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History Notes: Women's Firsts Portraits—Florence Cardell-Oliver
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Women's Firsts Portraits: Florence Cardell-Oliver



Florence Cardell-Oliver
Photograph: Parliament of Western Australia



Florence Cardell-Oliver

Dame Annie Florence Cardell-Oliver became Australia's first woman minister on 7 October 1949. At 70 years old, she was also the oldest person to be appointed to cabinet. She was responsible for Health, Supply and Shipping. Cardell-Oliver was elected on 15 February 1936 to the seat of Subiaco in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, as a Nationalist member. She defeated two other endorsed Nationalists and the Labor sitting member on preferences. She held the seat until 7 April 1956 becoming one of the longest serving women parliamentarians in WA. At first, Cardell-Oliver was a Nationalist, which included the role of vice-president in the 1930s, and then she joined the Liberal and Country League, later renamed the Liberal Party. In September 1934, John Curtin defeated her for the seat of Fremantle in the House of Representatives.

Dame Annie was a 'tall woman of imposing appearance' who wore 'long flowing gowns' and feather or flower trimmed hats. She was 'an outspoken and often controversial' member with views frequently different to her party. Her inaugural speech attacked the Government's balancing of the budget and argued for providing milk to 'under-nourished' children from poor families. The future Labor Premier, John Tonkin described her speech as 'provocative'. She successfully introduced a bill to amend the Child Welfare Act that required parents of a ward of the state to be notified before the child was released. In 1939, she organised a campaign to oppose the establishment of free birth-control clinics. In September 1941, she introduced a Death Penalty Abolition Bill, in opposition to her party, but it did not pass. During a debate on starting-price betting on 10 December 1941, she was the first woman to be suspended from an Australian parliament for refusing to withdraw a comment, ruled as 'unparliamentary'. Due to witnessing malnourished children in London, she introduced a free milk scheme for schoolchildren and compulsory chest examinations to fight tuberculosis. On 1 April 1947, she was appointed an Honorary Minister without portfolio in the McLarty-Watts Government and the following year she became the Honorary Minister for Supply and Shipping. Finally, in 1949 she achieved 'full cabinet rank' as the Minister for Health, Supply and Shipping. In her final Address-in-Reply speech, she spoke of the continued existence of 'houses of ill-repute' on Roe Street (now Northbridge) and Labor's decision to legalise betting shops. She retired from politics in 1956.

Annie Florence Gillies Wilson was born on the 11 May 1876 at Stawell, Victoria to Johnston Wilson, an Irish born storekeeper, and Annie Wilson, nee Thompson, from Scotland. She married David Boyd, a wool buyer, in Melbourne on 26 January 1895. Circa 1902, she worked with Salvation Army in the East End of London. Boyd died from an accidental overdose of opium based sleeping tonic in York, England on 5 November 1902. Dame Annie remarried a month later to Arthur Cardell-Oliver, a medical practitioner in Poplar, London. Ten years later, she returned to Australia with her husband, who worked as a doctor in York, WA, where their second child was born. In 1914, they moved to Albany and her husband enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force. During the war, Dame Annie was President of the Women's National Movement and she was active in the Women's Service Guild, including as President of the Albany branch, 1916 and later the Perth branch. After the war, she lived with her husband in Stratford, Victoria until his retirement due to ill health in 1924. They returned to England but she was widowed in 1929, whilst living in Cornwall. Dame Annie returned to WA and had extensive trips to Europe and the Middle East. In 1935, she was the women's delegate to the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage in Istanbul, as well as delegate to the British Commonwealth League, London. In 1951, she was appointed a Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE). She died at the Home of Peace, Subiaco, Western Australia on 12 January 1965 and is buried beside her second husband in St Columb Minor churchyard, Cornwall, England.

Bibliography

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