

PAT GILES — TRIBUTE

Statement

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [5.14 pm]: I rise to say a few words about Senator Pat Giles, who passed away in her sleep last Wednesday. Senator Giles was a woman who inspired generations of women in the Labor movement, particularly in the Labor Party and particularly this woman. Pat was born in 1928 in South Australia. She spent some time in Melbourne, but when her parents' marriage broke up, she moved back to South Australia and was raised by her grandparents. She trained as a nurse. She married a doctor, Nick Giles —

Point of Order

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: I am sorry to interrupt, but this is, effectively, an obituary. I would like to hear it and I am having difficulty doing so.

The PRESIDENT: I thank you, Hon Michael Mischin; you have just jumped the gun. I was finding it very difficult to hear what the Leader of the House was saying. I think given Senator Giles' significant contribution to this state, it would be appropriate that there be a degree of quiet. I know members are participating in conversations; perhaps if your conversation is very important, you might want to take it outside and allow the Leader of the House to continue talking about the valuable contribution Senator Pat Giles made to this state.

Statement Resumed

Hon SUE ELLERY: Thank you. I wonder, Madam President, if you would indulge me. A copy of this speech is going to be provided to her family, including a video, and I ask whether the clock could start again so that I can give them a clean video.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, that is fine. I will give the call to the Leader of the House to provide a member's statement.

Hon SUE ELLERY: Thank you, Madam President.

I rise tonight to mark the passing of Senator Pat Giles, a senator for Western Australia who passed away in her sleep last Wednesday. Pat Giles was a woman who inspired generations of women in the Labor movement, particularly in the Labor Party and particularly this woman. She was born in South Australia in 1928. Her family moved to Melbourne, but after her parents' marriage broke up they moved back to South Australia, where she was raised by her grandparents during her childhood.

She trained as a nurse in South Australia, and was triple certified—general nursing, midwifery and infant welfare. She met a Western Australian doctor, Nick Giles, who was working in Adelaide at the time. They married in 1952 and moved to Western Australia not long after. They lived on a large block in Bassendean and had five children in the next seven years—Anne, who was a friend of mine and a former colleague; Timothy, who I never met and who subsequently passed away; Penelope, a highly regarded lawyer; Fiona, an author and a former colleague of mine as well; and Josie of the stunning singing voice.

In Bassendean as a young mum, Pat volunteered for many organisations and, like many women of her time, she was active in the organisation that was then called the Council for Defence of Government Schools. For many women of that time who went on to a career in politics, her political skills were honed in defence of a good public education for her children. In 1970 she went back to gain a high school mature-age matriculation and began a full-time degree at the University of Western Australia, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1974, all the while continuing her community work and being a mother to five children. In 1974 she became a part-time tutor in industrial relations. In 1971, while a student at UWA, she joined the Australian Labor Party. She served in the organisation known then as the Federation of WA Parents and Citizens Association, known now as the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations.

In June 1972, Timothy, her then 18-year-old son, took his own life. This devastated the family, but Pat continued her work, saying later, "If I had stopped and given in to my grief, I'd have gone right under." In 1972 she in fact became a founding member of the women's liberation movement in Perth, and in March 1973 she was appointed the inaugural convenor of the Women's Electoral Lobby, WA branch, having attended the first world conference in Canberra that January. In 1974 she was appointed by the Whitlam government as the chair of the WA Committee on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, which previously had been an all-male committee. By the end of that year she had taken a position as an organiser with the Hospital Employees' Industrial Union of WA, and helped within that union to advance the then new concepts of equal pay, maternity leave and antidiscrimination measures. In 1975 she attended the first United Nations world conference on women in Mexico City. That was an Australian delegation headed by Margaret Whitlam. WA's women's rights activist and Pat's own mentor, Irene Greenwood, had been invited but was unable to attend and asked Pat to represent her. In 1975, Pat became the first woman elected to the executive of the Trades and Labour Council of WA. In 1976 she clashed with the

then Charles Court government over the issue of the proposed closure of the Tresillian nursing home, as it was called then, in Nedlands, which housed children with disabilities.

Her talents resulted in a long list of positions and achievements, not the least of which occurred in 1980 when she successfully argued a maternity leave case for the Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia in the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission. In 1976, she became the first woman to serve on the administrative committee of the Western Australian Labor Party and in 1981 she became vice-president of the WA Labor Party. She was elected to the Senate in October 1980 and then re-elected in 1983, 1984 and 1997. She became a champion for women's interests despite some of the male senators' resistance and confusion. Members who are old enough may remember the women's peace camp in Canberra in the mid-1980s. The women there were camping and I defy anyone to look clean, neat and tidy while they are camping—that is why I do not do it! The women were described by the media as feral women. I can remember one night during that time when Pat, on what was the equivalent of 7.30, was asked to comment on the state of dress and the general appearance of the women. With her trademark dignity, she made comments to the effect that there was nothing dishonourable in campaigning for peace.

As well as championing all marginalised sections of our community, she pointed out the particular vulnerability of women. She also raised subjects that were considered taboo at that time: abortion, contraception and toxic shock. She also championed the need for more childcare centres and for including one in the plans for the new federal Parliament House, which was not achieved until 2009. Pat was a key driver of many of the achievements for women under the Hawke Labor government, and that did not occur without resistance. During the debate on the Sex Discrimination Act, Pat dismissed the predictions of doom and gloom for the family and Australian society. Former Senator Austin Lewis said at the time that the compulsory close cohabitation of men and women in the workplace could upset marriages. Pat laughed at the time, incredulous that such tired arguments could be resurrected in the course of this historic debate.

Locally, the newly emerging northern suburbs was where Pat devoted the resources of her electorate office. Back then, the northern suburbs ended at Joondalup. Her electorate office was a bastion of community development, as she specifically employed staff to assist in building community capacity and establishing women's health services, childcare centres, youth services—one of which I worked for—and a range of services for thousands of young people at what was then the end of the freeway.

In 1990, she was appointed Special Parliamentary Adviser to the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Violence Against Women. She maintained her work internationally. She was a founding member of the World Women Parliamentarians for Peace, which was formed in Stockholm. She represented the Australian government at several international conferences and summits, and she led separate government delegations to Nairobi, Harare and Ottawa. She retired from the Senate just before her sixty-fifth birthday at the end of her term in 1993. However, that did not slow down her activism at all. She went on to chair the World Health Organization's Global Commission on Women's Health, she was the president of the International Alliance of Women and she remained an active member of the WA Women's Electoral Lobby. In 1989, a women's refuge centre was named in her honour. The Patricia Giles Centre is a non-profit organisation providing counsel, shelter and support for women and children who are subjected to domestic violence. In 1996, she was awarded an honorary doctorate by Murdoch University. In 2010, she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia for service to the community through organisations and advisory bodies that promote the interests of women and the Parliament of Australia.

Pat mentored many. She served her state with distinction. She campaigned hard in the northern suburbs for Labor governments and for better services. She will be sadly missed. For many of us, her passing marks the end of an era and it is now our responsibility to honour her life by campaigning always as she did, with dignity and compassion and a steely nerve for a better world.