



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

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

David Black
and
Harry Phillips

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MEGAN IRENE ANWYL



MLA Kalgoorlie 16 March 1996 (by-election)–10 February 2001 (ALP). Shadow Minister 1997–2001. Member Select Committee on Human Reproductive Technology Act 1991 1997–1999; member Select Committee on Misuse of Misuse of Drugs Act 1981 1997–2001.

When Megan Anwyl won a hard fought by-election for the seat of Kalgoorlie after the resignation of the highly respected Ian Taylor, she became the first woman to win a goldfields seat in the West Australian Parliament. Indeed, in her Inaugural Speech in March 1996, she told the Legislative Assembly how when she attended her first Kalgoorlie–Boulder Labor Party branch in 1990 a prominent Labor man said to her, ‘Good to see you here. We need to see more lawyers in Parliament, even if you are a woman.’ Her immediate response was to think, ‘Right, you’re on’.¹ In her Inaugural Speech she recounted how people in the vibrant ‘megacultural’ Kalgoorlie, including Aboriginal people with their vast history, ‘were seeking a better life.’ The main economic impediment for Kalgoorlie, in her view, was the lack of water. Another main need was a sealed highway to the Pilbara, which would encourage the viability of the goldfields and relieve the current pressure on the Great Eastern Highway between Kalgoorlie and Perth. She further stated:

It is the primary responsibility of government to ensure that all people have access to decent education and health services: yet, those two areas are being steadily eroded by this [Coalition] government, and for what? For the sake of economic rationalism at the cost of people’s jobs, health and futures!²

Megan understood that her election gave her the opportunity to present the case for goldfields development and help set the agenda on matters such as unemployment, law and order, mental health, drugs and domestic violence. Given her expertise in the law concerning personal injury, she judged the State Government’s legislation on workers’ compensation which had

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 26 March 1996, p. 406.

² *Ibid.*, p. 405.

taken effect from 29 June 1993, to be ‘arbitrary, harsh and unjust’, with the retrospective component being widely condemned.³

Born in Melbourne on 19 April 1962, Megan Anwyl received her primary and secondary education in Victoria. Her father, John Anwyl, who had risen to be a prominent university professor in education, had spent his own childhood on the Victorian goldfields during the Depression years, with this experience contributing to the development of an egalitarian philosophy. Her mother, whose maiden name was Jill Blackstock, was a teacher and later a senior policy officer who dedicated her work to achieving social justice in the community. Given the influence of her parents, it was not surprising that Megan adopted similar ideological perspectives. As she told Parliament at the onset of her Inaugural Speech: ‘I began to acquire the ideals of equal opportunity and a fair go for all at a very young age’.⁴ Like her parents she pursued education actively with arts and law degrees from the University of Melbourne and then practised as a solicitor in Melbourne and Kalgoorlie becoming active in many organisations which provided scope for her legal expertise to be utilised. The organisations have included the Eastern Goldfields Law Society, the Western Australian Law Society, the Australian Law Council, Women Lawyers, Family Law Practitioners, the Domestic Violence Action Group, and the Goldfields Youth Action Centre, of which she was the Chairperson.

In her short time as an MLA, Megan earned a formidable record for speaking on a wide range of topics. Her training and practice as a solicitor has equipped her to debate topics in a most competent manner. After her second electoral win at the 1996 general election, she expressed surprise to the Legislative Assembly at the dearth of debate concerning the decision of Premier Richard Court to break with tradition in Western Australia to call an election some three months ahead of the full four-year term. This meant she had to fight two elections in 12 months although she recognised that the extensive doorknocking had apprised her of people’s concerns in the region. She also undertook the opportunity to be sharply critical of the attire worn at the opening ceremony of the Parliament. The adherence of traditions in her view likened the Parliament to 1897 rather than 1997. Similarly, in terms of the political representation theories of the Legislative Assembly, she took the opportunity during the contentious abortion debate in 1998 to state:

I find it offensive that a group of largely middle aged men will vote about what will happen to a women’s choice to access a termination in the future. I also find it offensive that people with a particular moral or religious view can proscribe the actions of people who do not share that view.⁵

Apart from her views on representational principles, Megan invariably showed herself to be well read on a range of social issues, particularly those which covered her shadow portfolios of family and children’s services and youth. In a speech to the Legislative Assembly in October 1997, she indicated that Western Australia was the only state not to have an Office of Children’s Interests, which Liberal MLC Hon Barbara Scott (q.v.) had also sought.⁶ In this context she made reference to the effect the Federal Government’s ‘savage’ childcare cuts were having on family day-care schemes in the state. In April 1998 she used the grievance

³ Ibid., p. 405.

⁴ Ibid., p. 404.

⁵ *WAPD(LA)*, 18 March 1998, p. 803.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 23 October 1997, p. 7382.

procedure to highlight alleged instances of child abuse. Her keen interest in youth policy led to her appointment to the Select Committee into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1981. When the interim report was tabled in November 1997, she spoke to the minority report recommendations and told the Legislative Assembly:

There is a need to re-evaluate the efficiency of our laws. The current law on the minor use of cannabis is in disrepute in this State. Secondly the gateway theory and the whole idea that the liberalisation of cannabis laws would cause greater use of the drug has been discounted by evidence given to the committee. Perhaps the most important issue is the misallocation of scarce resources which appears to be occurring in this State, particularly in the light of the very serious federal budget cuts, not only to the Australian Federal Police but also to Customs and the National Crime Authority.⁷

After two years of deliberation from 1997 to 1999, as a member of the select committee reviewing the Human Productive Technology Act 1991 and proposing a framework for the Parliament to consider the matter of legislation in the controversial domain of surrogacy, Megan made some perceptive observations about the law making process. She appealed to the Parliament to recognise ‘the complexities—legal, moral and social, of the matters canvassed in the report’. She added:

It is very hard for Government to introduce controversial legislation. Many members of the Coalition are still reeling from the lengthy debate on abortion, and it is unlikely that legislation addressing the urgent issues set out in this report will be introduced during the life of this Parliament ... This Government will not even deal with the de facto property rights of men and women in this State; that is too difficult. Members should keep in perspective where they are in terms of imposing moral prejudice ahead of ethics-based evidence.⁸

One subject upon which Megan, as the MLA for Kalgoorlie, employed all the procedures of the Parliament, such as Address-in-Reply, budget debates, private members’ statements, grievances and questions, was to oppose the imposition of a gold royalty. Prior to the 1996 state election, the Deputy Premier, Hendy Cowan, left the impression that he would not be part of a Government that introduced a gold royalty, making the assertion when providing answers to questions on notice to Megan that Western Australia would be penalised by the Commonwealth Grants Commission to the tune of some \$70 million if it did not impose the royalty. Given Megan’s research that it would harm small producers and marginal production it was not surprising that the Government eventually modified the royalty rates. The backdown by the Government at the time is probably an instance in which an opposition backbencher with strong support of her party leadership was able to use the Parliament to indicate the extent of the region’s voice against the gold royalty and expose divisions within the Coalition over the policy.

Unfortunately for Megan, at the 2001 state election, which was won by Labor led by Geoff Gallop, she lost her Kalgoorlie seat. In a hard-fought campaign she was narrowly defeated by Matt Birney, a youthful Liberal Party member who within four years would be Leader of the Opposition for a short period. The demographic and socioeconomic nature of the Kalgoorlie district was beginning to be transformed with its history as a safe Labor seat being superseded. Given her keen interest in politics Megan subsequently plied her trade as a political lobbyist, initially with the prominent government relations consultant group, Hawker Britton. Then she

⁷ WAPD(LA), 27 November 1997, pp. 8871–8872.

⁸ WAPD(LA), 22 April 1999, p. 7603.

established her own registered lobbying company, known as Anwyl Consulting, which by 2011 included 16 client companies. Many of these companies and organisations are household names in Western Australia such as Skywest Airlines, Atlas Iron, Grange Resources and the Youth Affairs Council. Megan has also set up, chaired and facilitated a number of important industry groups that still continue—the DomGas Alliance, North West Iron Ore Alliance and the Magnetite Network.

From 2003 to 2009 Megan was a director of the Esperance Port Authority. Keeping her interest very close to women in politics has meant she has been a co-convenor of Emily's List and the first female committee member of the Former Members' Association of the Western Australian Parliament for eight years.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

I'm not a Feminist, but...

As the first woman to be elected to Parliament from the goldfields some themes emerge in my conversations with female constituents. They tend to praise me for working on and publicising certain issues that they claim have previously been ignored by my male counterparts. Some of these include: child care, domestic violence, suicide prevention and drug treatment.

I am constantly puzzled that fundamental issues which clearly affect our whole community are seen by male politicians and community leaders as 'soft', 'not sexy' and more appropriately left to women to sort out.

A lot of this support is because these women recognise that I am concerned about issues that are central to their lives and the wellbeing of our community. Some of those same women tell me that they will never vote for me because they have voted Liberal all their lives, but go to give me words of encouragement.

Many women then talk about the status of women in Kalgoorlie–Boulder. Almost inevitably their remarks are prefaced with 'I'm not a feminist, but' And they proceed to highlight the types of discrimination women often experience. Sometimes I ask for a definition of feminism and point out that I consider it to mean equality of opportunity irrespective of gender. Why do women distance themselves from feminism and simultaneously complain of discrimination?

Since elected three years ago, I am still coming to terms with the blatant trivialisation of so called 'women's issues'. Although fundamental to the wellbeing of our whole community (especially children), basic problems like domestic violence are compartmentalised into the Office of Women's Interests.

The corridors of power are full of men in suits and those men do not value the contribution of women, let alone allow themselves to become accustomed to listening to women or including them in the team. None of this fazes me—it just makes me more determined to succeed and make a difference.

But sometimes I get angry. During the marathon abortion debate last year, I was particularly infuriated by some of the nonsense spouted by male MPs and conscious that I was one of the very few women in Parliament still of reproductive age. I listened to men talk about sheep and cattle, seed falling on fallow ground and the shooting of a horse. I heard that some women would terminate a pregnancy in order to win a bikini.

Women in Parliament tend to get more interjections than men. Once while debating minerals resource issues, I was called a ‘silly’ by a minister. I don’t mind—I relish the challenge, but I do find it disturbing that men will flock into the House to interject on a woman, a newly elected woman.

Parliament is an extremely adversarial workplace, secondly only perhaps to the law courts. At least you get to yell back in Parliament. In 10 years of legal practice I never got patted on the head or told that I’m a ‘good girl’ as happens frequently now. Whenever there are two or more sitting together, many male colleagues who walk past feel obligated to ask what we’re cooking up or plotting now.

There is a perception that affirmative action means that mediocre women get the job. In my experience the average female MP is more talented than her male counterpart. As our only female Premier, Carmen Lawrence (q.v.), once said ‘we will have true equality when there are as many mediocre women in Parliament as there are men now’. Let’s hope that one day there will be equal numbers of women and men, preselected for merit. And who knows—once that occurs we may need to introduce affirmative action for men!

Post Politics Reflection

(These Reflections were written in 2012.)

(In reference to the five years she spent in Parliament Megan has said ‘It never occurred to me at the time just how much my five years in Parliament would go on to define my future professional career’.)

After leaving Parliament I chose to leave law for a job that would keep me close to politics—as it is just like any other addiction—and I haven’t found a way to give it up. I’ve been fortunate to work with some clients that share my passion for creating opportunities for people. Lobbyists get a bad rap on the whole but practically every ex-MP I know continues to provide advocacy for people or causes—many of them do so on a pro bono basis. I hope that there can be a de-mystification of what we do in the future.

I find it as hugely ironic that despite being branded ‘anti-mining’ when I was an MP—mainly due to my firm conviction that the way forward on native title was negotiation not litigation—I’ve actually gone on to build a successful business that advocates for the resources industry in the 11 years since I left the Parliament.

My profound regret is that some of the sexism and racism that was so prevalent then is still with us.