



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

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

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## JANET MAY WOOLLARD



MLA Alfred Cove from 10 February 2001 (Ind). Chair Education and Health Standing Committee from November 2008. Co-opted member of Community Development and Justice Standing Committee for the purposes of reviewing the Children and Community Services Amendment (Body Piercing) Bill 2007–2008.

Following three narrow and fascinating electoral victories, for over a decade as a member of the Legislative Assembly, Dr Janet Woollard has ‘made a difference’ as an Independent in Western Australian politics. Particularly in the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament, with numbers finely balanced in the Legislative Assembly which gave rise to the Colin Barnett ‘Alliance’ government, Janet’s voting record in the chamber has been particularly significant. As the details of her educational background, wide employment experience, extensive community service and family history reveal, she was highly prepared to be an influential parliamentarian. However, without the application of arguably one of the best features of the voting system formula, she may never have been able to enter the Parliament. Indeed, Janet’s electoral history has provided a classic case study of a key feature of the Legislative Assembly voting system, whereby the preferences of the preponderance of constituents of a district have to be taken into account to secure election to the chamber.

It is a matter of history that Western Australia in 1907 was the first state in Australia to introduce the preference vote, sometimes known as the alternative vote, for its Legislative Assembly elections. Following legislation in 1911 to ensure the compulsory distribution of preferences, this voting system was adopted for commonwealth elections in 1918 and thereafter in each of the mainland states for lower House elections. A key element of this voting system is that to secure electoral victory a candidate must gain an absolute majority (50 per cent plus one) of the valid preferences cast by the voters in the election count for that district. For each of her three electoral successes in the seat of Alfred Cove, where she had been a long-time resident, Janet’s first preference vote was respectively 20.30 per cent in 2001, 23.96 per cent in 2005 and 25.47 per cent in 2008. This was well short of an absolute majority for each election, but she then secured an absolute majority when all the valid votes were tabulated. On each occasion she obtained a two candidate preferred vote majority over

formidable Liberal Party candidates—namely, Minister Doug Shave (57.37 per cent to 42.63 per cent in 2001), former Minister Graham Kierath (54.57 per cent to 54.43 per cent in 2005), and Dr Christopher Back (51.01 to 48.99 per cent in 2008), who was subsequently elected to the Australian Senate. The early advocates of preference voting regarded the requirement for a candidate to be supported by the majority of the electorate as a major advantage of the system with it being a key reason for both its adoption and maintenance in the Australian polity.

Janet Woollard was born as Janet May McCullough in London, England, on 13 February 1955 to parents John McCullough, a maintenance engineer, and Louise (née Kitcher), a children services carer. Janet was married in London in 1978 to Dr Keith Woollard, before arriving in Western Australia in 1980. Her husband became a prominent medical identity—at one stage he was President of the Australian Medical Association—and they have six children, Victoria, Noel, Penelope, Luke, Elizabeth and Charlotte. After attending primary and secondary schools in England, including taking A levels at High Cross (Comprehensive) Janet had gained State Registration at Charing Cross Hospital from 1973 to 1977, and a Joint Board of Nursing Certificate in Intensive Care at Charing Cross Hospital.

The tertiary education credentials that Janet then acquired in Western Australia were formidable. Firstly she completed a Bachelor of Applied Science (Nursing Education) (1984) at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University), then a Master of Education at the University of Western Australia (1988), followed by a PhD (1997) at the same university. Subsequently, following advice, particularly by ‘mentor’ Phillip Pental, an Independent MLA and former MLC at the time of Janet’s entry to Parliament, she achieved an LLB at Murdoch University (2007). In the meantime in 2002 she became a justice of the peace. The scale of research activities, professional involvement and appointments, and even scholarships and awards, during this long phase of tertiary education are too extensive to detail. In summary, though, her capacity in the domain of health, nursing practice and education to provide expertise to the Parliament was second to none. This was particularly well illustrated when she became the Chair of the Legislative Assembly Education and Health Standing Committee in November 2008.

When she first entered the Legislative Assembly, Janet was elected on a predominantly environmental platform, although the Western Australian Electoral Commission had refused registration of a ‘liberals for forests’ party on the ground that the name of the party was too closely aligned with the Liberal Party. Janet had gained strong support from groups and leaders associated with the Wilderness Society, the Conservation Council of Western Australia, the WA Forest Alliance, the Campaigns for Ancient Forests, Doctors for the Preservation of Old-Growth Forests as well as other environmental groups. At the time she was also able to gain some support from disaffected Liberal and Labor voters, and even some backing from the Greens had come her way. Janet, though, was keen ‘to put the record straight’ by indicating she had never been a member of the Liberal Party or Labor Party.<sup>1</sup> Indeed she had been attracted to the concept of Independents in Parliament. In her terms:

Like many members of liberals for forests, I agree with the principles espoused by Sir Robert Menzies, such as individualism, ambition, dignity, independence, democracy, accountability, tolerance and freedom. I ran for Parliament because I was disillusioned with the previous

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<sup>1</sup> WAPD(LA), 22 May 2001, p. 266.

Government's lack of transparency and accountability, particularly with regard to forests and the forests and the finance broking scandal.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the forest debate was central to Janet's first 2001 campaign, it was run alongside the finance broking scandal, given that Doug Shave was the Minister most closely linked to the issue. The finance broking issue was also the prime focus for one of the other candidates, Denise Brailey, a forthright consumer advocate who was only 268 votes behind Janet in the preference distribution process when the field was reduced to three candidates. Health issues were another central concern in 2001 and in her first address to the Legislative Assembly Janet made it clear that '[a]s a nurse, I am gravely concerned about the deterioration of the health care sector'.<sup>3</sup> In particular, she contended it was necessary to give focus to aged care as nurses in that sector had judged that 'currently the elderly are being treated as second-rate citizens because the federal funding is inadequate'.<sup>4</sup> Not only did Janet deem the elderly 'at risk because of inadequate funding in aged care facilities, but also [she contended] many who are still at home feel like prisoners in their own homes because of the escalation of crime in Western Australia'.<sup>5</sup> In terms of Alfred Cove, she also spoke of a concern about the absence of a community police presence and the related problem concerning the supervision of individuals who had been released from prison as the conditions of release she contended needed to be enforced.<sup>6</sup>

The *Hansard* record indicates that Janet has contributed to parliamentary debate and questioning on a vast range of matters. Particularly significant has been her role as the Chairperson of the influential Education and Health Standing Committee. Following the introduction of the Tobacco Products Control Amendment Bill in 2008<sup>7</sup>, which she strongly supported in her second reading speech, her standing committee took the initiative to inquire into the Bill. It made 13 recommendations, six of which were fully supported by the government and seven of which gained partial support.<sup>8</sup> As a result of these recommendations the Liberal, National, Labor, Greens and Independents passed the legislation in September 2009, making Western Australia, Janet contended, the leading state in the nation in enacting legislation to protect the community from the harmful effects of tobacco. Key changes meant that in Western Australia there was an end to point-of-sale advertising of cigarettes (except for one specialist retailer in Perth) while a ban was implemented on smoking between the flags at beaches and in cars with children. A recommendation that play and sporting grounds be smoke free was modified to no smoking within ten metres of children's playgrounds. Steps were also taken to prohibit smoking in alfresco eating and drinking areas. The standing committee also recommended that smoking be banned in Parliament and its precincts, and the President, Hon Barry House, and Speaker, Hon Grant Woodhams, then took this step in June 2009, as they alone had the power to adopt this recommendation.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See *WAPD(LA)*, 26 November 2008, p. 504.

<sup>8</sup> See Education and Health Standing Committee (2009), *Inquiry into the Tobacco Products Control Amendment Bill 2008*, Report No. 1, 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

One issue which Janet had pursued for several years was expanding the protection offered to children under the Children and Community Services Act in relation to body piercing. Aided by the support offered the proposal by Robyn McSweeney (q.v.) as Minister for Child Protection and Community Services, the amendments were passed in 2010 for parental consent to be required for body piercing, branding or tattooing. As Dr Woollard had earlier told the Legislative Assembly in 2007 when she had tabled her own private member's Bill:

Medical problems arising from body piercing are well documented. It can cause mutilation and disfigurement, permanent body scarring, blood poisoning, toxic shock, hepatitis, AIDS and cartilage damage. Although body piercing may seem fashionable and trendy to young children, we should be legislating to protect them against potential serious health consequences. Serious infections and problems breastfeeding later in life can result from nipple piercings.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from a regular stream of reports from the Education and Health Standing Committee, there are many policy matters on which Janet has recorded an informed opinion, including the more controversial legislative matters such as prostitution and surrogacy. As a consequence it was not surprising that she had sought additional resources for her very active role as an Independent. She was successful to some extent but this quest became entangled with allegations by Opposition Leader Eric Ripper on a 'staff for votes deal' pertaining to the member for Fremantle, Adele Carles (q.v.). In rejecting this stance Premier Colin Barnett indicated an instance of the work of Janet when he said:

... the member for Alfred Cove has done wonderful work on improving therapy services for students in our schools. As a result of her advocacy and work on that issue, the government, through the Minister for Health, has committed an additional \$50 million towards those services. That is real work by a member of Parliament.<sup>10</sup>

One change which Janet was not able to achieve pertained to the sitting hours of the Legislative Assembly. She called for them to be 'more like office hours' as they could be likened to 'a relic of the past'.<sup>11</sup> When the Procedure and Privileges Committee reported on the matter in 2009 it indicated that it had only received one letter from Adele Carles, in addition to Janet, who had successfully moved for the investigation. Sitting hours in other jurisdictions were considered but the Committee recommended that 'the sitting times of the Legislative Assembly remained unchanged' as the size and population distribution of Western Australia 'means that the Legislative Assembly needs are unique and not easily comparable to other states and territories'.<sup>12</sup> It remains a matter of conjecture as to whether there may have been a different outcome if Janet had been appointed Speaker for the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament, as had been mooted in at least one newspaper.<sup>13</sup> Historically, several women MPs have raised objection to the sitting times, so it may have been surprising that the status quo was favoured. It suggests that increasing the number of women parliamentarians may not lead to any significant changes in this respect in the future. As the mother of six children juggling the existing sitting times, Janet has 'made a difference' well beyond what was probably forecast when first elected as an Independent MP. Strong representation of local interests, presented

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<sup>9</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 29 August 2007, p. 4501.

<sup>10</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 16 November 2010, p. 8843.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Banks, 'Independent Calls for Office Hours for MPs', *West Australian*, 27 November 2008, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Procedure and Privileges Committee (2009), Report on Sitting Times of the Legislative Assembly, Report No. 4, Parliament of Western Australia, Perth.

<sup>13</sup> Kate Campbell, 'Three-way Speaker Choice,' *West Australian*, 18 September 2008, p. 10.

with an informed mind, in concert with many ‘big picture’ issues which the major political parties are often reluctant to visit have characterised more than a decade of service by Dr Janet Woollard as a parliamentarian.

### *Reflections of the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

#### The Early Days

I have wonderful memories of when I was sworn in as a new member of the Western Australian Parliament. The ceremony was held at Government House and I had my husband and my family there, including members who had travelled from overseas to attend. I remember being very nervous throughout the ceremony but being in awe of the whole occasion. I had this acute awareness that I was involved in something very special that few people ever had the opportunity to experience and I enjoyed every moment.

I recall becoming most anxious when I was told that I would have to present a maiden speech in Parliament. My anxiety seemed peculiar as I had been a university lecturer for many years. I was generally a confident speaker and I had presented at conferences both locally and internationally. Yet I found it incredibly stressful to write and present that speech. I remember my family all came to stand in the gallery to hear me speak.

It is strange to look back and critique that maiden speech now. In hindsight, I know that there is so much more that I should have included and in one way it is a shame that I will not get that opportunity again. With the benefit of hindsight and armed with the knowledge and experience that I now have, I feel that I would write and present a very different speech if I were asked to do it today.

My ability to write and present speeches was certainly something that improved during my time in Parliament. In the early days, when I would stand up and speak I would almost always read off a pre prepared sheet. I remember it being the same for most of the new members. It really wasn't until I made the decision to stop reading verbatim that I began to relax and become comfortable in my new role. After this the whole process became more natural to me.

#### Assistance from other Members

At the beginning of my days as a Member of Parliament, I recall feeling quite isolated. The learning curve was incredibly steep and it was difficult at times to keep abreast of what was occurring. It can be very difficult as a new member to learn the proper procedures and to be able to participate fully in parliamentary debate without some background knowledge as to how the system works.

I am still perplexed as to why there is minimal information available for new members or assistance to help them settle into their new role. It can be a very overwhelmingly experience to become a new member of Parliament and I believe the majority of members struggle in those first few months. I think this is particularly the case for Independents who do not have the backing of a party to assist them. The Clerk and the Deputy Clerk were always very generous in providing their help to me when I required.

In Parliament, I was seated with two other Independents Phillip Pental and Liz Constable (q.v.), and they both assisted me immensely. Phillip, in particular, had extensive parliamentary

experience and expertise that he was willing to share with me. I remember that I often used to discuss issues with Phillip and he would act as my sounding board. He had such a positive and yet moderating effect on me. Sometimes I would become so passionate and blind sighted to a cause, but Phillip had a knack of being able to bring me back to the middle and helping me see things from a whole new perspective. I was very fortunate, and indeed grateful, to have had the benefit of his knowledge for so many years.

Soon after I entered Parliament I noticed that many of the members were also justices of the peace. It was then that I made the decision to study to become a JP. Through the JP course, I really began to learn about legal process; even more so than I felt I was learning as a member. The course held at Murdoch University helped me so much and was so fulfilling that it became the catalyst to my studying for a law degree which I commenced the following year.

I often get asked by people with an interest in entering Parliament what they should do in preparation. I always say to them 'get a law degree'. I think that a formalised understanding of the law is essential for a life in politics. I find my law degree has helped me immensely.

#### In the Chamber

People often comment on the bad behaviour of politicians in the chamber and I admit that initially I was quite naive as to how the system worked.

I remember early on that I had asked a question in Parliament and one of the Ministers used it as an opportunity to verbally attack me. The attack was particularly vicious and so I was surprised that as we were leaving the chamber the same Minister was extremely friendly towards me. When I questioned him about the incident and his apparent change in nature, he said something to me like 'it's just theatre in there, Janet'.

I learnt from that experience that what happened in the House was not necessarily indicative of what occurred outside the House. It seems that sometimes you just have to 'put the boots in' to get your point across. It doesn't mean that you are an aggressive person, but you just need to be able to develop a thick skin and be forceful when required.

I find that in most cases members are extremely approachable and responsive outside the House—certainly not like the 'badly behaved' politicians that people expect them to be.

I think if Bills were referred to standing committees for discussion and costing before they are debated and voted on in the House some of the time often wasted during debate could be prevented.

#### Independent

In some ways I feel extremely lucky being an Independent politician. I have had the advantage of working well with most members of Parliament. Of course I always have the disadvantage of potentially receiving the wrath of other members as well!

I remember that I used to walk in to the chamber for the vote and be asked by numerous people which way I would be voting and why. I always had the opportunity to express an opinion and argue my point; a luxury that many party affiliated members forgo.

I can listen to a debate in the chamber and adjust my vote according to what has been said in that debate. Sometimes my initial impressions of how to vote would not be the way that I ultimately voted. I could change my mind or my voting patterns at the last minute if required. It seems a shame that this is not the case for other members. Party members do not have the bonus of listening to the debate in the House before deciding on how they will vote.

As an Independent I find that people in the community are very open to me and supply me with briefings, information and assistance when required. In addition there are many people outside the electorate who bring their concerns to me before they approach their local member. I encourage these people to meet with their own member but when I am able, I offer assistance.

I believe that this is because I am able to listen to the community concerns and speak up on behalf of those concerns without worrying about party policies. Women also recognise that I am concerned about the issues that are central to their lives and I am encouraged by that.

While there are certainly advantages to being an Independent, there are also some disadvantages. I was disappointed in 2001 and 2005 when I applied to go onto the Education Health Standing Committee to be turned down by the Labor Party. I was the only person in Parliament at that time to have both an education and health background and it seemed only fitting that I could at least be considered for the position. I was pleased when in 2008 I was selected for the committee and elected chairman.

#### How Females affect Parliament

There have never been many females in Parliament and I feel that this is a blight on an otherwise highly effective system of government. Many things would be different if there were more females in Parliament; more diverse issues would be addressed.

Areas that are traditionally considered 'soft' or 'feminist' such as child health and early childhood education remain neglected in our current male-dominated Parliament. It saddens me that these areas are trivialised by the majority of parliamentarians. It is hard to understand how they have become classified as 'women's issues' when they impact so greatly on all of us. Male politicians are husbands and fathers but they still seem to forget that children are our future.

This is a shortcoming of our system and the reality is that it will ultimately fall to the females in politics to try and make a difference. Females will predominantly be left to sort out these issues because no one else is willing to. The problem is that these areas have been neglected for so long that it then becomes a momentous task. We need more women who are up to that challenge.

This is why we need more females in Parliament. We need to get these issues addressed before the problem becomes insurmountable. In other countries such as Sweden where there is more equal female representation in Parliament, I note that they seem willing to address the so-called 'women's issues'. A prime example is their tough anti-prostitution and trafficking laws, designed first and foremost to protect women. In the current climate of the Western Australian Parliament I do not believe that similar laws could ever be passed. This is a great shame. As such I am working to move the gateposts to facilitate a reduction in the number of brothels and

hope in the long term to see the end of prostitution in WA, which targets predominantly vulnerable girls and women.

I have always made a point of encouraging women to consider politics as a career. It is one of those rare areas where you can genuinely make a difference. It is sad that politics is often overlooked by women as a career option. The reality is that politics has been an extremely satisfying job for me and I am sure many others women would enjoy this role.

A downside to politics is that the job is not worked in professional hours. This affects members' contribution to debate, which often degenerates as the hours get later in the evening and in the early hours of the morning. For women who attempt the fine balancing act between political and family life the hours are not family friendly and this acts as an obstacle preventing women considering a career in politics.

#### Female Parliamentarians

One of the things I find disappointing about females in politics is that there is no bipartisan approach to areas which predominantly affect women, children and families. It is unfortunate, but the reality is that there are intimidating tactics employed in politics and females are often on the receiving end. I remember on several occasions returning to the chamber to protect another female from the bullying type behaviour originating from male members opposite.

#### The Parliamentary System

I believe that overall we have a good system of Parliament. It provides a means by which the community can speak up and the system encourages that. I am of the belief that if enough people speak up, eventually politicians have to listen. Politicians know that the consequence of not listening to the community will be that they are not re-elected in four years' time. This puts the power firmly in the hands of the people.

In one of his many speeches on liberalism, Sir Robert Menzies spoke about belief in the individual, in the individual's freedom, ambition and dignity. He spoke about the importance of the individual not losing personal significance and being able to engage in free thought, free speech and free association. This has always struck a chord with me.

This is the reason that I initially chose to enter politics and the reason that I continue to value my role. I have always identified with a philosophy that encourages democracy, accountability and the principle that anyone can 'have a go'.