



# WA Women Firsts

## Edith Cowan: First Woman MP in Australia

Edith Cowan was the first woman parliamentarian in Australia. She was also the first woman to be elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. Cowan was elected on 12 March 1921 to represent the West Perth electorate as a Nationalist. The historical moment is only fleetingly mentioned in the opening of parliament article in the *West Australian*, 28 July 1921: *“Not a little interest attaches to the opening of Parliament today is that a woman member for the first time on the history of Australian legislature, will take a seat.”* Cowan was also one of the first women to be elected to a parliament in the British Empire. She contested her West Perth seat at the election on 22 March 1924 but she was unsuccessful. She also contested the seat at the 26 March 1927 election.

Edith Dircksey Cowan was born on 2 August 1861 at Glengarry near Geraldton in Western Australia. She was born to pastoralist, Kenneth Brown and Mary Wittenoom, a teacher. She was educated at Misses Cowan’s school in Perth. In 1879, she married James Cowan at St George’s Cathedral in Perth and they had five children. Cowan became very active in volunteer work and received an OBE in 1939 for her war work in migrant welfare, infant health centres and women’s rights.



*Edith Cowan, c.1880s*  
Photograph: courtesy Royal Western  
Australian Historical Society.

*“I should remind hon. members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home.”*

Mrs Cowan

Inaugural Speech

Hansard

28 July 1921



*Carmen Lawrence*  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection

## First Woman Premier in Australia

Dr Carmen Lawrence (ALP) became Australia's first female premier on 12 February 1990. In 1986 she was elected as the Australian Labor Party's Member for Subiaco and in 1989 as the Member for Glendalough. She was premier until 1993 when the ALP was defeated in the state election. Following the election defeat Lawrence became Western Australia's first female Leader of the Opposition. Lawrence was Leader until she resigned in February 1994. She was elected to the seat of Fremantle for the Australian House of Representatives

at a by-election on 12 March 1994. Lawrence was the first woman to serve in both parliaments.

Carmen Mary Lawrence was born on 2 March 1948 into a farming family in Northam. She was educated at Catholic schools in Dongara, Morawa and Attadale. She graduated with a Bachelor of Psychology with first class honours in 1968. The following year she worked as a research assistant. She then worked as a tutor, lecturer and research psychologist at various universities and the Department of Health.

*"As a member of Parliament I am particularly sensible of my obligation to give voice to and further the aspirations of all citizens, regardless of their status, wealth, sex, race, creed or disability."*

Dr Lawrence (Subiaco), Inaugural speech, Hansard, 10 June 1986

## First LOOP

Carmen Lawrence (ALP) became Western Australia's first female Leader of the Opposition on 16 February 1993 after the ALP's defeat at the state election. Previously she had been Premier, Treasurer and Minister for Employment. She served as Leader until resigning in February 1994 until her election as the federal Member for Fremantle on 12 March 1994.



*Dr Carmen Lawrence, first woman Premier of Western Australia*

By Evan Collis, 1990

## First Female Cabinet Minister

Florence Cardell-Oliver (Nationalist) became Australia's first female cabinet minister on 7 October 1949 when she became the Minister for Health, Supply and Shipping. Previously she had been an honorary minister.

## First Female Independent Minister

Dr Elizabeth Constable (Ind) was the first female Independent Member to be a Cabinet Minister. She was responsible for Education, Tourism and Women's Interests in the 2008 Barnett Liberal minority Government.

## First Female Labor Ministers

Kay Hallahan (ALP) and Pam Beggs (ALP) share the honour of being the first Labor women selected for cabinet positions on 26 February 1986.

## First Female Attorney-General

When Cheryl Edwardes (Lib), Member for Kingsley, was appointed Attorney-General on 8 March 1993, she became the first woman to hold the position in Western Australia and Australia.

## First Female Deputy Speaker

Dianne Guise (ALP) was the first woman to be elected deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly which she held from 1 May 2001 to 7 August 2008.

## First Female Sports Minister

Mia Davies (Nat), Member for the Central Wheatbelt was the first female sports minister in the Parliament of Western Australia. She was appointed on 8 December 2014 after Terry Waldron's resignation from the position.

## First Female Select Committee Chair in LA

On the 15 November 1988, Judyth Watson (ALP) became the first female to chair a Select Committee (Reproductive Technology Working Party's Report) in the Legislative Assembly.

## First Female Select Committee Chair in LC

Beryl Jones (ALP) was the first woman to chair a Select Committee in either house of Parliament in Western Australia. She chaired the Legislative Council's Select Committee into Charitable Collections from 28 April 1987.

## First Female Standing Committee Chair

When Dr Christine (Chrissy) Sharp (GWA) was selected to chair the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development on 26 June 1997, she became the first woman to chair a Standing Committee in the Western Australian Parliament.

## First Female Liberal LOOP

Liza Harvey (Lib) on 13 June 2019 became the first female to hold the position of Liberal Leader of the Opposition.

## First Female LC Deputy Leader

Kay Hallahan (ALP) on 16 March 1987 became the first female to hold the position of Deputy Leader of a party in the Legislative Council.

## First Female Deputy Leader

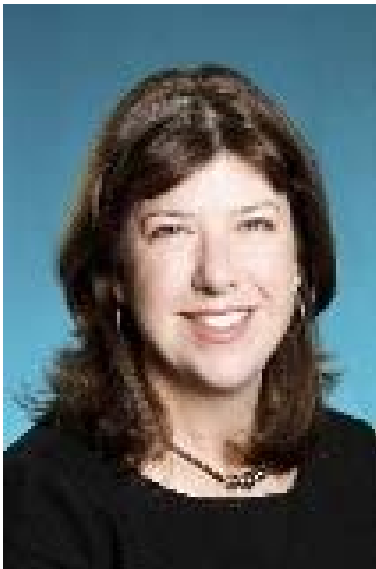
On 7 February 1994 Kay Hallahan (ALP) again made history when she became the first female to hold the position of Deputy Leader of the State Parliamentary Opposition.

## First Female President of the National Party

Wendy Duncan (Nat) was the first female to be elected President of the National Party of Western Australia from 2004 to 2009. She was first elected to the Legislative Council on 29 January 2008 for the Agricultural Region.

## First Independent Woman

When Dr Elizabeth Constable (Ind) won the by-election for Floreat on 20 July 1991 she became the first female to be elected without party endorsement to the Parliament of Western Australia. Constable did not contest the state general election on 9 March 2013. She was also the longest serving woman MP in Western Australia.



Adele Carles  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection

## Red Ruby: First MLC

Ruby Hutchison (ALP) was the first female Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council. Hutchison was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council on 8 May 1954 and began her term on 22 May 1954. She represented the Suburban Province. She was the first woman elected to an Australian Legislative Council. During her seventeen years she was the only woman MP in the chamber.

*Ruby Hutchison*  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection



## Sharp and Watson: First Women Greens

Giz Watson (GWA) and Christine Sharp (GWA) were Western Australia's first female members of parliament to represent the Greens. They were elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council for terms commencing 22 May 1997. Christine Sharp represented the South West Metropolitan and Giz Watson represented the North Metropolitan region. Sharp was also the first woman to chair a standing committee in the Parliament of Western Australia. She retired on 21 May 2005. Watson was defeated at the 9 March 2013 election.

## Green Power in the Lower House

Adele Carles (GWA) made history on 16 May 2009 when she was elected as the Member for Fremantle at the by-election after the retirement of Jim McGinty (ALP). It was the first time a lower house seat had been won by the Greens WA. Carles' election was also the first time that the Greens WA were given party status due to five elected members in the parliament. On 8 May 2010 Adele Carles quit Greens WA to

become an Independent Green. Adele Simone Carles was born in Kalgoorlie, WA on 19 February 1968 to New Zealand-born parents. They returned to New Zealand in 1975. She was educated at Birkdale College, Auckland. In 1985 she returned to Western Australia and studied law at Murdoch University. She first contested the seat of Fremantle as a Coastal Independent on 26 February 2005.

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*"Fremantle people chose a community voice this time – one that will not sell out to big corporations and one that has the very essence of Fremantle at heart."*

Ms AS Carles (Fremantle), Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 9 June 2009

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*May Holman, 1930.*

Photograph was published in the *Truth*, 16 March 1930

State Library 049175PD

## First Labor Woman

May Holman (ALP) was the first female MP to represent the ALP in WA and Australia. She was elected for the seat of Forrest to the WA Parliament at a by-election on 3 April 1925. Holman's father had held the seat until his death. She represented the Forrest Division until her own tragic death in a car accident on 20 March 1939 when she had just been re-elected for a fifth term. Holman was heavily involved in the Labor movement including president and secretary of the Labor Women's Central Executive from 1927 to 1939. She was also president of Perth Labor Women and secretary for the Parliamentary Labor Party from 1933 until 1939.

## First Liberal Woman

Margaret McAleer (Lib) was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council for a term commencing 22 May 1974. She was one of two members to represent the Upper West Province. From 1989 to 1993 she represented the Agricultural Region. McAleer became Government Whip in 1980 and continued in the role of Opposition Whip until her retirement in 1993. She was also Shadow Minister assisting with Women's Interests from 1990 to 1992.



*Margaret McAleer*

Photograph from the Parliament of WA collection

## First Democrat Woman

Helen Hodgson (Dem) was the first woman to be elected from the Democrats Party. She was elected to the Legislative Council representing the North Metropolitan Region for a term commencing 22 May 1997. She was the first female parliamentary leader of the Democrats.

## First Nationals Woman MLC

Winifred Piesse (NCP) was the first female Member of the Parliament of Western Australia to represent the National Party (or National Country Party). She was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council for a term commencing 22 May 1977. She represented the Lower Central Province.

## First Nationals Woman MLA

Dr Hilda Turnbull (Nat) was the first woman to represent the National Party in the Legislative Assembly. She was elected to the seat of Collie on 4 February 1989.



Carol Martin  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection

## First Indigenous Female MP

Carol Martin (ALP) was elected to the Parliament of Western Australia on 10 February 2001 in succession to the Hon Ernie Bridge. She made history by becoming the first Indigenous female member of the Parliament of Western Australia and any Australian parliament. She represented the Kimberley electorate and was re-elected in 2005 and 2007 but retired in 2013. Martin was Chair of the Standing Committee on Education and Health from 2001 to 2005. Carol Anne Martin was born in Subiaco, WA on 31 October 1957, the daughter of Bernard Pilkington and Rosemary Ogilvie. She went to various state schools in the Perth metropolitan area. In 1993 she graduated from Curtin University with a Bachelor of Social Work. In the same year she joined the Australian Labor Party. Following university she worked with several organisations in the Kimberley as a counsellor, consultant and trainer.

*"I am more proud than I ever thought possible to be the first Aboriginal woman elected to Parliament in Australia."*

Ms Carol Martin MLA , (Member for Kimberley),  
Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 10 June 1997

## First Female MP Born in a Non- English Speaking Country

Ljiljana Ravlich (ALP) was the first female Member of Western Australian Parliament born in a non-English speaking country. She was born in Split, Croatia on 9 January 1958. She was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council for a term commencing 22 May 1997 representing the East Metropolitan Region. She resigned from parliament on 21 May 2015.

## First Female MP in both Parliaments

Carmen Lawrence (ALP) was first elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1986 as the Member for Subiaco and in 1989 as the Member for Glendalough. On 12 March 1994, she was elected to the House of Representatives, representing the federal seat of Fremantle. She was the first woman and the third West Australian, after Lord John Forrest and the Hon Joe Berinson to serve in both a state and federal parliament.

## First Female to be Elected to the Australian Senate and WA Legislative Council

Diane (Dee) Margetts (GWA) was the first female Member to be elected to both the Australian Senate, (for the Greens on 1 July 1993 until defeated at the general election in 1998, (term expired 30 June 1999) and the Legislative Council of Western Australia on 10 February 2001 for a term commencing 22 May 2001. She lost the 26 February 2005 state election and her term concluded 21 May 2005.

## First Female in Both Houses

Kay Hallahan (ALP) was the first female Member of the Parliament of Western Australia to serve in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. She was first elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council for a term commencing 22 May 1983, representing the South East Metropolitan Region. She was later elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly representing the Armadale electorate.

## Youngest Woman MLA

Jaye Radisich (ALP) was the youngest woman ever elected to the Parliament of Western Australia. When she was elected to the Legislative Assembly, 10 February 2001, as the Member for Swan Hills, she was only 24 years old. Jaye Radisich was born in Middle Swan, Western Australia on 29 March 1976. She was the daughter of Jeffrey Radisich, a public servant and Dorothy Rakich. Radisich was educated at Herne Hill, Mt Lawley and Coolbinia primary schools and Mt Lawley Senior High School. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and a law degree from the University of Western Australia. Before entering parliament, Radisich had a variety of jobs including research officer for MP Ted Cunningham. Jaye Radisich retired from parliament on 6 September 2008. Tragically she died of cancer on 17 March 2012, aged 35 years.

*"I believe in creating a more just and equitable society that will give everyone a chance to achieve their dreams".*

Ms Radisich (Swan Hills), Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 3 May 2001



Jaye Radisich  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection

## Youngest Woman MLC

Louise Pratt (ALP) was the youngest female elected to the Legislative Council. She was elected to the East Metropolitan Region on 10 February 2001 (for a term commencing 22 May 2001) and 26 February 2005 (for a term commencing 22 May 2005). She resigned on 29 October 2007 to contest the 24 November 2007 federal election and was elected to the Australian Senate representing Western Australia.

## Youngest Woman Minister in WA Parliament

Donna Evelyn Mary Faragher (Lib), Member for East Metropolitan became the youngest female minister when she was appointed Minister for the Environment and Minister for Youth on 23 September 2008. She was 33 years old.

## First Ten Years of Service by a Woman

May Holman (ALP) was the first female Australian Member of Parliament to hold a parliamentary seat for ten years. She was elected on 3 April 1925 for the seat of Forrest which she held until her untimely death in 1939. She was also the first female in the British Empire to sit in parliament for ten years.

## First Wife and Husband in Australia

Ruby Hutchison (ALP) was Australia's first woman member of parliament to serve concurrently with her husband when she married the Hon Frederick Richard Hugh Lavery MLC on 14 May 1966. She was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council representing the Suburban Province for a term commencing 22 May 1954. In 1965 she was elected for the North-East Metropolitan Province.

## First Baby in the House

In 1988 Yvonne Henderson (ALP) became the first woman in WA to give birth while serving as a minister. She held various ministerial responsibilities from 1988 to 1993. Henderson was the MLA for Gosnells from 1983 to 1989. When the electorate was abolished in a redistribution she won the seat of Thornlie on 4 February, 1989.

## Doctors of Philosophy

Dr Carmen Lawrence and Dr Judyth Watson (ALP) share the distinction of being the first women elected to the Western Australian Parliament with a Doctorate of Philosophy. They wrote their theses in the psychology and anthropology departments at the University of Western Australia.



Giz Watson  
Photograph from the  
Parliament of WA collection

## Cardell-Oliver: “Disgrace to the Assembly”

In December 1941, the Nationalist, Florence Cardell-Oliver was the first woman MP in Australia to be suspended from the ‘service of the house’ when she commented on a fellow party member’s speech as a ‘disgrace to the assembly’. She refused all requests to withdraw her remark. Despite Cardell-Oliver’s outspokenness, on 7 October 1949 she became Australia’s first female minister. She was responsible for Health, Supply and Shipping. Cardell-Oliver was elected on the 15 February 1936 in the seat of Subiaco. She became one of the longest serving women parliamentarians in WA. In September 1934 she unsuccessfully contested the federal seat of Fremantle.

## First Openly Lesbian Member of Parliament

Giz Watson (GWA) was elected to the Legislative Council representing the North Metropolitan region for a term which commenced on 22 May 1997. In her inaugural speech Watson talked about her commitment to represent the lesbian and gay community as the first openly declared lesbian parliamentarian in Australia. During her parliamentary term she was a member of numerous standing and select committees including Chair of the Select Committee on the Department of Education and Training.

Giz Watson was born on 18 January 1957 in Eastleigh, Hampshire, UK, the daughter of David Watson, a doctor and Ruth Town-Jones, a nurse. The family emigrated to Australia in September 1967. Watson was educated in England as well as Penrhos College in Como, WA. She graduated from Murdoch University with a degree in environmental science in 1981. From 1985 to 1993 Watson was a self employed builder and after 1993 she worked as an environmental consultant.

*“Diversity is a natural expression of life and that diversity includes equity within the law and an end to discrimination for the gay and lesbian community, of which I am a proud member.”*

Hon Giz Watson (North Metropolitan),  
Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 10 June 1997



## Abbreviations

|     |                        |
|-----|------------------------|
| ALP | Australian Labor Party |
| Dem | Democrats              |
| GWA | GreensWA               |
| Ind | Independent            |
| Lib | Liberal Party          |

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