

Gender and representation –

100 years since the first female, Edith Cowan, was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia.

How has gender and representation changed in your Parliament over the past 100 years?

In short by not enough. 114 Women have been elected to the WA Parliament in 100 years. In the first 50 years only 4 women were elected! In the first 70 years 23 women were elected. It took 80 years to have 50 women elected.

In truth, representation of women in the WA parliament has only changed significantly in the last 20 years. How has this impacted on representation of 'women's rights/issues' and what else does Parliament need to do to have true representation of women in all areas where decisions are made?

The beginning – The first 50 years

To move forward we need to acknowledge and remember what went before. Women have fought and died for the right to vote. For the right to have a say in theirs, their children's and their families lives. To be decision makers in their own communities. Women today are still fighting this fight.

Edith Cowan (12 March 1921-22 March 1924) was an extraordinary woman. Getting elected was an amazing feat especially during a time that women did not have many rights. She narrowly defeated the sitting member on the strength of the work she had done to improve the lot of women, children and the under-privileged. Her election made headlines around the country and rippled across the world.



Edith Cowan

Edith was not in Parliament for decoration nor to "interrupt the important affairs of parliament with a woman's 'housewifely instincts.'" She introduced and saw enacted the Women's Legal Status Act 1923, which enabled women to practice law. There was also the Administration Act Amendment Bill, State Children's Act Amendment Bill (1921) and her tireless advocacy on behalf of women & children.

The second woman elected to Parliament was **May Holman (3 April 1925-20 March 1939)**. Not only was May the first Australian Labor Candidate elected to the Western Australian Parliament but also the first female Labor MP elected in Australia. May had a long history of advocating for workers, in particular the Timber Workers' Union. Her inaugural speech paints a clear but dismal picture of the lives of these workers and their families, all the whilst the companies were making huge profits. Some things have most definitely not changed there. May was involved with the Labor Women's Organization, she was a long-time president of Perth Labor Women; president, then secretary of the Labor Women's Central Executive from its foundation in 1927; and president, from its inception in 1929, of the Labor Women's Interstate Executive. She established country women's branches and in 1935 made a successful interstate tour for the Labor Women's organizations. On the nomination of the Women's Service Guilds and the women's executive of the State branch of the Labor Party, she had been a substitute delegate to the League of Nations Assembly at Geneva in 1930. May spoke out in favour of equal citizenship rights for women. She supported raising the school leaving age to 16, child endowment, equal pay for men and women, and improving training



May Holman

and working conditions of female domestic servants. May won 4 elections and would have continued, alas she was killed in a car accident in 1939.

Edith and May were followed by **Florence Cardell-Oliver (15 February 1936 - 7 April 1956)**, A Liberal/Nationalist she had strong views which didn't so much as promote woman's issue but actively campaigned against them, for example she opposed free birth-control clinics but moved for the abolition of the death penalty. Florence should be remembered for two firsts. First woman to be suspended from any Australian Parliament and the First Woman to become a Minister of the Cabinet.

One of the women I truly admire is **Ruby Hutchison (22 May 1954 – 21 May 1971)**. First female member of Legislative Council. Ruby joined Labor Party when she was 16 years old. She was feisty, intelligent and persistent. By 1928 Ruby was a divorced woman raising 7 children on her own. She took in boarders and relied on dressmaking to ensure her children had a roof over their head and food to eat. Once her children were grown and independent Ruby re-married and went on to Business School and at UWA's Summer School where she studied public administration, public speaking, psychology and languages. Throughout her parliamentary career Ruby pursued a variety of causes, including the right of women to serve on juries, as well as child-welfare, education and housing issues. Ruby introduced a number of private member's bills for reforming the electoral system for the Upper House. Her most forceful rhetoric was directed at the property franchise for Council elections. In October 1962 she was the second woman member ever to be suspended from either House of the Western Australian parliament, after refusing to withdraw her remark that she was ashamed to be a member of such an undemocratic chamber.



Ruby had a strong social conscience and was an active community worker. She founded the Western Australia Epilepsy Association and was an active member of the Mental Health Association. As a woman who had fed and raised a family, she was acutely aware of the effect of price rises on family budgets, the effect of a poor quality product, and of the exploitation of ordinary workers by companies and industries, and she raised these issues in a number of speeches in the Legislative Council. Ruby Hutchison was the founder of the Australian Consumers' Association which is now known as CHOICE.

From 7 April 1956 – 21 May 1971 Ruby was the **ONLY** female Member of Parliament.

Living in the 70's

When **Lyla Elliot (22 May 1971 – 21 May 1986)** was elected in 1971, I'm sure she didn't imagine that she would be the only female Member of Parliament until 1974.

She was joined by 4 other women during the 70's. **Margaret Craig (30 March 1974 – 19 February 1983)**, **Grace Vaughan (22 May 1974 – 21 May 1980)**, **Margaret McAleer (22 May 1974 – 21 May 1993)**, **Winifred Piesse (22 May 1977 – 21 May 1983)**.

Grace Vaughn's parliamentary colleagues described her as 'Amazing Grace'. A politician whose activism was grounded in personal experience of poverty, she used the Liberal-dominated Legislative Council chamber as a forum for demonstrating how policy decisions of conservative governments adversely affected the lives of working men and women. Grace's campaign for the construction of a women's toilet off the main corridor of Parliament House met strong opposition. She carried out her threat to use the men's toilet, walking in on her main opponent at an inconvenient moment; soon afterwards a new well-located female toilet was installed.

50 Women Elected

It took 80 Years to reach 50 women being elected to WA Parliament. From 1983 – 2001, 30 women were elected.

During this period there were a number of firsts:

- **Kay Hallahan (22 May 1983 – 14 December 1996)** – First female MP to serve in both Legislative Assembly & Legislative Council. She was also the first female MP to hold a ministerial post in the LC.
- **Beryl Jones (22 May 1986 – 21 May 1993)** – First female to chair a Select Committee

- **Dr Carmen Lawrence** – (8 February 1986 – 14 February 1994) - In 1990 Dr Lawrence became the first and at this time the only (so far) female Premier of Western Australia

In the 90's Woman's Issues were front and centre. One issue that caused controversy and challenges was Abortion Law Reform. **Cheryl Davenport (22 May 1989 – 21 May 2001)** In 1998 during the 35th Parliament of WA, Cheryl was the architect and proponent of a Bill to amend the Criminal Code of West Australia as it relates to abortion. The Bill was introduced after charges were laid against two doctors for procuring an abortion. The charges precipitated a crisis in Western Australian women's access to abortion.

This wasn't the first time Cheryl had aired her thoughts on abortion law reform. During her Inaugural speech she stated: *"Today I want to speak about a matter which is of great concern to the women and men of Western Australia; that is, the question of abortion law reform. It is a subject about which I personally and many other West Australian men and women feel very strongly. Few other proposed reforms in our social laws have the power to engender so much passion and emotion from the community, church and political parties. I realise that some of my parliamentary colleagues on both sides of the House may have a different Cheryl Davenport view on abortion from mine. I respect their right to have their personal views on the subject, but I want to outline today the reason I think it is extremely necessary to reform the law as a matter of justice and equality for women."* **Cheryl Davenport, extract from first speech, Parliament of Western Australia, 1989**



Cheryl Davenport

It took over 100 hours of debate in the committee stage and a number of amendments to get this bill passed. This bill passed in a Parliament that had 22% representation by Women. In a Legislative Council that had 7 female members. A remarkable feat of determination by Hon Cheryl Davenport and her supporters.

The Last 20 years



2017 Elected Women WA Parliament

Last century there were 39 women elected to the Parliament of Western Australia, this century we have so far had 75 women elected to the Western Australian Parliament. It's a start.

At the 2021 State Election there were 21 women newly elected to Parliament. They joined the 22 women who were re-elected. There are today more women in the Western Australian Parliament than there were elected in the whole of the last century.

In 2021 there has been some historical firsts that should be acknowledge:

- ◇ **Caitlin Collins (ALP) became the 100th woman to be elected to the WA Parliament**
- ◇ Hannah Beazley (ALP), Lara Dalton (ALP), Kim Giddens (ALP), Meredith Hammat (ALP), Jodie Hanns (ALP), Jane Kelsbie (ALP), Ali Kent (ALP), Lisa Munday (ALP), Rebecca Stephens (ALP), Katrina Stratton (ALP), Christine Tonkin (ALP) were also elected to the Legislative Assembly
- ◇ **Michelle Roberts (ALP) was elected the first female Speaker of the Legislative Assembly**
- ◇ Divina D'Anna (ALP) became the second Indigenous woman elected as a member for the Kimberley
- ◇ **Mia Davies (Nat) became the first Leader of the Opposition from the National Party**, since Arthur Frederick Watts in 1947, when she was appointed to the position on 14 April 2021.
- ◇ **Ayor Makur Chuot (ALP) became the first member born in Ethiopia and the first South Sudanese person when elected to the Legislative Council**
- ◇ Klara Andric (ALP) became the first member born in Serbia when elected to the Legislative Council. She is also the first Serbian born woman MP in an Australian parliament.

- ◇ Rosetta (Rosie) Sahanna became the first Indigenous MLC when elected to the Legislative Council
- ◇ Sophia Moermond became the first member of the Legalise Cannabis Western Australia Party when elected to the Legislative Council
- ◇ Sandra Carr (ALP), Lorna Harper (ALP) Jackie Jarvis (ALP), Shelley Payne (ALP) were also elected to the
- ◇ Alanna Clohesy MLC became the second female President of the Legislative Council when she was elected to the role on 25 May 2021.
- ◇ Sue Ellery MLC became the Mother of the House in the Legislative Council in Western Australia after the new term began on 22 May 2021

Decision makers

So, in WA we have 43 female Members of Parliament. 45% representation working towards 50. We have 5 female Ministers out of 17 (29%).

Federally we have 47 out of 151 members in the House of Representatives (31%) and 42 out of 75 members in the Senate (56%). In the Ministry there are 8 Ministers who are female out of 35 (23%).

The population of Australia according to the World Bank in 2020 was over 25 million with 50.2% being female, yet if we look at Parliament, we are under-represented in places where decisions are made.

I asked women from different age groups and cultural backgrounds what they would like to see be achieved when it comes to “woman’s issues”. The overwhelming response was equal pay.

Currently, Australia’s national gender pay gap is 14.2%.

As at May 2021, women’s average weekly ordinary fulltime earnings across all industries and occupations was \$1,575.00 compared to men’s average weekly ordinary fulltime earnings of \$1,837.00. This means that on average, women earn \$261.50 less than men.

The full-time total earnings gender pay gap, which includes overtime payments is 16.8%. This means women’s average weekly total full-time earnings are \$323.30 less per week compared to men.

Adding the part-time workforce, the total earnings gender pay gap for all employees widens to 31.3%. This means women’s average weekly total earnings are \$486.20 less per week than men.

In 2021 we are still discussing Equal Pay, not only that, it is forefront in the minds of women of all ages and cultural backgrounds.

In 1972 the ACAC ruling on the National Wage and Equal Pay cases:

The principle of ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ will be applied to all awards of the Commission. By ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ we mean the fixation of award wage rates by a consideration of the work performed irrespective of the sex of the worker.

In 2021 we know that this is not happening. If we look at Early Childhood Education & Care, where over 90% of employees are female, the wage for a Cert III qualified educator is over \$3 per hours less than a person with a Cert III in Bricklaying or Construction. Same level of qualification, huge discrepancy in pay. There is no equal value here.



Other areas mentioned have been a

- review of the Health Act regarding Abortion.
- Access to Abortion services at Public Hospitals -
- Access to Free sanitary Products – Similar to the Scottish Model
- Universal access to Early Childhood Education
- Violence against women
- Superannuation -
- Maternity & paternity leave – paid
- Homelessness
- Reduction in access to Pap smears – Medicare changes
- Accessibility to further education for regional, CALD & financial impacts of this

If the Hon Cheryl Davenport can achieve reform to the Criminal Code of West Australia as it relates to abortion with 7 out of 35 members (20%) in the Legislative Council and 13 out of 57 (23%), think what we can achieve with 41% in the Council and 47% in the Assembly.

We as Parliamentarians have the opportunity to continue the path of Edith, Ruby, Grace and Cheryl. We as women need to stop being so polite and use our voice to make the changes.

Let's be decision makers.



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