



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

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

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## JUNE DOROTHY van de KLASHORST



MLA Swan Hills 6 February 1993–10 February 2001 (Lib). Parliamentary Secretary 1997–1999. Minister of State 22 December 1999–10 February 2001. Member Joint House Committee 1993–1994; Member Library Committee 1997–1998; Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 1994–1996; Select Committee on Intervention in Childbirth 1994–1995; Select Committee on Heavy Transport 1994–1996; Select Committee on Crime Prevention 1997–1999.

In February 1993, June van de Klashorst was elected to the Legislative Assembly for the outer metropolitan Swan Hills seat. Four months later in her Inaugural Speech, and after graciously giving credit to her Labor Party predecessors, she stated she was ‘proud to stand here as a pioneer Liberal member for an area too long taken for granted by one side of politics’. Most significantly she added:

I am equally proud to be the first woman to win the Legislative Assembly seat in the Midland and Hills area. Thankfully women are no longer regarded as a novelty in politics. I consider that we can bring new perspectives to representation and can be more sharply aware of the needs and concerns of people.<sup>1</sup>

June adopted her representational role with zest speaking on a range of topics and immediately becoming an active committee member of the Parliament. However, one issue which soon troubled her arose when the newly elected Liberal–National Government announced it would close the Midland Workshops. June immediately began working with a Westrail special task force and the Midland community to help ease some of the pain experienced in the community. Other matters given priority in the speech were environmentalism—in the 1993 election she had received some 55 per cent of Green preferences—crime issues, especially juvenile crime, drug rehabilitation and education. In 1996, she doubled her parliamentary majority.

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<sup>1</sup> WAPD(LA), 17 June 1993, p. 21.

June van de Klashorst was born in England on 1 June 1938. Her father, Cecil Wellstead, was a bus driver. After receiving her primary school education in England, she emigrated to Australia with her family arriving on 13 July 1951. She was a student at Princess May Girls' School in 1951 and 1952 and attended Fremantle Technical School in 1953 and 1954. Five years later, she married Franciscus van de Klashorst by whom she had two sons. She held many secretarial and managerial jobs in the private sector before training as a teacher. Her teaching posts were confined to the geographic area of her electorate which linked her to many local associations, while other activities stemmed from her involvement from 1968 as a partner in an orchard at Gidgegannup. From 1985 she was a foundation member and treasurer of the Gidgegannup branch of the Liberal Party and thereafter held a number of posts in the party including the presidency of the Pearce Division from 1989 to 1992. In the party scene she did not favour the use of quotas to ensure women's representation and saw no need to establish a select committee to try to assist in the election of women to Parliament as they needed to be elected on merit. In this context Edith Cowan (q.v.) was depicted as having been 'a wonderful woman and role model'.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of her extensive experience as a schoolteacher, particularly as a school librarian, she spoke strongly in support of the School Education Bill 1997. She applauded the public consultation principles of the Bill and the way they would facilitate schools becoming the hub of the community. Importantly, she told the Legislative Assembly:

... we must move away from thinking that schools are merely educational facilities; we must consider the use of those facilities in a broader sense.<sup>3</sup>

The huge school assets of the state, she contended, should be used to provide facilities for our young children between 3.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. including the use of libraries, computers, domestic science centres, art and craft centres, trade workshops, ovals and sports centres, and health facilities.

During the course of this speech, June also spoke about setting up youth friendly multi-access centres to cater for young people who are concerned about health issues. The abortion debate, she considered was relevant in that young people in her view want to learn about birth control but they will not go to their general practitioners. Nurse stations in schools could help young women and young men with birth control and reproductive problems. When the abortion reform legislation was before the Parliament in 1998, she spoke and lobbied strongly in favour of its removal from the Criminal Code. In her own words she affirmed 'I believe in Christian family values, I am not pro-abortion, but I am pro-choice'.<sup>4</sup> While she regarded the legislation as absolutely necessary, she responded to the increasing divisiveness of the debate by urging the inclusion of counselling provisions in the legislation.

In January 1997, June was appointed as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Justice. This appointment was in concert with a confessed interest in this portfolio. In a speech to the Legislative Assembly in the following year she suggested:

True crime prevention is stopping young people turning to crime in the first place. The average young person in the justice system in this State is male—about 99 per cent. I am being reasonably

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<sup>2</sup> WAPD(LA), 19 March 1993, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> WAPD(LA), 11 March 1998, p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> WAPD(LA), 17 March 1998, p. 693.

general here, but invariably they tend to come from dysfunctional families. They usually have a bad school history and are illiterate and innumerate. Very often they are unemployed and other members of their family are also unemployed. They are usually poor. Therefore, any crime prevention methodology must look at all these areas to try to find ways to stop some of these things happening and to perhaps find out what the community, the Government, the police and other agencies can do to help these people.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier she had been appointed by the Premier to head a domestic violence task force. Models from Canada and New Zealand were evaluated. She considered a protocol had to be put in place to assist victims of domestic violence. In her opinion:

... the whole situation [was to be viewed] as a triangle—the victim and the perpetrator are on one side and the children on another. It is imperative that the incidence of domestic violence in this State decreases and to achieve that aim the perpetrator must be counselled.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, many of June's speeches to the Parliament incorporate a theme which can be of interest for the social scientist. Thus in her Inaugural Speech she said:

I have sought election through a desire to play my part in restoring ethical standards and in giving real power back to the people I represent ...<sup>7</sup>

A fortnight later she explained:

One of the reasons I am in this place today is that I noticed over the past 15 years the slow decline in the morality of some—not all—children. I believe that is due to the role modelling in society. Role modelling comes from the top and works its way down. Children were seeing people who were not being punished for things they did wrong and who said that it was perfectly all right to do something wrong, but not all right to do anything wrong if one gets caught.<sup>8</sup>

June was able to bring a wealth of 'real world' experience to Parliament. She has contended that the presentation of a women's perspective is important but this was not to be secured by the imposition of quotas. Although she was elected after many years in the workforce, she was able to address her parliamentary and electoral responsibilities with great zest and enthusiasm. Then in December 1999 her opportunity seemed to have come when Rhonda Parker left the Ministry to prepare for a difficult election contest and June was appointed in her stead as Minister for Family and Children's Services, Seniors and Women's Interests. In her new role, June continued to focus on her variety of community issues and during an Address-in-Reply debate in August 2000 she again spoke at length on educational issues vigorously defending her government's record on a range of issues including reduction in class sizes, placing specialist remedial teachers in schools, Aboriginal education, early childhood education, literacy and numeracy and making provision for students who did not wish to continue academic education to Year 12.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in November 2000 she entered into debate on issues involving seniors, the need to bridge generation gaps and an acceptance that:

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<sup>5</sup> WAPD(LA), 12 August 1998, p. 147

<sup>6</sup> WAPD(LA), 5 April 1995, p. 803.

<sup>7</sup> WAPD(LA), 17 June 1993, p. 24

<sup>8</sup> WAPD(LA), 1 July 1993, p. 945.

<sup>9</sup> WAPD(LA), 9 August 2000, pp. 135–137.

Seniors are not a separate group in our society. Being a senior is part of a normal life span... There is no need to look at being a senior as being different. Seniors need to be encouraged to consider this to be a normal part of life. I think the word 'retirement' should be removed from society's vocabulary. People should feel that they just move from one stage of life to another.<sup>10</sup>

In the 2001 election, June's parliamentary career came to a sudden and unexpected end when an 11 per cent swing to Labor in Swan Hills saw her lose the seat by more than 1 000 votes to Jaye Radisich (q.v.). During her eight-year career, June had participated actively and enthusiastically in government business and general debate and her brief ministerial career was a fitting, albeit disappointingly short, reward.

*Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(The following is a short summary of the Reflections June wrote in 1999.)*

For the 2000 volume June reflected that the 'last decade' had seen 'more changes to the lives of Australian women' than any other comparable period. The 'feminism movement', 'equal opportunity legislation' and 'growing job opportunities' in her view had all conspired 'to change forever the way Australian women see themselves and the world around them'. After tracing back through many of the developments of the twentieth century in this regard, she outlined her view that 'women, by dint of being women, bring a different perspective in Parliament' and that what she regarded as necessary was 'for both women and men to work together in a way which allows for a blending of ideas so as to develop the very best legislation that can be produced'. Ruling out quotas to provide for female parliamentary representation, remedies she suggested for overcoming the shortfall of the numbers of women in Parliament included having more women join political parties to influence the preselection process; for women to lobby parties to increase female representation; for the media to publicise the achievements of women leaders and, above all, for all sources to encourage women to seek election to Parliament. Her closing words reflected that sentiment:

Bear in mind that each time a woman gets elected it makes it easier for others to follow, leading to that much needed critical mass.

*(These additional Reflections were written in 2012.)*

Looking back 11 years after leaving Parliament, my first thoughts are about the enormity of it all, the impossibility of the role, the frenetic lifestyle; and the expectations of what is and is not possible for a member and a Minister. At the same time, it was an exhilarating, exciting, tremendously satisfying and wonderful eight years which I wouldn't have missed for anything.

The female angle just didn't jump into mind in those first few reflections of my time as the member for Swan Hills but, of course, it was a factor in how I carried out my role in both my constituency and later in my appointment as the Minister with responsibility for, I suppose one could say, the 'female' related portfolios of family and children's services, seniors and women's interests.

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<sup>10</sup> WAPD(LA), 15 November 2000, p. 3,204.

As I stated in my previous musings, I was only the fourth Liberal woman to be voted into the Legislative Assembly in 1993, along with Minister Edwardes, and we represented the whole of the female Liberal side of politics in the Assembly in the thirty-fourth Parliament. The same situation applied when I was appointed as a Minister. Once again, Minister Edwardes and I were the only women sitting at the Cabinet table each week.

There wasn't any overt discrimination but I sometimes found it difficult to present a woman's viewpoint as being very important when there could be a general lack of understanding of where I was coming from on some issues. I believed I also suffered from my trying to get consensual agreement rather than sticking to an immovable bottom line.

Don't get me wrong, I did have a number of 'wins' but had to work very hard to get support on a number of 'social' issues so important to the family, women and seniors. Of course, I did realise that the financial stability of Government and the usual needs of full employment, industry and commerce had to come before any help could be given to social aspects, as I had been a person who, prior to entering Parliament, worked on a household budget and if money wasn't there then nothing could be done.

The difficulty with selling the 'social portfolios' was the lack of ways to measure outcomes. How can you convince economic pragmatist Treasury officials that money spent to stop a person from deciding to commit suicide for just one day when they had tried to several days in a row, was great progress and a very positive outcome, despite the fact that they might try again tomorrow? An extreme example, but one I hope shows how hard it is to 'sell' the social need message and get scads of extra money for your portfolio when money is tight. The social portfolios are investments in long-term future changes.

I note that there are three women in Cabinet at the moment. An improvement of one woman over the past 11 years! I wonder how long it is going to take before Cabinet reflects the Western Australian population numbers and has 50 per cent women. At the rate of one extra per 10 years, to get eight more will take 80 years!

Despite this, I still subscribe to the fact that quotas should not be put in place. Women are just as dynamic and intelligent as men and able to be part of running the state should they be interested to do so and willing to work hard to get elected. Placing women in Parliament or Cabinet just because they are women is demeaning and gives a message that women are not equal to men, which of course is not the case.

Returning to my first paragraph and first thoughts of my time in Parliament, I now realise that the job was an almost impossible one, especially when a member gets to be given a higher office. Time is the enemy; there is just not enough time to do everything that is expected of you.

First and foremost there is your responsibility to your electors. In my case, Swan Hills had almost 32 000 people situated between Bullsbrook and Wooroloo and all points in between. Each one of them had to be represented in the best way possible, but of course often had 32 000 differing viewpoints on almost every issue. The secret I found was not to try to please everyone on every concern but to try to look at the whole picture and make a decision based on what is best for the whole. This of course leads to half being happy and the other half being unhappy at outcomes. Constituents are either apathetic, love you or hate you and are changeable daily, but most are

cynical and think you are overpaid and underworked. The fact that I worked 24/7 taking telephone calls at 2.00 am about electricity failures just didn't count if their representative couldn't solve their problem immediately and to their satisfaction.

If you are appointed to higher office, life gets even harder! You have, as well, ministerial responsibility for the whole state of Western Australia and whilst the 24/7 remains, you gain more time by giving up sleep.

The call on Ministers is frenetic especially in the social portfolios where human disasters happen all the time and it is the Minister's responsibility to fix what is often unfixable. One of the hardest things for me was to make decisions about taking damaged children away from their parents and to cope with the horror of some of their stories and journeys often all at midnight or the early hours of the morning. In addition, the expectation that Ministers regularly attend events, such as the opening of a women's refuge centre in a far flung community, or a local art exhibition or give a speech at a ethnic ball, means more than constant preparation and long hours; it also, from a woman's point of view, means extra time in keeping up her appearance as women politicians are judged on their appearance more than the blokes are.

The other main issue is having to cope with the press who have a completely differing viewpoint than you. Reporters spend their time trying to find something wrong with everything you do. This means being careful of every single word you say in case it comes back to bite you at some later time. This is a hard task for anyone, let alone one under so much time pressure with so many facts to look to every moment. You are also expected to know everything which happens in your portfolio area every moment of the day all over the state. A tall ask!

As the community of Western Australia, we need to be conscious that constant criticism of public figures, especially members of Parliament, could preclude them from taking risks which could benefit the state, just in case they make mistakes. This could limit imagination, speaking out and trying new ideas knowing they could be slaughtered by the media and hence the public.

Ministers and members of Parliament all rely strongly on their staff. This was the case with both my ministerial and electorate staff and I publicly thank them for all they did for me and for Western Australia including Swan Hills. These loyal and involved people give their all above and beyond what their salaries reflect.

I cannot stop writing without mentioning and thanking the 'wind beneath my wings', my husband. Frans was an unpaid extra staff person without whom I would not have managed to achieve so much. He visited my electorate office and helped with photocopying and other necessary tasks; became a courier bringing papers, which needed to be signed, to Parliament when the House was sitting and I couldn't get back. He represented me at many local events and even funerals, sat alongside me at endless numbers of lunches, dinners and the like, even though he knew no-one there and in some cases was almost completely ignored. Frans took over the role of 'wife' at home, as I was never there long enough to do the usual chores of washing, cleaning and shopping. He supported me when things went wrong or became difficult and I often used his wise counsel to sort through issues bouncing problems around with him.

Being the member for Swan Hills and a Minister was like being on an express train which never stops, going faster and faster along the track. There is no chance to stop it, the work keeps coming in and when there, you just get on with it and try to keep it under control. This becomes a way of life. It is only when you are shoved off the express train and it still keeps going without you, that you realise all that was involved, all the hours of work, all the neglect of family and friends, neglect of your health and wellbeing. But it was an experience like nothing else can be. To be part of running the state of Western Australia is a privilege given to few and I certainly wouldn't have missed it for quids. I loved every moment.

The outcome for us of the loss of Swan Hills was a complete lifestyle sea change. Frans and I are still involved in many community activities but at a lesser level, even though I still assist the now Minister for Seniors being chair of her advisory council. Helping others makes life still sweet, even though, to be honest, I do still miss the life of a politician and would go back tomorrow if I could turn back the clock and was younger.

I did achieve much. I am proud that I did and thank the community of Western Australia and the Liberal Party for the chance so to do.