



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

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

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and
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**Parliamentary History Project
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MONICA ROSE HOLMES



MLA Southern River 14 December 1996–10 February 2001 (Lib).
Member Parliamentary Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee
(later Public Accounts Committee) 1997–2001; Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation
and Intergovernmental Agreements 1997–2001.

Monica Holmes was elected to the Legislative Assembly in December 1996 when she won the new seat of Southern River by 660 votes from the sitting Labor member for Kenwick, Judyth Watson (q.v.). When Monica first spoke during the Address-in-Reply debate she said:

Maiden speech this may be, but maiden I am not! I would rather be regarded as a canny mother hen. As a canny mother hen, and broody on behalf of my electorate, I hope to ensure that more golden eggs are laid south of the river than has been the case in recent years.¹

The 1996 election campaign had been clouded with accusations that the marginal seats north of the river had been the main beneficiaries of infrastructure investment. Monica's intention was to seek to redress this situation with a concerted attack on the major challenges facing her Southern River electorate. A key element of her program was to provide incentives for business investment through the budget process:

... the main focus for employment must be economic growth, gained by attracting levels of business investment. Therefore, the business and industrial community must be given the encouragement and confidence to create the jobs which are still in short supply in the southern metropolitan area.²

To meet the problem of employment, the support of the Chamber of Commerce and other industry and employer groups was sought. This she contended could be facilitated by slashing 'through the jungle of bureaucracy'. The Government was urged to do everything possible to bring forward the

¹ WAPD(LA) 13 March 1997, p. 315.

² Ibid.

implementation of the proposed freight and passenger rail link south of the river. In turn, this would assist the environment through a decrease in vehicular use. Other proposals were for local government to consider providing a differential rating of industrial zones, as well as ensuring that the full range of essential services are provided to existing and proposed industrial land. With the assistance of the Minister for Local Government Monica also argued for consideration of the possibility of introducing municipal bonds, based on the United States model, which would give the community the opportunity to invest in its own future and, at the same time, receive interest income, which in the United States is generally exempt from federal and state taxation.

Although several of Monica's speeches reveal a keen understanding of the American, Canadian and German Federations, she was raised in the United Kingdom. Born as Monica Blagrove on 25 June 1944, she married Graham Holmes in August 1975. While in the UK she attended Kidbrooke Comprehensive School and Pitmans College, leading to a Royal Society Arts Diploma, and in Australia she received a Graduate Certificate of Management from the University of New England.

After six years as a self-employed hotelier, Monica migrated with her husband and daughter to Western Australia in January 1983. Before achieving her long term 'ambition and honour' of becoming a 'representative of the people', she worked as an electorate officer as well as an executive assistant and personal secretary. Between 1990 and 1993 she was also the first female executive officer of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. She has been, and continued to be during and after her parliamentary career, a member of many community organisations, including the Canning Historical Society, Rostrum, international associations for professional business women known as Zonta and Soroptimists, the Royal Aero Club, the Victoria Park Policing Committee and acted as the manager of numerous Red Shield Appeals. She has been a Neighbourhood Watch Area Coordinator and for seven years she was a voluntary weekly columnist on crime prevention for Community Newspapers. In 1994 Monica added to her credentials by becoming a Justice of the Peace and a member of the Royal Association of Justices.

In local government Monica served as a councillor on the Canning City Council from 1988 to 1991 with her responsibilities including serving as the chairperson of the Community Services Committee. Her membership of the Liberal Party commenced almost immediately upon her arrival in Western Australia and dating from 1983 she held many executive posts, including branch president, vice president and president of the Tangney division, state council delegate, divisional council delegate as well as being elected to serve on the state marketing and membership committees.

Following her election to Parliament, Monica was immediately appointed to the powerful Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee (PAERC). The committee was widely seen as being the Legislative Assembly's 'watchdog', fulfilling an important accountability role. In 1998 a controversy arose when the PAERC reported to the Parliament on a sponsorship deal between the Western Australian Tourism Commission and the Global Dance Foundation. After the committee took the highly unusual step of calling Premier Court, as the responsible Minister, to give evidence, the final report recommended a preferred course of action for such transactions by a Minister and relevant agency. In backing the recommendations Monica showed the courage of her convictions, rather than presenting a minority report.

As government backbenchers are expected to ‘toe the party line’ they often do not have many opportunities to present their ideas to Parliament. Nevertheless, Monica regularly utilised the parliamentary process in order to keep Southern River electorate concerns to the forefront. Significantly, too, she employed the then relatively new procedure of making short statements to the Legislative Assembly on matters of importance to her electorate. These included such topics as the Armadale-Kelmscott Hospital; recycling in Gosnells, Huntingdale and Canning Vale; crime prevention; bush fire brigade volunteers; Gosnells town site and Business Subcommittee; and the Forrestdale Trail. On broader matters such as the School Education Bill she also participated keenly in the debate offering strong support to local area participation principles. Indeed, upon election to Parliament she had contended that her education greatly facilitated her role as a parliamentarian. Perhaps, too, she would contend that her experience occasioned by living in another polity, was valuable on the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Intergovernmental Agreements, to which she had been appointed after only a few months of parliamentary sittings. Another of her parliamentary roles was her appointment as Deputy Chairman of Committees, making her the first non-Labor woman to hold this position.

Monica’s experience has belied the notion that new members in the contemporary Parliament needed to serve a long waiting period before assuming specific parliamentary roles. She also illustrated that within a decade or so of moving to Western Australia a person with the right attributes and enthusiasm can win a seat in Parliament. In her case this was achieved through membership of many community groups and successfully seeking election to the relevant local government body and there is no doubt that service to the local community is a very valuable asset when seeking office.

At the same time, like many others before her, Monica discovered that parliamentary life is far from secure and having won a marginal seat in 1996 she lost the seat in large swing against the Government in 2001. Subsequently she remained actively involved in many areas of interest working first as a parliamentary research officer and then in consultancy work. She obtained a real estate certificate in 2002 and between 2006 and 2009 was the CEO of the Western Australian Division of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award in Australia. In 2007 she became a Dame of the Sovereign Order of the Orthodox Knights Hospitaller of St John in Jerusalem.

For Monica life after Parliament has been very rewarding although the disappointment remains that she did not have further opportunity to build on the promising start she had made.

Reflections by the Member on her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written for the 2000 volume when Monica was still in Parliament.)

I became the member for Southern River at the 1996 state election, the first person elected for this newly created seat.

During my first two years of office I have learned a lot about the workings of the Parliament.

This knowledge has been greatly enhanced through my appointment to the position of Acting Speaker and Deputy Chairman of Committees. In this position I chaired the Parliament during

some very heated debates which included the controversial 1998 Bills relating to the abortion and native title issues.

In addition to being an Acting Speaker, as a Deputy Chairman of Committees I am also required to chair sessions during the Estimates Committees. This is another very interesting experience and it adds another dimension to the process itself by dealing in depth with the provisions of the state budget.

The actual parliamentary surroundings in Western Australia were definitely skewed in the past towards the male of the species. This was brought home to me when walking along the corridors and seeing the old wooden doors with 'male bathroom' written on them and none available for women. It was also interesting to visit the old billiard room which was again, of course, for men only!

Thank goodness things have now changed and in today's society women are an accepted part of the parliamentary process.

It is my belief that women in Parliament provide a different outlook and scope to debate from that of their male counterparts. My opinion is that this helps to provide a more balance viewpoint towards issues that are raised in the House.

I am very proud that my parliamentary career provided me with more than one opportunity to create some history. This has come about because I am the first member for Southern River as well as the first female Liberal member to be an Acting Speaker and chair the House.

It has also been an honour to be the first Liberal woman to be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee, which is the most powerful standing committee in the Parliament. In addition, to the above I am also a member of the Uniform Legislation and Intergovernmental Agreements Standing Committee.

I enjoy the interaction with the staff and my colleagues on both sides of the House and it is a very interesting experience to be on the floor of the House and actually be a part of the proceedings.

The privilege of having being elected to serve the seat of Southern River, is one I do not take for granted. In my opinion, women in Parliament have a lot to offer the parliamentary process and I sincerely hope that, in the years to come, a lot more women will take up this exciting challenge.

(These Reflections were written in 2012.)

**'MAKING A DIFFERENCE'—THE LAST TWO YEARS AND
WHERE TO FROM THERE?**

Following the earlier reflections of my first two years as a member of the WA State Parliament, this is a review of the last two years of my parliamentary career. During the last two years of my four-year term of office there were several important issues in my electorate. They included a proposal to put a freight marshalling yard in Canning Vale, air conditioning and upgrades for schools in the older areas of the electorate and new schools in the fast growing new areas. There were also planning issues surrounding the kennel zones, aircraft noise, and environmental

problems relating to the Jandakot aquifer. To deal with these matters, I initiated and chaired five community committees. Each committee had a strategic plan and the community members were integral to making the outcomes of the plans come to fruition.

In the last two years I continued to enjoy being active in the Parliament. In my role as a Chairman of Committees I chaired the last committee of the whole. I also continued in my standing committee roles, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

The state election in February 2001 was surrounded by issues, one of the major ones being the (Swan) Bell Tower proposal, which the Opposition seized upon, citing the cost as the catalyst, which should be spent on other issues. At the ballot box the people of WA decided it was 'time for a change' and I lost my seat, albeit by a narrow margin.

As a result of my loss I underwent a process I will never forget. It was succinctly summed up by the late Mr Paul Andrews when he lost the seat of Southern River in 2008. He said it was like having your appendix removed without an anaesthetic and I totally concur with his statement.

Having gone through the 'loss' process I picked myself up and went on with my (wonderful) life and enjoyed working in real estate for five years.

In 2005 another honour bestowed upon me was to be knighted by Prince Michael of Russia, a cousin of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, as a Dame of the Sovereign Orthodox Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem. Then in 2006 I was chosen to become the CEO of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (WA Division) Inc. This is an international youth award which operates in over 120 countries. It is aimed at young people between the ages of 14 and 25 and consists of four sections, namely a service, an adventurous journey, a skill and physical recreation. This position enabled me to work with numerous schools across the state and expand my passion for young people succeeding in their lives.

At the conclusion of my contract with the award in December 2010, I became a business facilitator. In this role I helped and guided people through the processes of starting up their own business. I also founded an association called the WA Achievement Association Inc. The aim of this organisation is to provide the vehicle for primary school children and adults, over 25 years, to achieve success in their lives by following their passions and setting and achieving goals.

I am the Chair of the Small Business Centre South East Metro and a board member of the Richmond Fellowship Western Australia. The aim of this organisation is to enable people with mental illness to recover through innovative services, education and advocacy. I am also pursuing other business interests and am a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the WA Parliament Former Members' Association.

To sum up, I would not change a thing in my life. To have been elected as a parliamentarian was an honour and a wonderful achievement. It was made possible by the fantastic support of my family and the team I had around me.

I stand by the views I expressed in my maiden speech and my earlier publication and acknowledge that the experiences I gained during my parliamentary career were amazing, character building and life changing.