



**MAKING A DIFFERENCE—A FRONTIER
OF FIRSTS**

**WOMEN IN THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN
PARLIAMENT 1921–2012**

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GIZ WATSON



MLC North Metropolitan Region from 22 May 1997 (GWA). Member Standing Committee on Legislation 1997–2009; Parliamentary Services Committee 1999–2002. Chair Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations from 2005; Select Committee on the Department of Education and Training 2006. Member six other select committees 1997–2009.

First elected in 1996 and taking her seat in May 1997 Giz Watson has since been re-elected three times as the Greens (WA) member for North Metropolitan Region. In September 2008 she won her fourth term for the seat polling 12.19 per cent of the primary count or about two per cent short of a quota in her own right.

Born Elizabeth Mary Watson in Eastleigh in Hampshire in the United Kingdom on 18 January 1957 Giz, the daughter of a medical practitioner, commenced her education in England but after migrating to Western Australia in September 1967 she completed her school education at Mandurah and South Perth Primary Schools and then at Penrhos College. Giz graduated from Murdoch University in 1981 with a degree in environmental science, but from 1985 to 1993 she worked as a self-employed builder, obtaining her builder's registration in 1992 before turning to environmental consultancy from 1993 with a particular concern in seeking to ensure the long-term future of the coastline and surrounding oceans. Three years earlier she had joined the newly formed Greens (WA) party and over the years until 1997 worked as convenor and co-convenor of the party.

Speaking for the first time in the Legislative Council on 10 June 1997 she told the Legislative Council that:

... on coming to Western Australia with my family in 1967, I immediately fell in love—with the bush ... It is by far the most magnificent country I have ever had the opportunity to visit—extraordinary in its landscape, breathtaking in its beauty, and blessed in its diversity of life. I am consistently inspired and sustained by this country.¹

¹ WAPD(LC), 10 June 1997, p. 3534.

She contrasted the ‘revolution’ towards which she was working with economic rationalism which she believed amounted to ‘ecological suicide’.²

In the course of her Inaugural Speech she also spoke of the implications of her position as Australia’s first lesbian parliamentarian:

... Greens value diversity over conformity. 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. The ... amendments [proposed by Liberal Attorney General Peter Foss] must be repealed as they sanction discrimination in housing, in education and in the provision of services to gays and lesbians.³

Similarly, in a subsequent debate she affirmed:

The importance of my being visible as a lesbian has nothing to do with political posturing. Indeed, my preference would be to keep my private life private. However, being identified as a lesbian is important to break down fears and homophobia, and to challenge misinformation and negative stereotypes. Most importantly my openness can give courage to others to become more open and have their home lives acknowledged by their friends and colleagues.⁴

During her first term in Parliament she served on one standing committee (on Legislation) and two select committees both of which dealt with issues pertaining to native title. In the course of debate on the Government’s Bill to set up the Native Title Commission, she argued for giving Aboriginal People a ‘foot in the door’ so that they could negotiate on a ‘legal footing with a European System which has left them with very little’.⁵

During the ten years plus since the commencement of Giz’s second term in May 2001, she has seen the Greens’ strength wax and wane. The key period undoubtedly was when the Greens held the effective balance of power with the ALP between 2001 and 2005 enabling inter alia the major changes to the electoral system during the interim period between the February 2005 election and the May 22 turnover of Legislative Council members. Over these years Giz became an increasingly significant figure and, in fact, for a time in 2008 and 2009 served officially as party leader when the party had official party status. Moreover, a study of the parliamentary record suggests that her contribution to the Parliament in terms of committee work has been substantial and probably second to none. As from 2001 she was deputy chair of the Legislation Committee, of which she had been a member since 1997, and remained until 2009. Her other standing committee work included membership of the Parliamentary Services Committee from 1999 to 2002 and chair of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations Committee from 2005. Between 2003 and the 2012 she also served on five select committees covering areas such as the Department of Education and Training (which committee she chaired), advocacy for children, adequacy of foster care assessment procedures by the Department for Community Development, the police raid on the *Sunday Times*; and the appropriateness of powers and penalties for breaches of parliamentary privilege and contempts of Parliament.

² Ibid, p. 3535.

³ Ibid., p. 3537.

⁴ WAPD(LC), 19 November 1997, p. 8124

⁵ WAPD(LC), 22 December 1998, p. 5444.

Over the years a perusal of the pages of *Hansard* and extensive indexes suggest that Giz has been one of the most prolific contributors to parliamentary debates on either side of either House. The index provides references to questions she has asked, petitions she has presented, the tabling of parliamentary committee reports (especially given that she has served on so many committees and has chaired and been deputy chair of several standing and select committees), plus her participation in the debate on a considerable range of Bills. To outline in a limited space the range of interests and issues she has covered over the years would be well nigh impossible, but it is worth drawing attention, for example, to the 50-minute speech she gave in October 2010 on the Prohibited Behaviours Orders Bill.⁶ What was particularly remarkable was the amount of research she undertook in preparing the speech with assistance from the Parliamentary Library, the Criminal Lawyers' Association, the Youth Affairs Council of WA and the Aboriginal Legal Service. During the speech she traversed the experience with similar legislation in a number of jurisdictions in Australia and overseas, and outlined with great clarity a range of objections to the Government's original draft proposals and then the responses. Her conclusions were also succinct and focused. The central problem she argued was the need to identify and case manage young people who offend repeatedly in order to deal with the mental health, substance abuse and other problems associated with their offending. In this regard, she welcomed the decision that the legislation would only apply to those aged 16 and above rather than 14 and above, but asserted that she was simply not satisfied that the Bill would reduce crime nor on the other side of the ledger that the 'existing legislative mechanisms and other things aimed at addressing the problems' were in fact inadequate. Instead she clearly placed much of the blame on the so-called 'bidding wars about law and order' asserting that it was incumbent on the major political parties 'to set policy directions so that when they come into government their policies are consistent with the position that they took when in opposition'. She concluded her thoughtful and detailed review of the legislation welcoming the review clause on the Bill while standing firm with the Green's overall stance:

The most likely consequence of naming and shaming young people in particular is that it will permanently stigmatise them'.⁷

The contribution Giz made to this debate is typical of her firmly principled, yet detailed, style of argument with a preparedness to seek changes in detail while not abandoning an underlying objection to the principles involved. Thus her last words following her detailed submission were quite simply, 'We will strenuously oppose this bill'. Similarly, in August 2009 when speaking on the Criminal Code Amendment Bill 2008, designed to provide for mandatory sentencing for offences committed against public officers, she made it clear from the outset that the Greens were 'fundamentally opposed to mandatory prison sentences'⁸ but then proceeded to speak for the allotted hour making as the touchstone of her approach the view that 'material published on mandatory minimum sentencing is remarkable for its consensus on the fact that it has negative social impacts'.⁹ In this context she quoted at length from the 2001 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers citing evidence that mandatory sentencing 'in practice' imposes most on Indigenous and minority groups. Reducing assaults on police, for example, she argued should be based on social strategies devised in response to the fact that the type of offenders targeted by the Bill tended

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 21 October 2010, pp. 8138–8146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8146.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 18 August 2009, p. 6016.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6016–6026.

to fit into certain situations with many of the assailants, for example, having ‘had little contact with their fathers’ or coming ‘from homes where violence was used to resolve disputes’.¹⁰

In summary, Giz has been a remarkably active member from the day she first entered the Legislative Council. In committee work, in debates on the floor and in the active strategic planning session required of a ‘balance of power’ party, Giz has always been to the forefront and the research and planning she put into the scrutiny of legislation in no way abated in the years since the 2009 changeover of members that left the Greens without the numbers for a strictly defined balance of power. Having completed four terms as a member for the North Metropolitan Region in 2012, Giz decided to seek and subsequently secured preselection for a south west seat in the 2013 election, the region she intended to make her home.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

The experience of almost two years in the Legislative Council for me has been one of attempting to bring a change in the processes and fundamental culture of Parliament, as well as the more obvious task of proposing and amending legislation. I will compare my original intentions on becoming a member of Parliament with the realities of the job.

In my Inaugural Speech I made the following comments:

I look forward to working towards a Green vision—a vision for a revolution in attitude, a revolution in practices, and a revolution in ethics.¹¹

The revolution in attitude I referred to is explained in the following terms:

A Green revolution seeks ... to establish a model where the highest care and consideration is given to sustaining the planet, and paramount importance is placed on the wellbeing of all members of our society.¹²

I went on to say:

Another revolution in practise is the involvement and empowerment of the community to participate in decision making. First and foremost green politics is grassroots politics. We seek to decentralise power and maximise the freedom and self-determination of individuals and communities. We seek to involve the community in all decisions that affect them and draw on their knowledge and experience to guide our policies.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6023.

¹¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 10 June 1997, p. 3537.

¹² Ibid., p. 3535.

¹³ Ibid., p. 3536.

As to a revolution in ethics:

There is a pressing need to revolutionise our values and create an ethic that values restraint over consumption, the collective good over individual self-interest and [diversity] over uniformity.¹⁴

I concluded by saying:

My personal commitment is to stand firm on matters of principle and work in a spirit of cooperation and openness.¹⁵

It is my experience these aspirations are not only shared by people with a green philosophy, but also by many women.

With respect to my experience of working with fellow parliamentarians, I have found that the raising of an issue, engaging in sharing of information and looking for consensus has resulted in political competitors simply taking those ideas and claiming them as their own. That has been an eye-opener for me in coming from a non-government organisation into politics. Before this, my experience had been the free exchange of information and working together for a common outcome, but in politics the reality is, by and large, one of selective use and limited sharing of information. There is a level of mistrust and playing for advantage before playing for the outcome. I see this as a major impediment to working openly and achieving a consensus. Therefore, the opportunities for cooperative working have been much fewer, but I am still pursuing this objective.

My idea of the Legislative Council was that the combined opposition parties would be able to work more constructively and I feel that, over the times when we have worked together, we have managed to develop better working relations. For example, the debate on the native title Bills, which were obviously critical Bills, was very pleasing in that, in the main, they were not used as political footballs between the opposition parties.

Trying to introduce a cooperative, consensus style of decision-making process is, as I understand now, an unusual approach in politics. It requires trust and confidence but it means you can develop a solution that is a win for all involved. It is not always going to be the case that solutions can be reached, but often when the opposition parties combine our strengths, we are more effective than when operating in a competitive environment.

The committee work of the Legislative Council provides a more satisfying opportunity to examine legislation in depth and discuss the impacts and possible shortcomings of legislation in a cooperative forum. It is, however, sometimes disappointing when detailed committee work and a unified response from the committee is given little attention in debate and the final vote in the House. I am referring in particular here to the reports of the Select Committee on Native Title and the Weapons Bill. However, I will continue to strive for an open and cooperative approach combined with an objective mind and, wherever possible, respect for the views of my opponents.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 3537.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 3538.

The other big challenge has been to deal with a feeling of being in a dominant culture that does not share my perspective on many matters. This is exemplified where members believe that the environment is dependent on industry and not the other way around. I feel that I am often dealing with a dominant paradigm that is the antithesis of my life philosophy. Nevertheless I see this as an opportunity to introduce a contrary world view or at least another way of seeing matters. Also I see it as my role to challenge some basic assumptions on which the dominant views are based.

When I talked about the need for a revolution ‘where the highest care and consideration is given to sustaining the planet, and paramount importance is placed on the well being of all members of our society’, I came to the conclusion that this requires a fundamental change of heart in many areas. This is especially true when it is assumed that there is an inherent right to exploit the resources of the planet and to suggest otherwise is considered positively heretic. Essentially there is a need for a shift in attitude and this requires us to think about our world and our society as a living whole.

This stance is consistent with the way most women understand our place in the scheme of things on the planet, in that women have an understanding of the interconnection between all things. Women tend to hold values over and above possessions and money. We have an appreciation of other values such as a sense of community and wellbeing, and we tend to think in the longer term. For example, we think about the consequences of decisions and their significance for our children and grandchildren. Women also tend to think of the collective good above self-interest and will more readily work towards compromise and consensus.

I find that maintaining these understandings and values and upholding them in an environment that does not ascribe to them is a constant challenge.

I believe that one of my important roles is reflecting women’s views and attitudes in Parliament and being aware that often their views are not heard and expressed fully by the dominant parliamentary culture. For example, I have spoken out on maintaining women’s health services, child sexual abuse and issues of domestic violence, which predominantly affect women.

As the first openly lesbian parliamentarian in Australian politics, I also have a special commitment to representing the lesbian and gay community. I believe it is particularly important that I act as a public representative of the lesbian community.

In conclusion, I would like to pay special tribute to those pioneering women parliamentarians who have made it easier for us who have followed in their footsteps—I know it must have taken courage and determination. And to those women who aspire to become members of Parliament in the future—I hope you join us soon!

(These Reflections were written in 2012.)

Since I joined the Legislative Council in 1997 there have been significant changes, most notably for women. The Western Australian Legislative Council now has close to 50 per cent female representation—the highest proportion of any Australian Parliament. Also, I believe there is now a younger age profile. This changed Legislative Council has quite a different ‘feel’ to it than the chamber I entered in 1997. It’s a lot less ‘bIokey’. It’s also my sense that, in the main, debate is entered into with more respect and consideration. While there is no

doubt that a number of female members engage in debate with an adversarial and combative approach equal to our male colleagues, I would observe that most are less likely to ‘play the man’(sic!) in that old style of politics that is all about belittling and unbalancing your opponent on a personal level.

Not that the proportion of women to men is the only factor in determining the ‘culture’ of the chamber. Individual styles and values are a significant factor, as is the clashing of particular personalities. There does, however, seem to be a certain ‘critical mass’ in the ratio of women to men at which point the ‘tone’ seems to change. This is a phenomenon that I have experienced in all types of decision-making forums, not just the Parliament.

The approach taken by the Presiding Officers and, of course, particularly the attitude of the President will also set the tone for any particular Parliament. The current President, the Honourable Barry House, presides with insight and an eye to achieving consensus. I note he has on a number of occasions noted and celebrated the strong female representation now present in the Council and acknowledged the difference this representation makes. It’s worth noting too that under the leadership of the current President there has been a comprehensive review of the Legislative Council Standing Orders in which all parties participated. This has resulted in, amongst other changes, a long overdue modernisation of the language into contemporary gender neutral terminology.

Another significant change since 1997 is that there has been 15 years’ experience of a multi-party chamber. The gaining of the balance of power by the Greens (in 1997 held jointly with the Democrats) saw a seismic shift in the way business was conducted. The presence of other new parties with the capacity to influence Parliamentary outcomes broke down the direct adversarial debate (Government versus Opposition) into a broader and often more nuanced exchange. It also meant that processes for more meaningful negotiation needed to be developed if the chamber was to function smoothly. This negotiation has, in my view, had a significant role in changing the Legislative Council’s culture and led to more respectful relationship which in turn impacts on the nature of the debate in the chamber.

I think also the younger demographic means that members are much more likely to have been exposed to feminist thought and changed social values. Male members accept (or at least acknowledge) that women have an equal right to be members too and have a valid contribution to make. And I think this hasn’t always been the case even in relatively recent Parliaments where the role of female members has sometimes been trivialised or restricted.

Over the 15 years that I have been a member I have been asked on many occasions: ‘how do we get more women into Parliament?’ I believe the power to have equal representation of women and men lies with the political parties, their cultures and practices and in particular their preselection processes. The Greens consistently select more than 50 per cent women to be our candidates and representatives—it can be achieved! If the culture of a political Party isn’t attractive to women, for example if it’s seen as a tough and no-holds-barred arena, many women are put off at the outset. The other challenge is the proportion of men already entrenched in positions of power that are most likely to preselect someone like them!

If we are to achieve parliamentary representation that reflects the broader demographic then we need to look closely at how our own political parties operate and the value they place on women’s perspectives.