



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

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

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Parliament of Western Australia  
2012**

## **CHERYL LYNN EDWARDES**



MLA Kingsley 4 February 1989–25 February 2005 (Lib). Shadow Minister 1989-1993 and 2001–2005; Minister of State 8 March 1993–15 February 2001, including term (1993–1995) as first female Attorney General. Member several joint standing parliamentary committees, joint parliamentary select committees and parliamentary select committees.

When Cheryl Edwardes was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1989 for the new northern suburbs seat of Kingsley, she became only the second woman after June Craig (q.v.) to enter Parliament to represent the Liberal Party in that chamber since the party was founded in 1944. Immediately upon her election to Parliament, Cheryl was allocated a host of shadow portfolio roles and, after Richard Court had won the Liberal Party leadership from Barry MacKinnon in May 1992, she came within a 'hair's breadth' of achieving the deputy leadership of the party when she was defeated by lot after the vote was tied with Colin Barnett. Her rapid rise to prominence was cemented when the Coalition won office in February 1993, with Cheryl becoming the only woman in the 17-member Cabinet. Of particular historic significance was her appointment as the first female Attorney General in Western Australia, a position she held at one stage in conjunction with the Justice Ministry. Not surprisingly, she was also allocated the Women's Interests portfolios, which she retained until 1997.

Given that Cheryl was later to become Minister for the Environment and to hold the Labour Relations post, there is no doubt that she has continually faced an exacting range of responsibilities. In this regard, a major challenge was to maintain the close ties with her electorate, which had been a characteristic of her first term in Parliament. The previous Labor Government had appointed her to the State Planning Commission Commercial Consultative Committee and the Northern Suburbs Rapid Transit Study Advisory Committee. She also had links with a broad spectrum of organisations, ranging from small business, recreation and arts to child care, youth and tourism and family support groups. With respect to the latter groups, after endorsing income tax splitting, taxation deductions for children and mortgage payments, Cheryl contended in her first Address-in-Reply debate speech:

I am committed to the preservation and protection of the family. In my view there is no more important social unit than the family because it is the basis upon which individuals develop and are able to determine their future. Family life teaches all of us about love, mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation. These principles are the very basis of healthy relationships inside and outside the family unit.<sup>1</sup>

Cheryl Edwardes was born on 1 March 1950 in Mt Hawthorn, Perth, daughter of carpenter and caretaker Warren Duschka and his wife, Betty. She was educated at Tuart Hill Primary and Senior High Schools and subsequently graduated in law from the University of Western Australia where she won the Criminal Law Prize in 1980. In fact, her academic qualifications read as an impressive BJuris, LLM and BA. She was admitted barrister and solicitor to the Western Australian Supreme Court in 1984 and to the High Court in 1987. Over the years, Cheryl had experience in a vast range of jobs including being a cashier and clerk at Woolworths, an audit clerk with chartered accountants, Officer in Charge of Records at the Western Australian Museum, and clerk at the University of Western Australia Library before her involvement as a solicitor at Freehill Hollingdale and Page from 1984 to 1986. Her law connections were extensive, with membership of the Law Society of Western Australia and legal aid committees, and she was also a member of the Industrial Relations Society for computers and the law. In terms of political party involvement, Cheryl was the senior vice-president of the Greenwood branch of the Liberal Party from 1986 to 1988 and during this period she was also a member of the Joint Policy Committee. The scale of her activities left little time for leisure pursuits, although Cheryl does profess to enjoy tennis, bushwalking, reading and films.

During her first term in Parliament while still in opposition, Cheryl quickly became a very active member of the growing number of committees appointed by the Parliament. In June 1990, she was a member of the Joint Select Committee on Parole. Then in 1992, at a time when it was still a rarity for a woman to chair a parliamentary committee, she was elected Chairman of the Select Committee on Parliamentary Procedures for Uniform Legislation Agreements. What made this achievement even more unusual was the fact that Cheryl was an opposition member at the time. Earlier, she had been a very active member of the Select Committee on Youth Affairs and when its final report was tabled in the Legislative Assembly she made a direct appeal to her fellow members:

... Unless members can understand the extent of the problem across the board in all spheres, they will not be able to resolve the problem with a firm commitment. I hope that once members have read the report, they will digest it and ensure that action is taken and that a comprehensive youth policy is put in place. We are dealing here with our future community; these are the ones who will look after us in our old age. Also, we want our youth to enjoy their lives and to be satisfied with their lot. This will be achieved only as a result of a comprehensive youth policy which is directed across all spheres of interest.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of youth affairs, Cheryl at one stage was the Minister assisting the Minister for Community Development with special responsibility for the Youth Justice Bureau. Other responsibilities in the Court Government era, not already mentioned, included Parliamentary and Electoral Affairs, Seniors, Fair Trading, Environment, Employment and Training, and Labour Relations. Despite this formidable list of additional governmental responsibilities, it was perhaps Cheryl's roles as Attorney General and Minister for Justice that has provoked

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<sup>1</sup> WAPD(LA), 30 March 1989, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> WAPD(LA), 4 June 1992, pp. 3490.

most comment. She found it a formidable task to secure reform in a domain historically dominated by men of high standing, although she always maintained a very professional approach to her role. During this period, she also had to contend with ‘guilt by association’ accusations that emanated from the Royal Commission into the City of Wanneroo, given that the key figure in the inquiry was the former Mayor of Wanneroo, Wayne Bradshaw, who had known Cheryl and was related to her husband, Colin Edwardes (a Wanneroo councillor). However, in his final report, the royal commissioner completely exonerated Cheryl from any wrongdoing, confirming the allegations ‘were without foundation’.

Other particularly challenging ministerial portfolios were environment and later labour relations. The latter was assumed in the aftermath of the ‘third wave’ of reforms, which had provoked strong union opposition; a series of provocative decisions by WorkSafe (a statutory authority within the portfolio); and the contentious tabling of regulations to ban smoking in public places. Cheryl’s handling of the issues did much to mend fences. Nevertheless, being Minister for the Environment posed even more formidable hurdles. Despite reports from key figures in the environment movement that Cheryl gave such groups a good audience, it was her difficult task to manage the signing in 1999 of the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA). The furore over the RFA resulted in protest marches by forestry workers and industry pressure groups and the many conservation bodies seeking retention of old-growth forests. In defence of the Government’s stance, Minister Edwardes had told the Legislative Assembly the RFA ‘is about achieving a balance between conservation and jobs; that is the balance that this Government will achieve’,<sup>3</sup> but by July and August, the Government had been forced to backtrack to some extent, provoking blockades of Parliament House by truck drivers from the affected timber areas.

In February 2000, Cheryl had become the longest serving woman Minister of State in Western Australia, and when the Court Government lost office in February 2001 she continued to be a leading frontbencher in the shadow Cabinet as a member of the opposition management team, which later became the Coalition management team. With Colin Barnett as opposition leader, she was the shadow Minister for Planning, Labour Relations and Employment, Public Sector Management and spokesperson on censorship issues. From May 2004, she was the manager of opposition business in the Legislative Assembly. She also returned to active membership on parliamentary committees serving as a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission from June 2001 to May 2004 and was appointed to the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission immediately when the Corruption and Crime Commission began operations from the beginning of 2004. She was also a member of the Procedures and Privileges Committee of the Legislative Assembly from October 2003 until Parliament was prorogued for the 2005 state election.

After a term in opposition, Cheryl decided not to contest the 2005 poll but instead supported her husband Colin Edwardes, a prominent public servant, in an unsuccessful quest to retain the seat of Kingsley. However, Cheryl continued to be very active in public and commercial life with a list of roles that has been extensive. She became a member of the Superannuation Complaints Tribunal, was linked to academic work at Curtin University of Technology and was deputy chair of the Constitutional Centre Advisory Board. Earlier she had been engaged with the law and politics program at Notre Dame University. She has acted as a consultant on networking and leadership for a range of organisations. One of the more high-profile posts she

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<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 28 March 1999, p. 6862.

filled was as a senior executive as head of government relations with mining magnate Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting. Before joining Hancock Prospecting, she was a Special Counsel at Minter Ellison, Perth. Since 2010, she has been the chairperson of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) social policy committee. Other community contributions have been as chairperson of the Victims of Crime Reference Group, from Wanneroo Chamber of Commerce, and as duty counsel of the Duncraig free legal aid service and the Legal Aid Commission of Western Australia. In mid-April 2012, she was appointed to the new Independent Media Council (IMC), which had resulted from the decision of Seven West Media (SWM) to withdraw from the Australian Press Council. The IMC was to be chaired by Christopher Steytler, a former judge and Parliamentary Inspector of the Corruption and Crime Commission. Former Labor Minister Jim McGinty, who is also a former Attorney General, was also to be a member of the IMC.

Some of the awards that have been bestowed on Cheryl have included the Paul Harris Fellowship for juvenile justice; a Family Values Award from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2001; and the Woman Achiever from the Jewish Council of Jewish Women Australia in 1994. Cheryl Edwardes was a strong minister, with a broad education, who was prepared to accept the challenges of public office based on extensive community links. Since leaving Parliament, she has continued a very active community role and in the legal profession and is continuing to 'make a difference'. To date she still holds the record of being the longest-serving woman minister in Western Australia and although in time this record will be broken, it will be recognised that she has helped to make the future for women in political life a more equally balanced path that is now wider.

*Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(These Reflections were written in 1999.)*

One of the greatest challenges of being asked to contribute to a book celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage in Western Australia is just where to begin. Do you return to the very first time the thought of political life entered one's conscience; do you try to summarise the high and low points; do you focus on a couple of defining moments; or do you take a less personal perspective altogether?

Since being approached to play my part in this publication, I have variously considered each of these approaches and some. Not being one to take the simple approach, I decided to try the amalgam theory: start roughly at the beginning and then try to weave together over a decade of experiences.

Perhaps my experiences might best be described as being like the tapestries my mother was so fond of creating. Lots of loose threads that somehow come together to complete one picture, while other pictures or scenes remain to be finished.

In looking back, I am reminded of the media release I issued in the early days of my parliamentary career. It began by citing an updated version of an old typing practice line that I used when learning to type: 'Now is the time for all good women to come to the aid of the party!' Interestingly enough, it was used as part of an address to the combined

Bank Wives' Club annual meeting in Perth in 1990, as I tried to convey what it was like to be the lone female Liberal member in the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia.

Today we not only have more women members of Parliament but also an increasing number of women in managerial positions across all occupations. Importantly too, the prospect of women working in such positions is no longer seen as something unique, although there is still some way to go.

For a while it appeared as though the steamroller of the 'women's rights' movement would continue on unabated, but perhaps we have now reached a point of equilibrium where men and women are standing beside each other and working together to achieve a balance between work and family.

From a personal perspective, I have been quite dismissive of the notion of barriers to women's advancement. I have argued that barriers are often things we, as women, put in our own way. This is not to say that life as a female in a male-dominated environment is easy, or that there aren't difficulties to be overcome. However, if you allow yourself to be distracted by real or perceived barriers, you do yourself and others a disservice.

Three years ago, as we celebrated the significant achievement of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Edith Cowan's election as the first woman in an Australian parliament, our attention was drawn to some of the decades in which she participated. One memorable moment was her challenge to her male colleagues to try walking up Mount Street carrying the shopping and pushing a pram. If I recall correctly, the debate related to improving public transport but I have no doubt that many of my female colleagues, from both sides of the House, would have moments where participating in debates is a bit like carrying the shopping uphill while pushing a pram.

While the Parliament has certainly made strides forward in becoming more 'family friendly', like many workplaces there is a way to go. Some of my more memorable moments in Parliament have involved debating important pieces of legislation until the early hours of the morning while trying to figure out how I could juggle pressing family commitments or even get hold of bread and milk for breakfast.

The change, as I have experienced it over the last decade, has definitely been for the better. For instance, recent debate over changes to sitting hours have included consideration of balancing work and family, as well as improving overall productivity. I find it hard to imagine Edith Cowan and her peers even contemplating such matters.

These improvements notwithstanding, the pressures remain to a degree. Anyone in public life experiences some degree of intrusion into the personal domain. Some may find it more difficult to deal with than others, though I would argue that this is no reason to turn away from taking on a role with a high public profile. While there may have been highs and lows, the highs inevitably outweigh the lows.

Whether it be having the honour of becoming Western Australia's first woman Attorney General, or simply being able to bring a female perspective to the portfolios I have held, it is a humbling experience to know that you, as an individual and as a member of a Government, have the capacity to shape the future of our state.

It is a huge responsibility and can be daunting, yet until we have Parliaments that reflect the broad composition of our community, we run the risk of not upholding one of the fundamental tenets of democracy—government for the people, by the people. Greater representation of women—an issue fought for so vigorously by women, and to a lesser degree men, in the last century—is but one aspect of this change.

As I stand in the Parliament today, I am no longer the lone Liberal female in the Legislative Assembly. I am surrounded by female colleagues on both sides of the House. All are making a valuable contribution to our future. All have a responsibility to encourage good men and women to take a place in the Parliament.