



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

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

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

## CARMEN MARY LAWRENCE



MLA Subiaco 8 February 1986–4 February 1989; Glendalough 4 February 1989–14 February 1994 (ALP). MHR Fremantle 12 March 1994–24 November 2007 (ALP).

*State:* Minister of State 25 February 1988–19 February 1990. Premier 12 February 1990–16 February 1993. Leader of the Opposition 16 February 1993–7 February 1994. Member Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee 1986–1988; Select Committee on the Midland Abattoir Land Sale 1986. *Commonwealth:* Minister of the Crown 25 March 1994–11 March 1996. Shadow Minister 1996–2001. Member five standing and statutory committees. Federal President ALP 2004.

Carmen Lawrence achieved a special place in Australian political history in February 1990 when she became the first woman to occupy the office of State Premier. She subsequently also became the first Western Australian woman to be a member and Minister in both the State and Federal Parliament. Following her election to the Legislative Assembly in 1986 as the first ALP member for Subiaco for 30 years, she had been quickly nominated to the key Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee and after only two years in Parliament she became a member of the Dowding Ministry in February 1988. Recognised as a person of high intellect with outstanding scholastic achievement, Carmen had already established a formidable record of community service. In becoming a founding member in 1972 of the Women's Electoral Lobby, she demonstrated her determination to canvass measures to enhance opportunities for women and, in this context, her initial impressions of the parliamentary process were less than favourable. After three years of parliamentary experience as both a backbencher and Minister, she gave evidence to the 1989 Parliamentary Standards Committee of the Western Australian Parliament stating:

In summary, my concerns are firstly, that the debates themselves are often short on facts and long on rhetoric; that there are too many opportunities for people to digress and be repetitive and irrelevant; and the very design of parliamentary procedures and building make it difficult sometimes for women to contribute in a way that is notable and noted. You will often see

difficulties if you are engaging in the sort of energetic debate for people with light voices. I should not restrict that to women, because there are a couple of men who have similar problems.<sup>1</sup>

Carmen Lawrence was born of farming parents on 2 March 1948 at Northam. She was educated at Dominican Ladies College in Dongara (1954 and 1958–1962) and Marian Convent, Morawa (1955–1957). Subsequently, she attended Santa Maria College in Attadale (1963–1964) where she won a General Exhibition and Special Subject Exhibition in Economics. At the University of Western Australia, she was awarded a Bachelor of Psychology with first class honours before proceeding to complete her Doctorate of Philosophy and was the recipient of a series of prizes in recognition of her scholastic achievements. In this regard, Carmen shares with Judyth Watson (q.v.) the distinction of being the first woman elected to the Western Australian Parliament with a PhD. Over the next few years she worked as a research assistant, university tutor and lecturer and research psychologist, including the three years prior to her election to Parliament, in research services in the Department of Health.

Her first executive position in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) dated from 1982 when she became the vice president of the Subiaco–Wembley branch, and over the next five years she was also a delegate to the Curtin Electorate Council. She unsuccessfully contested the ‘blue ribbon’ Liberal seat of East Melville in 1983 before her success in the marginal seat of Subiaco in 1986 when she defeated former federal Liberal member Ross McLean. Meanwhile, in 1985, she had become a member of the influential ALP Administrative Committee and a proxy delegate for the 1986 ALP National Conference. Within the ALP she seemed able to resist the faction system which had become firmly entrenched within the party during her period of membership, and throughout her career she has generally been labelled as non-aligned in a factional sense. Indeed, in 1999 when the Labor Party was reviewing its policies and aspects of its structure, she expressed the view that the faction system was essentially ‘undemocratic’, rewarding compliance not creativity and innovation:

[I]t was necessary to open up to the full range of influences that exist within the party and not to restrict itself to the faction leaders ... I don't think any political party in the late 20th century can afford that.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking in the Legislative Assembly for the first time after her election in 1986, Carmen told the Legislative Assembly:

I wish to draw members' attention to the plight of a group in our community which is frequently without an effective voice, whose members are unseen, unwanted and ignored: I refer to these people who suffer from mental illness.<sup>3</sup>

In this context she advocated the principle of ‘the least restrictive alternative’ which placed an obligation on the state and its agencies to explore alternatives to compulsory inpatient care. Given her strong commitment to the spectrum of health concerns, it was not surprising that she became the Minister for Human Services and Health in the Keating Government after she won the seat of Fremantle in the Federal Parliament. At the same time, it is important to appreciate that the range of her interests and her capacity to speak with authority on a variety of matters is vast.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Parliamentary Standards Committee, Western Australia, Volume 2, Parliament of Western Australia, 1989, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Sunday Times*, 7 March 1999, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 10 June 1986, p. 16.

Between 1986 and 1988, she was Chairperson of the Child Sexual Abuse Task Force and, as already indicated, another one of her constant concerns has been the status of and opportunities for women. In this regard, she played a key role at the 1994 Labor Party National Conference which resolved to adopt a platform that would guarantee women pre-selection for 35 per cent of winnable seats by the year 2002. At this stage, too, she had also authored studies on the women's vote and written about the treatment by the media of women in politics (as in the member's 'Reflections' which follow).

In the 1989 election when the ALP was unexpectedly returned to power, Carmen was returned for the newly created marginal seat of Glendalough. By the time she assumed the premiership in February 1990, the Government's position had deteriorated significantly and, after a series of party resignations and ministerial changes, by early 1992 she was left leading a government without a majority in either House of Parliament. As Premier, she appointed the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters (often labelled the WA Inc Commission) with broad terms of reference. Although the commission's findings were devastating for the Labor Party, Carmen's own high rating as Premier was widely considered to have helped minimise the electoral damage to the party at the 1993 election. A year later she resigned from State Parliament and entered the House of Representatives as member for Fremantle to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of Treasurer John Dawkins and was immediately included in the Keating Ministry. However, soon afterwards she became the subject of the controversial Royal Commission into use of Executive Power in which the Court Government appointed Victorian Mr Justice Marks to investigate a series of events surrounding the presentation of the so-called Easton petition to the Legislative Council shortly before the 1993 election. Despite some serious adverse findings by Justice Marks concerning her role in the affair, she was re-elected for Fremantle at the 1996 and 1998 Federal elections and in July 1999 was acquitted of all charges by a District Court jury leaving the way clear for her to rebuild her political career.

The later years of Carmen's parliamentary career were all spent on the opposition benches and after 2002 she did not serve in the shadow Ministry. In this period, as well as a continuing significant involvement in parliamentary committees and general debates, she played a broader role in the party organisation and served as Federal ALP President in 2004. Her last committee assignment, as with her first ministerial position, embraced Aboriginal affairs, and on leaving Parliament after the 2007 election she returned to academic life becoming a Winthrop Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Western Australia at which she had been such a distinguished scholar in her younger days. In addition, from June 2010 she served as Chairperson of the Australian Heritage Council and in 2011 to 2012 she served as a panel member of the Gonski review into school funding. In retrospect, she had a highly significant parliamentary career and in different circumstances might even have become the first Australian woman Prime Minister several years before Julia Gillard achieved that distinction.

*Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(The following represent edited extracts from Reflections about Carmen Lawrence written for the first volume of Making a Difference.)*

Carmen Lawrence delivered her Inaugural Speech in the House of Representatives on 2 June 1994, and she devoted the major portion of the speech to the problems holding back women from

entering parliamentary politics. One hundred years earlier, South Australia had become only the second place in the British Empire, and one of the first in the world, to grant women the right both to sit and vote in Parliament, a right which was extended to Australian women at the federal level in 1902:

I am very proud to have been elected to this place in 1994 the centenary of women's suffrage in Australia. Australia has a proud record of pioneering women's rights. [Yet o]ne hundred years after Australian women first were able to vote, we are confronting the fact I think head on for the first time that having the right to stand for parliament has by itself been insufficient. It has not resulted in significant numbers of women winning seats. You need only look in this place, when members are here in numbers, to see what I mean ...

The post suffrage political progress of women has been excruciatingly slow. It was two decades after federal enfranchisement before a woman Edith Cowan, from Western Australia I am pleased to say, was elected to a state parliament. It was four decades before Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney became the first women to be elected to Canberra: Lyons to the House of Representatives and Tangney to the Senate. It was 6 1/2 decades before Annabelle Rankin became the first woman minister. Although Enid Lyons in the 1940s had held cabinet ranking, she did not actually have a ministerial portfolio, which is a curious position.

It was 7 1/2 decades before it became established and accepted that women candidates did not repel the male vote [and] ... it was eight decades before it became de rigeur for there to be at least one woman in a cabinet and nine decades, a long 90 years, before it became widely accepted and the stated policy of a major political party my own that women were entitled to more than tokenism and should in fact participate equally in the political system ...

Women are achieving international success across the board, in the sciences, the arts and sports. In many respects our political life lags behind the rest of our community life. I want to make a case very clearly that women have half this country's talent, creativity and ideas... I quote from George Bernard Shaw:

Nature's supply of five per cent or so of born political thinkers and administrators are all urgently needed in modern civilisation; and if half of that natural supply is cut off by the exclusion of women from Parliament and Cabinets the social machinery will fall short and perhaps break down for lack of sufficient direction ...

It is the process of selection, after all, which determines the composition of parliaments and... that selection process, that gatekeeping, has resulted in representation which is largely white, male and predominantly middle class. I am not suggesting there is some conspiracy, but the process has produced that outcome ...

My message to women is: do not wait to be asked; do not wait to be pressured into political life put up your hand and demand that you participate. To quote a very feisty woman, Sarah Henderson:

All the strength you need is within you. Don't wait for a light to appear at the end of the tunnel. Stride down there and light the bloody thing yourself.<sup>4</sup>

In 1999, Carmen wrote an article for *Australian Rationalist* concerning the way the media portrayed women in politics:

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<sup>4</sup> CPD(*H of R*) 2 June 1994, pp. 1298

[M]ost people do not experience politics at first hand. Voters' perceptions of the political figures and issues are shaped principally through the news media: this is even more likely in large scale, national and state based constituencies where personal contact with the candidates is made difficult by the sheer weight of numbers and distances. Such coverage is necessarily selective. It may be said that, in this sense, the news media shape rather than mirror the political landscape ...

In general, political activities are portrayed as combat, as fiercely competitive. Debates are frequently described in adversarial terms and those elements of political life which most resemble combat are most likely to be reported...Serving politicians come to appreciate that coverage is more likely if their statements and images are provocative and controversial. Reasoned and moderate argument delivered without vitriol is given a wide berth ...

Gender differences in coverage may reflect widely held stereotypes from which the media are not immune. For example, they have been found to stress the compassionate and nurturing qualities of women while men's competence is underlined. In the past, the media's starting point was that women belonged at home and they were expected to marry and raise a family. Politics was definitely reserved for men...All this matters because the media images of women add to the perception that many already hold that women are outsiders in politics, that they occupy a marginal position. They are frequently portrayed as exceptions, 'diversions from the serious male game of politics'. It matters because in our society, maleness is still the norm. The set of attitudes, ideas and interests that come with being male are often taken as given. But it is critical, if we are to have an open and representative democracy that men's privileged occupancy of positions of power and influence is no longer viewed as normal.<sup>5</sup>

*(The Reflections that follow were written in May 2012 by David Black after an interview with Carmen Lawrence.)*

When asked to explain what were the causes and beliefs which motivated her 20-plus years in parliamentary politics, Carmen answered in one word 'inequality'. In this regard, it is significant that one of her abiding passions, which she continues to pursue with the same intensity and commitment as she displayed in the parliamentary and governmental arenas, has been a focus on educational inequality. This in turn arises from her strongly held view that access to financial assistance, whether from the government or private sector, is far less important to the underprivileged than removing the intrinsic barriers that arise from lack of the educational and cultural knowledge and awareness which are crucial to attaining comfort and even survival in the modern world. Thus to give just one specific example, she cites research indicating that the most successful measured education outcomes have been obtained in Finland and this is linked to the avoidance of stereotyping and segregating gifted and talented students from a very early age.

Carmen made the initial choice to enter state rather than federal politics on the basis that for her as a single mother entry to federal politics would be out of the question at least while she was responsible for the upbringing of her son. By contrast, in 1994 her changed family commitments made entry to federal politics a feasible option, though without altering the very real disadvantages faced by Western Australian members in Canberra even in the modern environment of regular and rapid air travel. Another very real issue in everyday terms was the fact that the vast expanses of Parliament House in Canberra, and even the size of the House of Representatives chamber, meant that party members were much more isolated from their counterparts on the other side of the

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<sup>5</sup> Carmen Lawrence, 'Media Representation of Women in Politics', *Australian Rationalist* 99 (Autumn 1999), pp. 27–32ff.

House both in terms of parliamentary business commitments and social relationships outside of the chamber. All of this added to the combative/adversarial nature of federal parliamentary proceedings which in her view is now even more intense than ever.

With reference to the ALP quota system for endorsement of women MPs, a development in which Carmen played a major role in the 1990s, she remains as committed as ever in 2012 arguing that without this move, progress towards female representation in Parliament would have been painfully slow ('glacial' in her own words). One central issue she believes was making it more feasible for women to be endorsed for a percentage of safe seats instead of, as was typically the case in the 1980s and early 1990s, women being endorsed mainly for marginal seats, which provided additional electoral appeal but tended to produce, for the most part, relatively short parliamentary careers.

Having spent her first seven years in state politics and the first two federally in government with only the one year (1993–1994) in opposition, Carmen, after nine years on the opposition benches in Canberra, considered that parliamentary time out of office is a salutary experience notwithstanding the greater opportunities to research and explore issues, especially when one returns to the back bench as she did for her last five years in Parliament. Unlike some of those who had served with or against her, she took the opportunity in September 2007, within five months of her sixtieth birthday, to deliver a valedictory speech not omitting to thank those who had 'backed and assisted [her] in meeting the substantial legal expenses forced on me by the Marks Royal Commission and the subsequent trial': in her own words the Royal Commission 'was born of political malice'. Explaining her decision to leave Parliament—as it eventuated on the eve of Labor's return to power after 11 years in the wilderness—she said:

I am retiring not because I have lost interest in policy but because I desire to engage in the community in a different way. I hope I can continue to make a contribution to Australian life. Although I have been in politics for 21 years I guess I have always believed that politics is not a career or a lifetime occupation; it is a privilege of representation.

Having made clear her deep-seated rejection of the politics of the previous 11 years, she reflected on what constitutes:

... 'the good life' ... in a world on a fast track to self-inflicted ill health and planet-wide damage to forests, oceans, biodiversity, and other natural resources... I think it requires no less a change than thinking about the meaning of progress and possibilities for the future... We need urgently to satisfy our needs, and perhaps to redefine them, with less impact on the earth's natural environment.

From a future Labor government, she was looking forward to 'renewed commitment to a much more muscular form of egalitarianism in education and health in particular'. Deploring the size of the Australian educational gap due to socioeconomic status as 'amongst the widest in the OECD' she went on to argue:

Education is not just about employability. We need a wider set of objectives; we need to advance the expansive development of intellectual powers that go beyond the acquisition of fact and bare proficiency at skills that the labour market requires. We should view education as a public good

which benefits everyone by adding skills and knowledge, which improve our society as well as the economy.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, Carmen has written a number of papers and delivered a number of speeches with a particular but not exclusive focus on women in politics and society. Reflecting on the establishment of the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972 she contended:

We were young, educated and impatient with the world of our mothers. We say that the society we lived in was riddled with inequality and discrimination and stifled by conservatism and complacency. And we did not accept that this was inevitable. We had seen our mothers corralled into hearth and home, encouraged to be content with raising children and caring for their husbands, while burying their own desires and talents in suburban conformity.

We argued that women were constrained by attitudes and expectations which belittled their intellectual capacity and restricted their choices and that it didn't have to be so. The general expectation, which we rejected, was that women should exclusively embrace the roles of wife and mother, leaving work and participation in public life to men. Lest the conservative commentariate shriek—again—that we belittled motherhood and decried relationships with men, let me be clear that the prevailing view amongst the women I met was one of cherishing their children and wanting genuine partnership with their husbands and partners. We were neither men haters nor pofaced apparatchiks intent on forcing others to live as we dictated. We simply wanted our country to really embrace equality and to give us our chance to live full lives.<sup>7</sup>

Reviewing the situation in the first decade of the twentieth century she concluded:

So much has changed: there has been a virtual revolution in women's education and working lives. Our choices have multiplied and our right to fully participate in society is taken for granted—if less often achieved. There has been less success in recasting men's and women's roles and responsibilities, while the images of women in the popular media remain as stereotyped as ever ...

I suspect that more than a few women are uncertain about how we should measure our achievements; about precisely what we are striving for and whether some of the materialist objectives we've been encouraged to embrace are really contributing to our wellbeing. Does it really improve the quality of our lives to spend endless hours at work, depriving ourselves of precious time with friends and family; time for leisure and creativity? Are we paying too steep a price for our materialism. Can we justify our ever-increasing consumption while others live in rank poverty and the world's resources are being depleted at an alarming rate? ...

The struggle for women's equality in the West has centred on questions of autonomy, discrimination and participation...[and] many women have been seduced into believing that more wealth and material possession are all this is necessary for a good life ...

The struggle for liberation of women needs to shift gear and direction—with a greater sense of urgency of confronting the grinding poverty and disadvantage of many of the world's women and a reanalysis of what constitutes a better quality of life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed at <http://www.safecom.org.au/lawrence-valedictory.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Carmen Lawrence, 'Making Women Count' (copy supplied by the author).

<sup>8</sup> Carmen Lawrence, 'Challenges for Young Women in Australia', paper written in 2005 and copy supplied by the author.