



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

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

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and
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MARGARET JUNE CRAIG



MLA Wellington 30 March 1974–19 February 1983 (Lib). Minister for Lands and Forests 10 March 1977–25 August 1978; Minister for Local Government and Urban Development; and Town Planning 25 August 1978–25 February 1983. Member of the Honorary Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Marketing and Distribution of Beef and Sheep Meat Products 1975.

After only one term in Parliament, and doubling her majority at the second attempt, June Craig had the distinction, in March 1977, of becoming only the second woman—after Dame Florence Cardell-Oliver (q.v.)—to achieve Cabinet rank in Western Australia. She then held various Cabinet posts until the 1983 state election when after a redistribution she contested unsuccessfully the newly created and marginal district of Mitchell encompassing the outer suburbs of Bunbury and neighbouring areas, allowing another Liberal candidate to be returned for the more favourable areas in her old seat. Nine years earlier, on her very first day in the Legislative Assembly in 1974, and as only the fourth woman ever elected to that chamber, she had the honour bestowed on her by the then Premier Sir Charles Court of moving the Address-in-Reply debate. As she said later:

... there was no reason why more women should not be there, that we really had the same sort of capacities and abilities and that perhaps in many ways we had more common sense. I really saw those things as a challenge.¹

However, while June firmly believed that women had a right to be paid equally for equal work, she had reservations about affirmative action. Significantly, she had set herself the goal not to undermine the future role of women in the Parliament or in high public office by behaving in such a way that gave people the opportunity to say, ‘Oh well that’s what we would have expected because you see she’s a woman.’² She was obviously forging new

¹ June Craig interview by Ronda Jamieson, September to November 1987, Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, p. 82.

² *Ibid.*, p. 333.

ground as her ministerial appointment led two long-serving male members to express ‘absolute fury’³ at the development.

Ironically, in her early days in the Legislative Assembly June felt that because it was a long time since they had heard a woman’s voice, the members did not know how to cope with it so she enjoyed ‘a lot of silence which was almost frightening for a while’.⁴ Nevertheless, when attending a Liberal Party dinner at Parliament House for those who had lost their seats at the 1983 election, she felt compelled to refer to the lack of understanding of women’s issues. In her opinion at the time, unless Liberal Party members were willing to pay more than lip service to the position of women in parliamentary politics they would remain in the wilderness.⁵

In her first speech in Parliament, June indicated that ‘polarisation of urban and country dwellers has become much more pronounced of late’.⁶ She appealed to members to be appreciative of the problems that were confronting people who lived in farming communities. The reinstatement of some, if not all, development concessions that had recently been removed from the farming community she believed would provide a great boost to rural areas. Part of the answer was to be found in decentralisation of government administration. Moreover, in her opinion ‘we must plan with due regard for conservation, the environment, and the people living in the area’.⁷ In a later Address-in-Reply debate, she referred to the serious problem of salinity in the Wellington area claiming that ‘there may have to be a total ban on clearing or a reforestation programme embarked upon’.⁸ Indeed, the needs of rural people were always on June’s agenda. Not surprisingly, in one of her early speeches she spoke against the introduction of daylight saving. She invited opinions on the subject but found:

... not one person indicated that he or she desired daylight saving. Parents and citizens’ groups and country women’s associations were united in not wanting it.⁹

Born in the depths of the Depression on 8 December 1930 as Margaret June Lynn, daughter of a shipping agent and granddaughter of Robert John Lynn, who had sat in the Legislative Council from 1912 to 1924, June (as she preferred to be known) was educated at St Hilda’s Primary School and Presbyterian Ladies’ College. In her youth she was a champion tennis player and was selected for the prestigious Wilson Cup state teams in 1948 and 1949. In September 1951, after having undertaken studies in physical education at the University of Western Australia and Melbourne University, and having worked for a short time as a typist/receptionist, she married Frank, son of long-serving MLC, Leslie Craig and a farmer at Prinsep Park in Dardanup, by whom she had three children. Subsequently, tragedy struck when their only daughter was killed by a falling tree from a bushfire near Rockingham in March 1977. Ironically, when this happened June was within a few days of being sworn in as the Minister for Lands and Forests and she later expressed appreciation for the great support she received, particularly from Premier Sir Charles Court and the press, whom she considered

³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴ Ibid., p. 330.

⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 25 July 1974, p. 14.

⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 9 April 1975, p. 689.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 20 August 1974, p. 741.

had treated her ‘with enormous courtesy and dignity’.¹⁰ Even so, she was almost immediately back to work in Parliament, as she recalls that Sir Charles Court always demanded attendance in the House.¹¹ What is not often realised, she reminisces, is how uncomfortable the parliamentary seats are for long debates.¹²

Since her Melbourne university days, June had endorsed an ideology supportive of individual freedom and she first joined the Liberal Party as early as 1950. Prior to her election by a 900-vote majority to the Legislative Assembly for the south west seat of Wellington in 1974, she was extremely active in a wide range of community affairs and was patron and vice patron in numerous clubs and organisations in Bunbury and surrounding districts. Among the organisations to which then, or later, she gave substantial service in various capacities were St Mary’s Anglican Guild, Citizens Advice Bureau and Good Neighbour Council, Save the Children Fund, the Karrakatta Club, the Commonwealth Games Association and the WA Olympic Council. After leaving Parliament, she was a part owner of a children’s clothing business and served for a time as senior vice president of the Forrest division of the Liberal Party. Within the party she judged she was not considered to be sufficiently partisan¹³ nor, she confessed, had she devoted sufficient time to ‘hobnobbing’¹⁴ in the corridors of Parliament. Although, in her view, you learn not to be surprised in politics,¹⁵ she appreciated that it was easy to gain publicity if statements were made which were contrary to the party line.¹⁶

Parliamentary and Cabinet life, in June’s view, was exacting, in her case particularly because she was always conscious of the tremendous effect of government decisions on people’s lives.¹⁷ Her entry to Parliament also coincided with the establishment of electorate offices, which placed special demands on rural members. So numerous were the communications received that she found it necessary to provide, at her own expense, for an additional office in the electorate and she was also one of the first parliamentarians to purchase an answering machine with records confirming the ‘astronomical’ number of calls coming into the office. In her view, it was also necessary to have a Perth base and a reliable car for the frequent travel on remote roads. Purchasing clothes and shoes, necessary as part of the demand of being in public life, was expensive partly because time was so limited.¹⁸

Looking back on her career, June considered that the portfolios she held, particularly planning and local government, required extensive communication with people and attention to technical detail. She was not prepared to cut corners, but on subsequent reflection considered she may have concentrated too much upon completing the daily administrative requirements rather than addressing ‘big picture’ items and reshaping the direction of policy. If she had been given a choice of portfolio, education would have been her preference.¹⁹ She greatly valued the acquisition of knowledge, praised the Parliamentary Library service and upheld the need for parliamentarians to be informed about the whole gamut of civic affairs.

¹⁰ June Craig interview by Ronda Jamieson, 1987, Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, p. 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.161.

In 1994, June was appointed a member in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM) for her long and distinguished parliamentary and community service. In the citation it was indicated that award was made 'for service to the community, particularly as National President of Save the Children Fund, and to the Western Australian parliament'. This was not the end of national recognition for her civic contribution as in 2003 she received a Centenary of Federation Medal. She had continued her community service but moving to Crawley meant there was also some time for membership of the Village Bridge Club in Dalkeith.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Pre-selection, campaigning, election day, success, the media, the Parliament, party room, the electorate, new responsibilities, new colleagues, new lifestyle, one woman among men—what training or what previous life experience can prepare one for such change?

The Challenge Awaits Me

Conscious of the fact that my perspective of the Parliament dates back to the 1974 election, I think it is essential to comment on the changes taking place in society at that time. Women were taking an increasing interest in political action. The Women's Electoral Lobby was formed in the early 70s and provided an important voice on women's issues. They were soon joined by other organisations. Most women were contributing to the ongoing debate about discrimination. Women's liberation became the catch cry.

The campaign required me to spend a great deal of time at the doors of those I hoped would become my constituents. Men doubted that a woman could properly represent their agricultural interests and hoped I was not one of those 'women's libbers'. To my horror, many women said that they would vote the way their husbands advised. Few young people voting for the first time knew much about the election or the issues or could differentiate between state and federal responsibilities (this was not necessarily the prerogative of the young!). Many said they would vote only because failure to do so would incur a fine.

Some people were vitally interested and we had some lively debates on both sides of the political spectrum. Occasionally, I received a remark to the effect that it was good to see a woman candidate, there should be more of them—I agreed heartily.

The Member for Wellington—Woman Member of a Man's Club

There had not been a woman member in the Assembly for 18 years, nor was I joined by another in the nine years I was a member.

The First Party Meeting

I was kindly greeted by all who were to become my colleagues, and there was also some enthusiasm for the fact that it was our side of politics with a woman representative in the Assembly and another in the Council—Margaret McAleer (q.v.). Most believed the only voices raised in complaint over the matter of discrimination and women's issues were those of 'the left'. Surely, they would say, this proved that the push for greater recognition came from a minority! There are none so blind as those who do not wish to see!

The First Three Years

Establish an electorate office; choose a secretary (I was fortunate, she was fantastic, competent, caring, politically aware, a great friend and confidante); organise my domestic situation—Frank was a busy farmer and his life must not be too disrupted; and find accommodation in Perth and a better car to cope with big mileage. Then there was Parliament: the electorate, the hours, the sittings, the huge learning curve (the orders of the day, the legislation—learning to read, understand and interpret same), committees, honorary royal commissions. Time was needed to be in my electorate, to be with constituents and organisations, to keep my finger on the pulse, to be aware of problems and needs and deal with them, and to prove that representation by a woman was no disadvantage. Get to know my colleagues. Cope with the additional calls on my time.

I had a certain curiosity value, so I was invited to speak to many and varied groups situated outside my electorate. A woman among men, one determined to illustrate that my role was not to represent only the views of women, rather those of the wider society. This attitude was to upset some women's groups.

The Next Six Years

Election 1977: an increased majority and appointed Minister for Lands and Forests. The promotion was received by many with pleasure, though some correspondence and verbal comments indicated their view that the role was given simply because I was a woman. Two colleagues wrote to say that the position was rightly theirs and they would do all in their power to destroy me! A difficult start, marred too by tragedy, when we lost our only daughter in a tragic accident.

In those days the workload of a Minister was quite remarkable. Advice came solely from the department. Senior public servants were dedicated to their role, worked long hours and were available to give advice whenever it was called for—sometimes when it was not! The Minister made the decisions—no political adviser and no opportunity to choose personal staff, for the Premier believed that selection of staff by members of Cabinet would politicise the public service. Huge learning curve to enable one to come to grips with the legislation governing the portfolio, to recognise pre-existing difficulties, formulate policies and, most important of all, to meet and understand the roles of those people working within the department and out in the field, their problems, their challenges, their hopes for, and sometimes fear of, change.

Cabinet met each week, and minutes for consideration at the next meeting needed to be circulated the Thursday prior. Confidentiality was imperative, study of the contents necessary and the Minister responsible for each needed to be well versed in the proposal. Acceptance by Cabinet was followed by the Minister taking the proposal to the party room; if passed in principle, but with some queries, a committee of those members with a particular interest was formed where the proposal was examined in detail. When committee members were satisfied, the Minister again reported to Cabinet and sought permission to print. The process was not always smooth; legislation often foundered.

Balance!

Responsibilities—ministerial, parliamentary, electoral, party (parliamentary and lay members), public, government representative at functions (separate from those associated with

portfolio and electorate), home and family, interviews, meetings throughout the state, media—the list was endless, the time never sufficient.

August 1978, appointed Minister for Local Government and Urban Development; and Town Planning. These portfolios were extremely people-oriented—a feature I loved. There were bridges to be mended and there was acceptance to be earned. Local government was almost entirely a men's club, few women were councillors, and a woman Minister was difficult to accept. Some of my colleagues found it even more difficult.

Planning was an area of considerable controversy. People expect to be free to make decisions about their land. Communities established on leasehold land demanded to stay rather than leave when leases expired. Road reserves, in place for years, were seldom accepted when the time came for implementation. Controversy abounded; negotiation with individuals, councils and communities were necessary, time consuming, often helpful and sometimes adversarial. The Joondalup Development Authority and Wanneroo Shire Council were at loggerheads, and the Local Government Association demanded more autonomy and continuation of some practices that were outside their legal authority. Dismissal of a council to protect ratepayers was at first seen as the correct solution, but later the ministerial power that sanctioned it was questioned. I soon found that a competent woman Minister, unafraid to make decisions, was branded 'steely, unflappable and headmistress-like', whereas a man displaying similar characteristics was 'competent and successful'.

Colleagues who supported legislative amendments in the party room soon changed direction if they found that the approved action may have an effect on their election chances. New initiatives, such as Keep Australia Beautiful Council, off road vehicle controls, dual-use cycleways, among others, were hard fought behind the scenes.

Ministerial responsibility, with most work being done away from Parliament House, (as a Minister, one had no office there), meant that too little time was spent in the corridors with colleagues. Dissatisfaction with my performance festered. My family suffered.

The opportunity to serve as both member and minister was something for which I will ever be grateful. Then, as now, I know women politicians labour under deep-seated difficulties. I believe the voice of women is urgently needed in politics, and while the corridors of power will remain lonely places for them in the foreseeable future, democracy will be better served by their increasing presence.