

WINIFRED MARGARET PIESSE

Condolence Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [2.00 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house expresses its deep regret at the death of Hon Winifred Piesse, a former member of the Legislative Council for Lower Central Province; and places on record its appreciation for her long public service, and tenders its profound sympathy to members of her family in their bereavement.

Hon Winifred Piesse was known to her family and friends as Win. She was born on 12 June 1923 and would have been 94 in June this year. She fitted a lot into those years. She was a nurse and child health nurse in Victoria, Busselton, Narrogin, Wagin and Dumbleyung. She managed farms in Wagin after her husband died in 1966. She was a Wagin shire councillor and justice of the peace. She had three children—two sons, Austin and Charles, and a daughter, Anne. She was, of course, also a member of the Legislative Council as a member for Lower Central Province, and she was the first woman elected to the WA Parliament for what was then the Country Party.

That is just the bare bones of her activities. She was also very active in many organisations, both local and statewide, including the then Farmers Union of Western Australia; the Royal Australian Nursing Federation; the Country Women's Association of Western Australia; Red Cross; St John Ambulance Brigade; the Wagin Golf Association; and the Wagin Bowling Club.

Although I did not know Win personally, I have been provided with some notes on her history, and she seems to have been the sort of strong, self-reliant woman who emerged from a childhood in the Depression and war years into adulthood prepared to take on life's challenges, and she did have challenges. She left school early through ill health, but afterwards completed qualifications in nursing, midwifery and child health. She lost her older brother, Cyril, who was on HMAS *Sydney* during the war. It was apparently Cyril, who had visited WA on the *Sydney*, who suggested that Win also should visit WA.

She worked as a young single woman in country WA. The challenge of working in country hospitals had its benefits, though, as she met her husband-to-be, Mervyn Piesse, when she was working at Busselton Hospital. That precipitated a move to Narrogin to be nearer to him, which in turn led to their marriage in 1947. This was followed by the birth of their three children.

However, after almost 19 years of marriage, she and her children were dealt a blow with the death of her husband, Mervyn, in 1966. He had been a prisoner of war on the Burma Railway during World War II, and there is no doubt those years shortened his life. He died of a cerebral aneurysm at the age of 53; I can only imagine the devastation this would have caused Winifred and her children, who were still teenagers at the time, but she soldiered on and took over the management of their 3 250 hectares of farmland. That must have been a monumental challenge, but she managed admirably.

After her children finished their studies, she took on another challenge of returning to work as a child health nurse in Wagin. In 1971 she was elected to Wagin Shire Council. Then, at the age of 57, she decided that she wanted to make a difference for her community, for Western Australia and for women and children in regional areas, so she ran for and was elected to the Legislative Council, for what was then the Lower Central Province. She was the first woman from the Country Party to be elected to WA's Parliament.

She served a six-year term and championed the cause of quality education and health services for children and young people in the regions. In her inaugural speech, Win said, according to my notes —

We have a great responsibility in preparing our children for life. We must give them the incentive to progress. We must encourage them to work on the traditions of their forebears; and to lift their thoughts beyond the immediate future. We must give them the vision splendid.

She also worked hard to improve services for women in regional areas, and I understand she was instrumental in getting mammogram services to visit many regional areas in WA.

Despite being defeated by just 400 votes in the 1983 state election, she forged on, stronger than ever, in working for her community. She became involved in the golf club and bowls club in Wagin, where she was known as an icon of the Wagin community, as well as working with the CWA. She was not, I have read, bound by the traditional ideas of what a woman should and should not do. Not many women in those times ran farms, but she did. Not many women of those times went on to become shire councillors, but she did. There were few women who ran for Parliament, but she did, and ably represented her community.

The *Wagin Argus*, in an article of 13 October 2011 on the third Lipstick in the Limelight Empowering Rural Women forum, described her as a "Wagin icon". The idea of empowering rural women—all women, in fact—is one that she pursued. It seems to me that she was one of those women who empowered herself and provided an example to the people around her. She was a woman who made a difference and I know she will be sorely missed, not just by her family and friends, but also by the wider community. I commend the motion to the house.

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [2.06 pm]: I rise to support the motion and to comment on the life of Winifred Piesse. Winifred Margaret Aumann was born on 12 June 1923 in Narre Warren in Victoria, the daughter of an orchardist in what was then a rural community. She was educated at the local primary school and Dandenong High School, and completed a nursing general certificate, followed by midwifery and child health certificates.

After commencing her nursing career in Victoria she came to Western Australia in December 1946, working first in Busselton, then in Narrogin. In September 1947 she married farmer Mervyn Piesse, the son of Hon Charles Piesse, who had represented the great southern region in the Legislative Council as an MLC for the South East Province from 1894 until his death in 1914. Three of Charles Piesse's brothers had also served as rural members of the Legislative Assembly from 1890 to 1935.

Winifred Piesse was widowed in 1966, aged 42, and returned to her nursing career in Narrogin, Wagin and Dumbleyung for 11 years, becoming the child health nurse in Wagin and also managing the family farms. She was active in a range of community organisations, including the Royal Australian Nursing Federation, the Farmers Union of Western Australia, the Country Women's Association of Western Australia, the Red Cross, and the Wagin St John Ambulance Brigade, where she was the nursing officer.

In 1971 Win Piesse was appointed as a justice of the peace and was elected as the first female member of the Wagin Shire Council, where she served until her election to Parliament in 1977. She had joined the Country Party in Wagin in 1948 and was a branch and divisional secretary, leading to her nomination as the National Country Party candidate for Lower Central Province when the late Hon Tom Perry, MLC, decided to retire.

The Lower Central Province was a disparate and challenging electorate, with 24 500 enrolled electors. When created in 1965, it was an upper great southern seat dominated by Katanning, Narrogin and Collie, and was thus fairly safe for the Country Party. However, after a redistribution in 1972 it moved deep into the south west, comprising the Legislative Assembly seats of Katanning, Collie and Warren. It was a three-way marginal seat between the National Country Party, the Liberal Party and the Australian Labor Party. In five successive elections, Labor finished first, but always short of a majority. The NCP and the Liberal Party would battle for the second position and then rely on each other's preferences to win the seat.

In 1974, the other Lower Central Province seat had been won by the late Sandy Lewis for the Liberal Party. However, in 1977 Win Piesse reversed this result, receiving very strong support from her home base in the Katanning district that overcame deficits in the other two seats. She polled 7 277 votes, or 32.9 per cent of the vote, 1 000 votes behind the Australian Labor Party, but 700 votes ahead of the Liberal Party. The distribution of Liberal preferences gave her 13 195 votes, a majority of 4 200. Her final percentage of 59.6 was the highest winning margin for all contests in the Lower Central Province after 1970. Winifred Piesse thus became the first woman to represent the National Country Party in either house of the Parliament of Western Australia. In the combined coalition party room, she joined Margaret June Craig and the late Margaret McAleer, both of whom had been elected three years earlier.

In her six-year term in the Legislative Council, Win Piesse is remembered as a very confident speaker, but one who never strayed towards personal attack and who would interject only in a helpful and friendly manner. She took every opportunity to convince her Legislative Council colleagues of the need to look after the rural community and she was tireless in promoting Wagin and the great southern. She would encourage members, regardless of party affiliation, to visit her electorate in groups of five or six so that she could show them local facilities. She used her nursing experience to act as an unofficial medical adviser to her colleagues, giving them sound direction on how to deal with sprains and other ailments.

At the 1983 election, Win Piesse again faced a triangular contest for the Lower Central Province, which at that time consisted of the districts of Narrogin, Collie and Warren and had 26 000 electors. The redrawn Narrogin district included her home base of Wagin. Although the National Party had earlier broken away from the National Country Party, and rival NCP and National candidates both unsuccessfully contested the other lower central seat in 1980, the National Party did not oppose Win Piesse in 1983. She polled 6 129 votes, or 26.5 per cent. This was 4 400 votes behind the Australian Labor Party and 370 votes behind Bill Stretch of the Liberal Party, who won the seat by 850 votes after the distribution of her preferences. She was to be the only successful National Country Party or National Party candidate in any of the five contests after the province was substantially redrawn in 1972.

After leaving Parliament, Winifred Piesse lived in Wagin and remained active in her local community and in such organisations as the Wagin Golf Association and the Wagin Bowling Club. She died aged 93 on 11 March. We extend our sympathy to her daughter, Anne, to her sons, Austin and Charles, and to their families, including, of course, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The best we can say about our time on this earth is that we use the years available to us fruitfully, do the best we can with the opportunities that are available to us and try to leave the world a better place. I am honoured to acknowledge this lady's life, her career and her service to her community and the public in this place and out of it.

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [2.13 pm]: I rise on behalf of the Greens to also support this motion and offer my sincerest condolences to the family and the friends of Winifred Piesse. Winifred Piesse sounds like a woman I very much would like to have met. I have been very impressed to learn more about Winifred Piesse, her contribution to her family and her community and, of course, her contributions in this place.

It is difficult for anybody to be left widowed, but even more so to have three children at a time when there were not the sorts of social services and supports that are more readily available now. Despite this, Winifred Piesse went on to manage farms, to be enrolled as a local councillor and to contribute enormously within her community. She sounds as though she was a woman who was formidable and determined.

I particularly want to note some of the issues that Winifred Piesse appeared to focus on. I note that Winifred Piesse trained as a nurse and was particularly concerned about the issues of smoking, the position of young people within society, and breast cancer—an issue that has affected, I suspect, a number of people in this place and certainly many people within the community. I note that Winifred Piesse at one point recounted that one of her fondest memories of her time in Parliament was when, after making a plea for finance and a strategy to combat breast cancer, members from both sides of the house and staff went to her office and thanked her for raising the issue. Based on what I am hearing about the sort of character she was, it sounds as though she came into this place with a great deal of integrity and compassion and tried to ensure that these sorts of issues, which can affect everyone, were given voice.

I acknowledge that, as a woman, she has a very proud place in the history of the National Country Party, and I look forward to the contributions from her future colleagues—I was trying to think how to frame that—to hear more about that. I also note that Winifred Piesse went on to contribute so much within her own community after her time in Parliament.

I agree that we should all be so lucky to leave such a wonderful footprint in our lives. We get only one life—at least I believe that—and, as such, it feels as though Winifred Piesse really made her mark as a family member, a community member and a woman in this place. I, too, again wish to offer my sincere condolences to Winifred Piesse's family and friends. I am sure that they can take great pride in knowing that they come from such formidable stock and have known such a wonderful woman.

HON JACQUI BOYDELL (Mining and Pastoral — Deputy Leader of the National Party) [2.16 pm]: I also rise this afternoon on behalf of my National Party colleagues to express our condolences to Hon Win Piesse's family. Her family have joined us in the President's gallery. I have just had lunch with her daughter, her niece and her grandchildren. I can tell the honourable member that they are a formidable lot and are proud of the history of their family, as they should be.

I will make reference to a document compiled by David Black and Harry Phillips for the Parliament of Western Australia called *Making a Difference—A Frontier of Firsts: Women in the Western Australian Parliament 1921–2012*, and Hon Win Piesse was one of those firsts. I want to share with the chamber some of her reflections for David Black and Harry Phillips of her time in Parliament, what brought her here and what was important to her while she was here. These are Hon Win Piesse's reflections during that interview —

Prior to 1977, entering politics and Parliament were never on my list of 'things I must do before I die!'

I think many of us would say that, yet we find ourselves here —

The women's liberation movement was gathering momentum in the 1970s. I was far too busy in those days to pay much attention to it. Besides, no one with my vital statistics could ever afford to burn her bra!

My husband died in 1966, so I took over management of a fairly large farming enterprise until my sons were old enough to leave school and take charge.

In 1971 I was the first (and until then the only) woman elected to the Wagin Shire Council. Because of this, I was invited to attend the 'Women in Politics' conference in Canberra in 1975. That was an educational experience for me, but I must admit that I was horrified at much that I heard and saw at that conference. It became clear to me that what many of the advocates at that conference were proposing was not **equality for women** but **domination by women**. Had they obtained that, I believe they would have been even more unhappy than they already were. No doubt there are flaws in our legislation concerning women, which should be adjusted, but I do not think domination is the way to go.

On my return from Canberra, I was interviewed regarding my impressions and experience of the conference. Having voiced my disappointment at the attitudes displayed, I was asked what I intended to do about it ... I answered that I would do anything in my power to help promote necessary changes, but without the radical aggression as displayed at the conference.

It was following this that the then Country Party invited me to nominate for a seat in the State Parliament. On 24 May 1977, I was sworn in to the Legislative Council.

I am a trained nurse of some years experience, and starting in State Parliament was something like starting in a new hospital except that in a new hospital someone ‘looks out’ for you for the first few days. Here I must pay tribute to each member of the then House staff. They were always most helpful to me. A member of the staff showed me where the main rooms were, for example, chambers, library and dining room.

A member of my own party told me that there would be a meeting of our party at 10.00 am in the Country Party room and a meeting of the joint party (Country Party and Liberals) in the joint party room at 2.00 pm. I arrived at the joint party room at 1.55 pm just as the door opened and a man emerged, closing the door firmly behind him, he looked at me and said, ‘YOU can’t go in there!’, I replied, ‘I thought this was the joint party meeting.’ He said it was, ‘but YOU can’t go in there’. I told him I was the new member for Lower Central and he replied ‘Oh well, I suppose you CAN go in then.’ There were no other women in the room, but a number of the men whom I did not know.

For some years I had run our farms, attended sheep and cattle sales, and arranged my own bidding if I was buying. I had inspected our wool on the showroom floor and attended the wool auctions—all places run by men—and I had always felt at ease in those situations.

Parliament was a different environment.

...

I did not enter Parliament believing that I could move mountains, rather that I might be able to bring attention to matters of concern to people living in the country, and to the needs of women, (particularly in health matters) and of children (particularly in education).

The worst thing during my time in Parliament, was the long distances to travel throughout Lower Central Province. Sometimes I had to change my dress in a parking place on the roadside, when going from a school sports presentation on to a formal dinner over 160 kilometres away. There are no freeways in the ‘bush’ and most roads are narrow, winding and hilly. I had no spouse to share the driving, and often I would be too tired to eat. I did find that a bit of cheese and a spoonful of honey helped one survive all day.

One of the best memories of my time in Parliament —

This was alluded to by Hon Alison Xamon —

happened the morning after I had made a plea for finance and strategy to combat breast cancer in women—a problem becoming ever more prevalent among our young women. Quite a number of men—members of both sides of the House and staff—came quietly to my office and thanked me for raising that issue. Among them was Hon John Tonkin, ex-Labor Premier, retired. All of these men had lost family members or close friends to this dreadful disease, but had hesitated to raise the issue in Parliament.

Perhaps the best memory from outside the Parliament was when a lady shire councillor proposing a toast to MPs in her area said, ‘Win Piesse has shown us that a woman can retain her femininity and still be very successful in public life. She does not have to adopt a masculine manner.’ I treasure that remark.

I think those comments and reflections by Hon Win Piesse tell us a little bit about what sort of a woman she was. She was exceptionally dedicated. She was dedicated to her family, her community, and the issues that were really close to her heart. She had a sense of humour and I think that we all know as members that we need to retain a sense of humour in the things that we do.

The funeral for Hon Win Piesse was held a couple of months ago. Her niece, Kate Walker, read the eulogy at her funeral, and Kate joins us today. For the public record and members, I would like to read to the house the eulogy that was presented at the funeral for Hon Win Piesse, because it really is a beautiful story. It is by Kate Walker. It reads —

Campaigning with Aunty Win

If you are lucky, in your family you will have that person who is your mentor, sounding board and ‘go-to’ person for when your parents are too close to the issue or you just need a sympathetic ear ... Aunty Win was this for me ever since I was a small child. The highlights of the year were holidays with her on the farm, so I didn’t need to think twice when she asked if I would like to be her driver and companion over the summer she was campaigning in the south west as a Country Party candidate for the Upper House. I was waiting for my first teaching appointment so it seemed an interesting way to fill the break until I had a job. My tasks would be to fill the thermos and make some sandwiches in the morning in case we were too far from anywhere at lunch time; to clean the windscreen and to drive. Navigation at times proved a two person task as some of the directions to the venues were cryptic to say the least!

We spent many hours together out on the road—travelling to meetings in remote little country halls, farm sheds and small towns all over the south-west ... in potato sheds, an asparagus farm, numerous shearing

sheds and knocking on front doors. As I drove she would be making notes or reading up on information in readiness for the next group of people she was to meet or speak to. Sometimes she would run an idea past me or ask what I thought about something she was reading. She would tell me background on our next stop or the people we were to be visiting. Afterwards she would ask me what people had been talking about or seemed most worried about.

Sometimes we just talked ... she told me stories of her childhood and tales of the family members I never had the chance to meet and some of those I only remember as old people. She was obviously extremely close to her Dad. She talked of when she first came to the West and of meeting Uncle Mervyn and the challenges of her early married life on the farm, with small children and being married to a returned POW. We shared a lot of laughs ... and even sang a bit on the long hauls.

I was impressed at the work she put into being prepared and trying to understand the people she was meeting. She was a good listener and always seemed to be genuinely interested in the issues and points of view they put to her. If she didn't know something she would make a note to follow it up or find out more about it. She was particularly concerned about women and children's health and children's education. We put in some very long days and visited some very out of the way places.

One evening meeting that sticks in my mind was at a little hall somewhere out the back of beyond, where she—and Mr Dick Old, then Leader of the Country Party, were to address a Party meeting. Mrs Old and I were delegated to the little lean-to kitchen in charge of supper. A lovely array of baked goods were brought by those attending the meeting ... including a fabulous cream filled sponge—not cut! We could not find a knife anywhere. Win often had a little kitchen knife in her bag for cutting up fruit ... but even that was not there on this occasion. However—she did have one of those large metal nail-files. Mrs Old and I gave it a good scrub with some detergent and steel wool we found under the sink and sterilized it with boiling water from the urn and it did an adequate job on the sponge. The sponge must have been enjoyed as there was none left at the end of the evening.

That was one of the best summers I can remember. Win taught me so much about so many different things—about people, places and society ... and how to make the most out of whatever came along. I was so proud when she was elected!

That was the eulogy read for Hon Win Piesse by her niece, Kate, who is in the gallery today. The National Party, or National Country Party at the time, was also very proud when she was elected. She had a fantastic career. She obviously contributed much to the Parliament and her electorate, which is something all members aspire to do. To her family who sit in the President's gallery today, you should be very proud of Win's accomplishments. Win will be forever remembered as a powerful advocate for regional WA, fiercely determined and a courageous individual. Win showed us all that women can be both strong leaders and successful in public life. I will end with a reference to one saying that she held dear and she made often: if you put your hand out and have a go, it's amazing what you can do. What a simple but powerful message.

HON COL HOLT (South West) [2.30 pm]: I want to add my support to the motion to acknowledge the passing of Hon Winifred Piesse and to give my sympathy and condolences to her family. I would also like to thank Win for her service to the National Country Party, to this state and this Parliament, and, just as importantly, to her region, her community and her family. As Hon Jacqui Boydell said, her family should be extremely proud of her contribution to this state. The National Party family are very proud of what she brought to our party and the contribution she made to the state. Her picture hangs in our party room. Any member who comes to the National Party room will see her picture hanging there as a symbol of the first woman in Parliament for the National Country Party. In my mind, she is much more than just a woman who made that first groundbreaking news—she is a true regional champion. We want regional champions. We want people who are champions for their family, their community and their regions, and we want to bring that passion to the state Parliament and to political parties. That is exactly what Hon Win Piesse did. With those few words I acknowledge the passing of Win Piesse and give my condolences to her family.

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Kate Doust): I also want to acknowledge the family of Winifred Piesse who are sitting in the President's gallery today, and to pass on my condolences on the loss of a very amazing woman. A lot has been said today about Winifred Piesse's achievements throughout her life. Many of us talk about balancing work and family life in our modern age. For each of those things, she had a substantial family whom she raised in the most part alone, ran a farm, had a nursing career, was active in local government, was engaged in party politics, was a member of Parliament, and then, in her post-parliamentary life, continued to be active as well. For a lot of people, any one of those activities, taken separately, can be life consuming. She was able to manage a number of those and juggle them at any one time and have a family as well, so I think she is a fantastic role model for all of us. Given the fact that she was the first woman for the National Country Party at the time, she was a very obvious trailblazer in this place. I pick up on the comments of Hon Jacqui Boydell and imagine what it could possibly have

Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Alison Xamon; Hon Jacqui Boydell; Hon Colin Holt; President

been like for her and those other couple of women who were here at the time. It was a very different place and probably a quite difficult place. Having heard about all the hard work she did with her family, the community and here in the Parliament, I think she would have felt quite comfortable in this place today, with more women being engaged and all of the issues that she was a champion for at the time—youth and children, women’s health and regional development—still being issues that we talk about a lot in this place. She would obviously have felt very comfortable with that. I want to acknowledge the great contribution she made raising a family, working in her community and being a member of this place. I think it is an outstanding role that she played for all of us and I pass on my condolences to her family.

I ask members to now rise and stand in your places to indicate your support for the motion, and to observe one minute’s silence in memory of the late Winifred Piesse, our esteemed former member of this Council.

Question passed; members and officers standing as a mark of respect.

The PRESIDENT: I advise that in accordance with our custom and practice, a copy of the *Hansard* transcript of this condolence motion will be forwarded to Winifred Piesse’s family.