



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

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

David Black
and
Harry Phillips

**Parliamentary History Project
Parliament of Western Australia
2012**

ELSIE KAY HALLAHAN



MLC South-East Metropolitan Province 22 May 1983–21 May 1989; East Metropolitan Region 22 May 1989–13 January 1993 (ALP). MLA Armadale 6 February 1993–14 December 1996 (ALP). Minister of State 26 February 1986–16 February 1993. Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council 1987–1993. Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly February–October 1994. Shadow Minister 1993–1996.

In 1986 Kay Hallahan became the first woman member of the Legislative Council to hold a ministerial post and, with Pam Beggs (q.v.), was one of the first two women Labor Cabinet Ministers. Having contested the Legislative Assembly seat of Kalamunda for Labor in 1980, three years later she was elected for the South-East Metropolitan Province for a term commencing in May 1983 and subsequently became a member for the East Metropolitan Region in 1989. In March 1987 she had become the first woman to hold the position of Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, but in January 1993, on the eve of her likely elevation to the upper House leadership with the retirement of the then leader Joe Berinson, she resigned her seat and was elected to succeed former Minister Bob Pearce as Labor MLA for Armadale in the Legislative Assembly. In so doing she became the first woman to have sat in both Houses of the Western Australian Parliament. A year later when Ian Taylor succeeded Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) as Leader of the state Opposition, Kay became the first woman deputy leader of a political party in Western Australia, only to lose the position eight months later in the leadership spill which saw Jim McGinty succeed Ian Taylor as Labor leader. She returned to the backbench in May 1996 and retired from state politics at the December election, though she did make a brief return to the political arena when she agreed to contest the federal seat of Canning in 2004.

Kay was born in Perth on 4 November 1941, daughter of timber worker Stan Downing and his wife, Elsie. Her initial education was at Tullis and Muchea Primary Schools, after which she attended Bullsbrook District High School and Perth Girls High School before commencing work in 1957 as a calculator operator. During 10 years as an office worker at the Midland Junction Abattoir Board she also undertook both voluntary and paid community work, the latter for Midland District Youth Committee. In 1969 she commenced a three-year term as a woman police

constable in the Western Australian police force before marrying school teacher Pat Hallahan in May 1972 at Eling in Hampshire, England. As consequence of the marriage she was required to resign from the police force under the rules then prevailing. Five years later she commenced studying social work at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, at one stage working part-time as a real estate salesperson, before graduating with a social work degree in 1980. Between 1981 and her election to Parliament she was a social worker at the Lockridge Community Health Centre, the Melville Rehabilitation Centre and the Alcohol and Drug Authority. Over the years she has been a member of the Australian Social Welfare Union, the Australian Institute of Public Administration, Amnesty International, the Club Fiumano e Gugliano and Apheda (a trade union aid and development organisation), as well as a patron of numerous community organisations. On retiring from the Western Australian Parliament Kay's range of commitments quickly came to include being chairperson of the National Board of Save the Children Australia and of the Management Committee of Lotteries House in Armadale, and a board member of Community Radio Station 93.7 Heritage FM and of Araluen Botanic Park.

Having joined the ALP in 1976 Kay served over the years as president of the Darling Range branch, delegate to and office bearer of the Canning Electorate Council, and a member of the State Executive. In 1986 she convened the ALP women's election campaign, having been closely associated earlier with Wendy Fatin's successful campaign in 1983 to be the first Western Australian woman elected to the House of Representatives in Canberra.

In her Inaugural Speech towards the end of July 1983 Kay highlighted the fact that much of her work experience had been involved with 'people-centred services' and that she had seen at first hand:

... the devastating effects of unemployment on individuals and families. The sudden drop in income, the inability to pay mortgage and hire-purchase commitments and the feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness are realities for many ... The desperation of people condemned to an income well below the poverty line has to be felt to be understood ... [and] nowhere is there public debate which is questioning the means by which the benefits of society are to be distributed, when work as we have known it, is no longer the means by which we can satisfactorily distribute the collective wealth.¹

She also drew on her past experience as a police constable to support moves to have complaints against the police investigated by an independent authority and for other avenues to be found for dealing with domestic violence 'once the offender has been dealt with or the volatility of the situation reduced'.²

In the latter stages of the speech she spent time on an issue which remained central to her political philosophy throughout the whole of her political career, namely electoral reform:

... the constituents in South-East Metropolitan Province, along with other metropolitan electors, have been robbed of a fair and equitable vote. They are the losers in the electoral processes of this State ... Parcels of votes are bundled together by squiggly lines on a map to ensure conservative domination of this State's two Legislatures. It is an appalling situation when one considers our cultural inclination to a 'fair go' and our commitment to democratic principles ...

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 27 July 1983, p. 333.

² *Ibid*, p. 335.

The underlying philosophy of equality before the law is relevant to this argument; Equality in making the law also applies. It will be possible for Western Australians to lay claim to this only when a system of one-vote-one-value is the basis of our electoral processes. Until that time Western Australians will not enjoy the benefits of a society based on equality and the value of its individual members.³

To her great regret when she delivered her valedictory speech she had to concede that:

It was one of my dreams that before I left Parliament I would see a Labor majority in the Legislative Council ... I am sad to say that the electoral system still does not fairly reflect the number of voters.⁴

It is ironic that while Kay was fortunate enough to be in government when Labor was in power at both state and federal levels, she never sat in a House in the Parliament where the ALP had a majority. In summing up the achievements of her years as a Minister, she referred to what she described as ‘a revolution in the provision of child care, in emergency accommodation and funding for women’s refuges’.⁵ To this list she added the family centre program, adoption law reform, the saving of Araluen and the voluntary preprimary program for five-year-olds. In her own words ‘she was ‘proud to be associated with those things’.

Having maintained such a busy and varied life in Parliament, Kay has retained a range of interests and activities over the years. These have included active roles with the Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia, Save the Children Australia, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, the Armadale Redevelopment Authority, the WA Council on Homelessness and a variety of other boards and inquiries. In 2002 she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia and in 2003 received a Centenary of Federation Medal and an honorary doctorate from Curtin University.

Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career

(The text which follows is based on a discussion between Kay Hallahan and David Black in May 1999.)

In November 1975 when Kay Hallahan and her husband, Pat, who was on long service leave from his teaching job, reached Tehran on their way by coach from London to Katmandu, they heard the news that the Whitlam Government had been sacked by Governor-General Sir John Kerr. Until that moment politics had been a constant topic of debate and discussion between the two of them and with friends, but henceforth more was needed: from Kay’s point of view the immediate action required was for them both to join the ALP on their return to Australia. It was during this same coach journey that Kay also reached the conclusion that in terms of her personal life and commitment to working with those most in need, the one big gap which she had to fill was to acquire academic qualifications—the essential passport to working professionally in the area of community service—in order to be paid for doing that which she most wanted to do in life.

³ Ibid., pp. 336–337.

⁴ *WAPD(LA)* 13 November 1996, p. 8334.

⁵ Ibid., p. 8337.

A major turning point this may have been but Kay describes the way her life developed from office worker and voluntary youth organiser to member of Parliament and Minister of the Crown as incremental with each stage leading naturally to the one which followed. Her earliest years were spent in timber milling towns where the prevailing ethos meant her father as mill manager was also responsible personally for those in his employ and where, if a worker was in need, help would come from within the millworking community itself. It was from this family background that commencing in her late teens Kay became actively involved in work with young people.

Coming from a family where formal education had been minimal and academic knowledge was by no means prized, Kay's realisation that without formal qualifications one's options were restricted was perhaps a natural consequence if somewhat late in coming. In her own words, the alternative was 'forty hours a week at the office and another forty hours community work'. Indeed, her decision to join the police force in 1969 was largely motivated by the fact that this was one area where formal qualifications were not required and as a woman member of the force she would to a large extent be employed in a helping role as well as law enforcement. At this stage, going into politics was not a serious option though she admired the community commitment by J.J. Brady, a long-serving Labor MLA from the Midland Junction area. From 1977 onwards, however, the political and academic aspects of her life developed together and her entry into parliamentary politics grew naturally out of her increasing involvement in the affairs of the Darling Range branch and the Canning Electorate Council.

Kay agrees that a successful political career in many cases is largely a matter of being in the right place at the right time. In 1980 she served her apprenticeship contesting the blue ribbon Liberal seat of Kalamunda, but as Labor's fortunes began to rise in Western Australia in the early 1980s there was a deal of manoeuvring and jockeying for state and federal endorsements for the 1983 election. Kay herself was involved in the successful campaign to have Wendy Fatin elected for the federal seat of Canning. When Kay accepted the invitation to seek preselection for the South-East Metropolitan Province, which took in the Assembly electorates of Armadale, Canning, Gosnells and Murdoch, she was surprised to find herself with four male opponents for preselection but she campaigned vigorously and successfully and then won the seat at the general election by more than 11 000 votes over her Liberal opponent. Three years later and she was in the Burke Ministry, a promotion which she accepts was assisted by the fact that the Government was looking for balanced ministerial representation from the upper House.

During her seven years as a Minister, Kay held a significant variety of portfolios commencing in the community, family and youth services area but later taking on such portfolios as planning, heritage and lands and then education, employment and training. These were hectic years in which she was subject to constant media scrutiny and an enormous workload. She regarded planning as a very positive portfolio, and that with community services and education she had been provided with real opportunities to make decisions which had a significant and positive community impact. She also gained great satisfaction from contact with the numerous people who related to her portfolios at one level or another.

Parliament, by contrast, she found an intimidating forum in the early years and her strong advice to any woman contemplating a life in politics is to do everything possible to prepare for the experience. Familiarity with meeting procedure and developing public speaking skills are two areas of particular importance in this regard and, while she believes she did the very best she could and performed creditably in almost every task she was asked to undertake, Kay concedes that she

was never completely at ease prior to making a speech in Parliament, or in a public forum or media interview.

At the beginning of 1993 she resigned her Legislative Council seat, thus forfeiting the likely prospect of becoming upper House leader, in order to contest Armadale at the forthcoming election, the seat having been left vacant by the decision of Bob Pearce to leave politics following his earlier resignation from the Ministry. Kay admits that her hope that Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) could win re-election in 1993 was unrealistic but she was determined that if she could hold Armadale for the ALP as a contribution to achieving that goal, it was well worth doing. In the process, it also had the attraction of bringing her back closer to the constituency, a situation which to some extent had disappeared after 1989 with the introduction of proportional representation for Legislative Council elections. As it eventuated, the ALP went into opposition, but Kay retained Armadale by 2 000 votes and in February 1994, with the departure of Carmen Lawrence to enter federal politics and the election of Ian Taylor as Labor's new leader, Kay was elected as Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Looking back now, Kay regards her eight months as deputy leader as disappointing from most points of view but especially in the sense that the ALP team simply did not function as it could have. In this regard, she suggests that politics places a multitude of demands on those who participate, not the least of which are maintaining effective relationships with members of one's own party. By May 1996 she had moved to the backbench in preparation for her retirement from politics at the end of the year. In this regard she was delighted that both moving from the upper to lower House and again when leaving politics the vacancy she left was filled by a female colleague, in both cases Alannah MacTiernan (q.v.). According to Kay, life after politics does involve a difficult adjustment the more especially in learning once again to live a balanced life rather than a life in which a multitude of demands and activities completely dominate most waking hours. Despite the disappointment of the final years in Opposition Kay considers she worked hard throughout her parliamentary career and was well supported in the achievements made in the various portfolios. For the community as a whole, she contends, the challenge is to see more women in senior positions so that their involvement in politics would be a natural flow on from other walks of life. In the process this would give them the kind of preparation which she herself would so very much like to have had before she first took her seat on the floor of the House.

(The text which follows is based on a discussion between David Black and Kay Hallahan in May 2012.)

Looking back from a vantage point 16 years after she left the State Parliament Kay Hallahan now considers that she would very much have liked to have spent another term or even two in parliamentary politics. She still believes that her decision to change houses in 1993 and to leave Parliament altogether in 1996 were the right decisions both from the point of view of the party and given her capacity for continued service at the time. However, in the fullness of time she now believes that if her personal circumstances had been different she would have been able to use the additional time in politics effectively in dealing with issues central to her political outlook and with which she has been able to be associated in her post parliamentary career.

For Kay life after politics has been very active and rewarding with particular reference to such activities as her work on the board of Save the Children Australia, with the Positive Ageing Foundation and the Telethon Trustees, as well as numerous others. In these and many other areas of endeavour her experience as a member of Parliament and as a Minister of the Crown equipped her to make a very positive contribution in a number of significant areas of community concern. The significance of the part played by women in politics has undoubtedly increased she believes but even in 2012 she still supports the need for quotas ensuring the endorsement of a significant number of women for winnable and for safe seats.

Parliamentary politics can be very tough and unforgiving but can be the logical extension of substantial involvement in community and other non-parliamentary fields of endeavour and Kay appreciates the opportunities provided being a parliamentarian. While there were periods of considerable difficulty for her party and the Parliament at times during her time as an MP she would still consider, as she did in 1999, that 'being in the right place at the right time' is crucial to achieving a long and successful parliamentary career. In her case the timing of her original entrance to Parliament was fortunate and although in later years circumstances were not conducive her continuing in Parliament, the totality of her career paved the way for an active and rewarding post-parliamentary career and a return to voluntary community involvement much wiser and better informed.