1969, Alison Xamon was the daughter of Alan Crysford Miller, a minister of religion, who passed away in 1980, and Kay Diane Middleton, a schoolteacher and psychologist. The family moved frequently in her early years, with her father preaching in the parishes of Mundaring, Belmont, Gosnells and Forrestfield and, despite far from comfortable economic circumstances, her parents gave her what she described as 'one unique and special advantage over many others; that is, I had educated parents who instilled in me the enormous value of an education'.² After completing her high

¹ Linda Savage (q.v.) was elected on 22 March 2010 to fill the casual vacancy occasioned by the death of John (Jock) Ferguson.

² *WAPD(LC)*, 24 June 2009, p. 5409.

school education Alison attended TAFE, where she graduated with a certificate IV in human services. She later attended Murdoch University where she graduated with an arts degree and it was during this time that she became active in student politics culminating in her election as guild president. Subsequently she went on to complete a second degree in law, and over the years was employed as a play leader in the community sector and then as union organiser and industrial officer for both the State School Teachers' Union and the Australian Nursing Federation before becoming a lawyer for the CEPU. In her own words 'members might think it strange that a Greens (WA) member has such a long union background ... The Greens are wholly supportive of collective action and support the right of workers to collective bargain through their unions for a better ... [and] quite often ... [this] translates to a better deal for the community'.³

Outside her paid employment Alison was active in the Community Legal Sector as a member of the board of the Environmental Defender's Office, the Employment Law Centre, and the Women's Law Centre. Her active role in the union movement included serving as a delegate to UnionsWA and a member of its women's committee as well as of a variety of community organisations including running the Perth chapter of APHEDA (Union Aid Abroad), the Friends of East Timor, the Death in Custody Watch Committee and the Peace House.

In 1996 Alison became a sole parent with the birth of her daughter, a time which she describes 'as one of the happiest yet'. Nevertheless, in her Inaugural Speech she described as 'baffling and insulting' the way that 'some within our community sought to treat me and my little family as though we were substandard or inferior as a family'. By contrast, she told her fellow Legislative Councillors, 'I salute those parents who undertake the hardest job in the world all by themselves'.⁴ In September 2002 she had married Luke Edmonds, by whom she had two sons, and she entered Parliament sharing with her husband the upbringing of their three children, initially only two of whom were at school age with their youngest only three. Her support for a wider definition of family values has been strongly expressed with her contention that:

there is no one family form that is more important than another. Families come in all different ways, sometimes by choice and sometimes not, but all are worthy of our respect.⁵

Thus, to those parents 'who undertake the hardest job in the world all by themselves' she promised 'they will have an advocate who will support them and recognise the valuable contribution they are making'.⁶ She was also in the position as the Greens' spokesperson on the Inheritance (Family and Dependents Provision) Amendment Bill to welcome changes ensuring that all three of her children, for example, would be able to make a claim on her husband's estate, which would in effect be her estate also.⁷ Similarly, when speaking about National Marriage Day in August 2010 she asserted that 'if marriage is something that is worthy of celebration, if it is truly the cornerstone of society ... why on earth would we deny gay and lesbian couples the opportunity to marry'.⁸

³ Ibid., p. 5410.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5411.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 August 2011, pp. 6284–6286.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 12 August 2010, p. 5461.

Alison's strong feelings about alternative family values were equally demonstrated when she addressed the House in October 2010 concerning the so-called 'stolen children' apology (a subject on which she spoke again in the following year:

For the women so tragically affected by past adoption practices, for so many of their children, for the fathers ... and for so many of the extended families, I hope and pray that this apology ... will be the first step towards some sense of healing ...⁹

Alison's direct involvement with party politics had begun when she joined the Greens (WA) as a founding member in 1990 and in this regard she pays tribute to Senator Jo Vallentine 'who first inspired me to become politically active'.¹⁰ In the years that followed she served one term as the party's state convenor and two terms as its national convenor. On entering parliament she was elected a member of the Standing Committee on Legislation and in this regard she has played a strong and active role as, for example, when the committee debated and eventually stalled the proposed legislation—the Criminal Investigation Act Amendment Bill—dealing with issues of 'stop-and-search' powers for police.

As already indicated, from the moment she entered Parliament, Alison has been prepared to speak publicly about her own personal circumstances and the impact these have had on her outlook concerning life and the part that can be played by Governments. Thus in her Inaugural Speech she made specific reference to the circumstances of the death of her father which she described as having:

a permanent effect on me, and after years of personal reconciliation, I bring this personal experience to my public life ... [namely] the debilitating effects of mental illness and the devastating effect of suicide.

As a consequence she was:

heartened at the prospect that the important issue of suicide prevention may be starting to get the attention it deserves.¹¹

During her first two plus years in Parliament Alison asked hundreds of questions of various Ministers and delivered speeches on a variety of Bills. From the outset she was extraordinarily active, the more especially considering her demanding daily schedule as a mother of two and then three school-age children and notwithstanding the strong support she has received in this regard from her husband. Indeed it is doubtful whether any of those who first entered Parliament following the 2008 election contributed more than Alison to proceedings on the floor of the House. Alison's willingness to deal publicly with the issues she has had to confront as a private citizen has made her impact on the political scene all the more relevant and meaningful. This has applied even with the political odds stacked against her as her attempt in 2011, with strong backing from the Law Society of Western Australia and the mental health sector, when she introduced a private member's Bill with the objective, unsuccessful as it eventuated, of preventing mentally impaired people from being subject to an

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 19 October 2010, p. 7857.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 24 June 2009, p. 5412.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5411–5412.

automatic gaol sentence following an assault on a public officer. As she told the House in June 2011:

After the mandatory sentencing provisions became law, it came to the public's attention that the first two people to face these changes suffered from a mental illness ... After negative media ensued, prosecutors made the decision to downgrade the charges so that a mandatory jail term was no longer a threat. In this case it was the police, or the prosecution, who made the decision to take mandatory jail off the table. But this is the fundamental problem with mandatory sentencing legislation: the discretion that should rightly be with the courts, our judiciary, is available only to the police and the prosecution.¹²

When the Bill was put to the vote it was defeated by 17 votes to 12 on party lines.

This particular private member's Bill is one of five such Bills that Alison introduced within the first two years of her term. She also introduced the Perth Hills Planning Bill 2010 which sought to amend planning laws to recognise the Perth hills as a region requiring specific protection; the Water Services Licensing (Water Conservation Target) Amendment Bill 2008, which sought to have mandatory water conservation targets a condition for water licenses; the Industrial Relations (Equal Remuneration) Amendment Bill, which sought to allow pay equity cases to be heard within the state industrial relations system; and the Occupational Safety and Health Amendment Bill 2010, which sought to amend occupational health and safety laws and of particular significance sought to introduce the offence of industrial manslaughter into the Criminal Code. At the time of writing all of these Bills were still in the course of debate.

During her short term in Parliament Alison has made a significant public impact in a number of controversial areas and her career so far has suggested that the pursuit of issues and fundamental principles weighs much more heavily in her mind than conforming to contemporary public opinion on major social and political issues.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

From Alison Xamon's perspective the demands on a woman in terms of giving birth to children and subsequently serving as the primary carer in the family is the most fundamental distinction preventing women entering parliamentary careers at the same stage of life and with the same options as is the case with men. Delayed entry into a parliamentary career, the necessity of surrendering a ministerial post with the birth of a child and/or the need for a supportive partner to share the child rearing functions are all factors that will ensure that the demands of life in Parliament will always tend to lessen the options available to women. This said, in Alison's own case she was able to support the party by nominating as a 'supporting candidate' on seven occasions between 1998 and 2007, four times in federal elections and twice for an East Metropolitan Region seat in the Legislative Council. However, it was not until the September 2008 election that she could make the commitment to nominate for the Legislative Council as number one on the party ticket and with a very real opportunity of finally achieving a seat in the parliamentary arena.

¹² WAPD(LC), 23 June 2011, p. 4691.

A love of politics had always been a driving passion in Alison's life and for her a parliamentary career was simply the logical extension, the political wing, of the activist groups and the associated causes in which she believed and for which she had worked since her graduation with a law and arts degree from Murdoch University. In her own words she considers that what she brought to Parliament was her years of experience working within the trade union movement whether it be, for example, as a union organiser and industrial officer with the Teachers' Union, or legal representative for the CEPU or with the Nursing Federation. Alongside this was her involvement as the chair of the Employment Law Centre, a member of the board of the Environmental Defender's Office and the Women's Law Centre, as the Perth convenor of APHEDA and her activity in a host of other organisations. She also brought to Parliament the passion that had first led her to join the Greens WA in 1990—in part inspired, as with many others who joined the Greens in the early 1990s, by the example set by nuclear disarmament campaigner Jo Vallentine and which centred around a range of commitments to environmental and civil libertarian issues that made straightforward and clear cut her decision as to which political party to support. She came to Parliament with her 'eyes open' as to what she expected to see, especially given the work she had done for and with politicians. In this regard she realised and accepted the need to work as hard and probably harder than she had before while still finding the time to play her part alongside a supportive and equally active husband in the family unit which she regards as constituting the most important part of her life.

Alison has what she describes as a deep respect for the parliamentary institution. At the same time, in her own words, while Parliament may no longer be a men's club the political behaviour exhibited for the most part is still essentially based on masculinised concepts of debate and dispute resolution. This is not to say that the more masculine aspects of parliamentary behaviour, participation in debate and responses by MPs are only exhibited by male politicians but in her view the style and the modus operandi of the Legislative Council has still some way to go before a more balanced approach to the political arena becomes more widely based. The frustration too can be readily demonstrated given her five private members Bills all stalled in the parliamentary process.

At this stage Alison does not have any real concept of how long she will remain in Parliament or what her parliamentary career might eventually lead to. She does know that she is very much committed to securing a second term given that she has a political agenda and passions concerning which if anything she is more committed than ever. As and when she leaves Parliament, by choice or design, she believes she will remain as intensely dedicated and actively involved as ever in pursuing the causes and the beliefs which have motivated her to date. In any case even while in Parliament as a member of the Greens the trappings of ministerial rank are unlikely to be achieved and her focus has and always will remain on seeking to bring about the legislative changes and remedies to rectify injustices and inequities in the community at large. In this regard, notwithstanding the disappointments and frustrations in achieving genuine change, she does believe that on issues such as mental health, water conservation and occupational health and safety there is today a much greater level of community awareness than in the relatively recent past.