



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

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

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and
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PAMELA ANNE BEGGS



MLA Whitford 19 February 1983–6 February 1993 (ALP). Minister of State
26 February 1986–16 February 1993. Member Joint House Committee 1983–1986;
Select Committee on the Adoption of Children Amendment Bill 1983–1985.

After only one parliamentary term as a backbencher, Pam Beggs was a Cabinet Minister from February 1986 to February 1993 in Governments led by Brian Burke, Peter Dowding and Carmen Lawrence (q.v.). With Kay Hallahan (q.v.) she was the first woman member to serve in a Labor Ministry in Western Australia, and the range and nature of her portfolios meant she was continually in the public eye. Interestingly, when Pam was initially being considered for a ministerial post she requested not to be allocated education or the environmental portfolios. However, she was possibly surprised on entering the Burke Ministry to be allocated racing and gaming, which had invariably been the province of men, along with tourism, and she administered these portfolios for all but a year of her ministerial career. In the Dowding Ministry she received additional responsibility for housing and planning and near the end of her ministerial career she won acclaim on behalf of the Labor Party as Minister for Transport with the opening of the northern suburbs railway, which was constructed in the ‘nature strip’ of the Mitchell Freeway from Perth to Joondalup.

Born as Pamela Austin on 23 May 1947, daughter of a tin miner, in Inverell in New South Wales, she came with her family at the age of four to the tin mining town of Greenbushes in the south west of Western Australia and was educated there and at Bridgetown High School and St Joseph’s College in Bunbury. After a short spell as a telephonist Pam spent four years in the Woman’s Royal Australian Air Force reaching the rank of commissioned officer. Subsequently, she worked as a dietician and as a laboratory assistant with Western Mining and then with Trace Element Laboratories before marrying Thomas Beggs at Applecross in December 1972. The couple, who for a time owned and operated a road house near Geraldton, had three daughters.

Pam, who had participated in the moratorium movement during the Vietnam War, joined the ALP in the 1970s as an inaugural member of the Balcatta branch (where she worked for a time on a voluntary basis with future Premier Brian Burke), and then in the Hillarys branch. Over the next few years she participated actively in ALP election campaigns and was also involved in the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations. In 1983 she won the northern suburbs seat of Whitford for Labor from the Liberal Party and held the seat with an increased majority in 1986. Her ability to win a marginal seat, together with similar success by her Labor colleague Jackie Watkins (q.v.) in the adjacent mortgage belt northern seat of Joondalup, helped to develop the view that women may be better candidates in marginal seats. Women, it was contended, were in touch with the 'bread and butter issues' and this was advantageous in close electoral contests. At the same time, and notwithstanding her electoral success, Pam was unequivocal in her views about the state's electoral system in her Inaugural Speech in March 1983 when moving the Address-in-Reply to the Governor's Speech:

It cannot be denied that a very bad case of malapportionment exists between electorates for the election of this Assembly. My electorate of 17400 electors has more than five times the number of voters in Murchison-Eyre ... The current state of the electoral system in this State is a source of shame to any individual who believes that democracy is worth preserving. The aim of this government will be to establish an equitable electoral system that will give neither side an inbuilt advantage. That system will give all citizens the right to an equal vote—a vote of equal value—a right that has been spelt out in the International Covenant on civil and political rights of 1966 and the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.¹

During her first three years in Parliament Pam took the opportunity to raise a number of issues through parliamentary questions, including matters affecting education, consumer affairs, health (including attempts to control the advertising by the tobacco industry) and housing. She was also acutely conscious of the struggles associated with law reforms that had the capacity to benefit women. When colleague Dr Judyth Watson (q.v.) compiled and edited *We Hold Up Half the Sky: The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament*, Pam chose to highlight her role, on behalf of Premier Brian Burke, in 1985 in moving the second reading stage of the Sexual Assault Bill. In her own words:

... women victims of rape had almost always been deemed to have deserved it: their dress, or aspects of their past or present behaviour were harshly judged. Legal processes subjected the victim to further trauma. Because of this, many women would not report the rape; too many perpetrators went free.²

Two years earlier the broader issue of the place of women in politics had been the theme of the concluding stages of her Inaugural Speech:

As 51 per cent of the population are women it is incongruous that under successive conservative Governments in Western Australia no constructive attempt has been to include this section of the community in the decision making process of Government ... The nature of the structure of Australian society has excluded many women in the past from becoming directly involved in the drafting of legislation as members of Parliament ... No doubt exists in my mind that the significant absence of women from Australian Legislatures for most of this

¹ WAPD(LA), 22 March 1983, pp. 7–8.

² Judyth Watson, *We Hold Up half the Sky. The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament*, Perth: ALP (WA Branch), 1994, p. 87.

century may be connected with Australia's loss of leadership in the sphere of progressive social legislation.³

Not surprisingly, her longest parliamentary speech as a backbencher came on the Government's Equal Opportunity Bill in 1984:

The truth is that the trend towards women participating in the paid work force began in Australia a long time ago. Most significantly, it began at approximately the time of the beginning of World War II and ironically the Government of the day actively encouraged [it] ... At that time, those women, just like women today, faced up to their patriotic duty; they did not shirk their responsibilities and they entered the work force in droves. After the war many of those women relinquished their positions and went back to their homes, but the percentage of women in the workforce continued to increase through the postwar baby boom until today.

I consider that that event in the course of our history changed the nature of our work force; but I do not consider that ... the change has resulted in a detrimental effect either on the economy or on the family which has always been, and will continue to be in the future, the primary unit in our society. I put it to the Parliament that this legislation will not have any detrimental effect whatever on our economy or on the family unit. This Bill will do no more than create a framework for fair play; that is all it will do.⁴

With the electoral tide turning against Labor, Pam held on to Whitford in 1989 by 550 votes, but was defeated by Liberal Rob Johnson in 1993. After the loss of her parliamentary seat she preferred to avoid the public gaze and, following a twelve month recuperative period, she and her husband operated a small business in the heart of her former electorate. However, as a former Minister, she was required to give evidence in the Royal Commission into the Use of Executive Power (1995) with terms of reference aimed at ascertaining the role of then Premier Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) in the tabling of a petition in the Legislative Council in November 1992, a clear reminder that while holding elected office a person's actions and statements are a matter of public record.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

(The text which follows is based on discussions between Pam Beggs and David Black in April 1999.)

Pam describes her entry into politics as something that was 'meant to be'. As a married woman with three small children, and not at the time in paid employment, she became very active in the late 1970s and early 1980s in community affairs and politics at the grassroots level. The northern suburbs were opening up rapidly, with a high proportion of young families and a serious lack of resources—schools, recreational facilities, health centres and the like. Politically, the electorate of Whitford (created in the redistribution of 1976, and held by the Liberals with an absolute majority of more than 2000 in the 1980 election) was split into two in time for the 1983 election. With sitting member Mick Nanovich choosing to contest the new seat of Joondalup, Pam successfully sought ALP preselection for the more southerly seat, which was still widely believed to be 'unwinnable' despite an obvious upsurge in Labor support in the community. In seeking to contest the seat she was strongly encouraged by

³ WAPD(LA) 22 March 1983, p. 8.

⁴ WAPD(LA), 9 October 1984, p. 2087.

future colleagues including Brian Burke and Keith Wilson. She attributes the extent of her success in the 1983 poll to the fact that in her position as a young mother she could relate to a very substantial cross-section of the electorate.

Her three years as a backbencher were full of the normal frustrations of any backbencher in a party with a secure parliamentary majority, but she did take what opportunities she had to raise a number of issues dear to her heart, as with the rape issue already referred to, and in broad terms, those with an orientation towards consumer affairs. Pam also recalls lobbying against the Telecom party line and the presence of skimpy barmaids in Perth hotels, and she presented a number of petitions to Parliament concerning the availability of undesirable videos.

Pam agrees that her rapid elevation to the Ministry was certainly a case of being in the right place at the right time, but she does believe she possessed a number of qualities that helped put her in the front running for a place in the Cabinet—the fact she was a team player, her innate political sense of politics, her capacity to learn quickly and perhaps above all, her capacity to relate to people and to take others with her in the pursuit of worthwhile objectives.

Of the portfolios she held, she considers housing was one of the most satisfying, more especially in terms of working with Homeswest in meeting the pent-up demand for affordable homes for the less fortunate. Transport was of course enormously satisfying given her association with the construction of the Perth–Joondalup railway, which she sees as providing the model other areas of the metropolitan region now wish to emulate. Racing and gaming was a portfolio she inherited at least in part because it was considered of relatively less significance, but as it eventuated, it became a political hot potato with issues relating to the Burswood casino and the Totalisator Agency Board, often sources of considerable controversy and political pressure, and also some very self-centred client groups. At the same time, the revenue generated for the Government was always of great benefit in supplementing the Government coffers to meet the needs of the community. Planning was another area that she found to be fraught with political pitfalls.

In all her portfolios, though probably most especially in racing and gaming, Pam was conscious of having to operate in a man's world, but she considers she was always treated with courtesy and when it came to effective decision making, she does not believe that she encountered any substantial problems. Reviewing the situation of women in politics in 1999 she believes that the level of media interest has declined and that to some extent the rate of progress towards genuine gender equality in the world of politics has stalled, at least in the Western Australian environment.

Her defeat in 1993, an outcome which she had accepted as inevitable by the end of 1991, came in some respects as a welcome relief but also a source of great disappointment, given that the work she had done for the electorate over the years seemed to play such a small part in the eventual electoral outcome. Politics for Pam had been 'an enormously draining experience' and she was exhausted physically and mentally, and in ensuing years while she has maintained her community involvement and her interest in politics, she has not played any kind of active political role. Looking back now she can see that in many respects she was very fortunate in having 10 years in politics, all in Government and less than a third of the time on the backbench. Fully engaged in family life after a 10-year stint buried in the world of politics she

is only too aware of the way time can pass and the importance of periodically taking stock and getting one's priorities right.

Probably her greatest regret over her years in politics concerns the way politicians are regarded in the community. She believes it is 'a terrible shame' that people who go into politics for all the right reasons, who try to make decisions for all the right reasons, and who, while inevitably making numerous mistakes, do the job to the very best of their ability, all too often find themselves judged at the time and thereafter as politicians and not for their own intrinsic qualities as a person. Pam considers she made many friends through politics but she also lost many friends and for her this became 'a huge cross to bear'. On the brighter side, in her day-to-day life in a cafe in the heart of her old electorate, she had the chance to see and relate to numerous people, more especially older people, whose lives she had become a part of during her years in politics.