



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

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

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RITA SAFFIOTI



MLA West Swan from 6 September 2008 (ALP). Member Public Accounts Committee from 2009.

For Rita Saffioti being elected to Parliament in September 2008 meant in effect moving from involvement with policy making and politics in the executive sector to direct participation in the legislative process. Rita had previously served as an adviser to the Premiers Gallop and Carpenter, including two years as chief of staff in the office of Premier Alan Carpenter. Her entry into the Western Australian Parliament at the second attempt (in 2005 she had been unsuccessful as a candidate in the East Metropolitan Region) came when she won the newly created outer suburban hills Legislative Assembly electorate of West Swan centred on Ballajura, Landsdale and Malaga and about half of the Swan Valley, including Caversham and Henley Brook. After preferences her majority was 1 659 votes with a 54.45 per cent of the final vote.

Rita Saffioti was born in Perth on 26 May 1972, daughter of orchardist Niocodemo Saffioti and his wife, Guiseppina Ienco, who had worked as a cook and a cook's assistant in the local restaurant industry. Both Rita's parents migrated to Australia from Calabria in Italy in the postwar era; her father in the 1950s and her mother in the 1960s. Her father worked as a migrant labourer clearing land, building stations and fencing properties but after meeting and marrying Rita's mother established an orchard in Roleystone. While her parents in her own words 'were not political activists' Rita considered that her political philosophy developed from a household in which her parents constantly debated whose town was the poorest and 'I think that my mum's town won the day, with probably fewer donkeys per capita than my father's town'.¹ For Rita accordingly her political philosophy centred on fairness, opportunity, a proper distribution of wealth and an acknowledgment that everyone has the right to live on this planet with a sense of integrity, security and economic freedom.²

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 13 November 2008, p. 276.

² *Ibid.*

With her parents on their orchard in Roleystone, Rita was educated at Roleystone Primary School and then Roleystone District High School and completed her final two years of education at Kelmscott Senior High School before graduating with a Business degree with distinction at Curtin University. She worked as a public servant in the Department of Finance in both Canberra and Perth and then for the Treasury in Western Australia until 1997 when, having joined the ALP in 1996 she was appointed as an economics adviser to Dr Geoff Gallop, first in his capacity as Leader of the Opposition and then as Premier. In February 2003 Rita became director of the economics policy unit in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and then for another 11 months as strategic management adviser before, after the change of Premier as previously indicated, becoming chief of staff in the Office of Premier Alan Carpenter in January 2006. Following her preselection for West Swan in 2008 between April and July of that year she worked as a strategic consultant with the Fremantle Dockers, of which team she had been a strong supporter. In October 2006, in the Perth Town Hall, she had married Timothy Fraser.

In outlining her views in her Inaugural Speech Rita described herself as a 'strong federalist, arguing that 'our Federation fosters innovation and creativity' and 'allows for our economies to develop natural strengths and diversity'. To her mind 'uniformity is good for business but in the same respect flexibility is also good for business'. Speaking of the value of education in the same speech she queried the approach which led to one expecting or relying 'on the classroom to be the only vehicle for teaching values and responsibilities in the community'.³

In Parliament itself Rita's first committee assignment came in October 2009 when she was elected to membership of the Public Accounts Committee. Three months later she found herself centre of a media controversy when first the Speaker and then government Minister Rob Johnson had informed her that she could not bring her eight-week-old baby girl, Grace, into the chamber, with at least one Liberal MLA claiming he would move to have mother and baby ejected from the House on the grounds that no non-elected person could be present during the proceedings. The situation had arisen because Rita's husband, who was at the time minding the baby, would be returning to work himself in the forthcoming weeks. In the ensuing media debate the argument was put forward that adhering to the policy would make it virtually impossible for women with very young children to enter politics. The immediate compromise agreement with the Government was that Rita would be automatically paired every time she had to leave the chamber to feed the baby.⁴

Significantly in the previous September Labor frontbencher Michelle Roberts had introduced a private member's Bill based on recommendations from the Equal Opportunity Commission and designed to outlaw discrimination against mothers breastfeeding babies in public.⁵ The Attorney General said the government would oppose the Bill but only on the grounds it considered that the provisions of the existing Equal Opportunity Act were adequate to achieve the same purpose. Rita herself made a short contribution to the Assembly debate on the Bill in which she argued that making specific provision for breastfeeding in the legislation would make it easier for members of the public asked to 'move on' in that situation to refer to the specific legal provisions protecting their position. In her view:

³ Ibid.

⁴ See *Sunday Times* 28 February 2010, pp. 1–2; 7 March 2010, pp. 2 and 11; *West Australian*, 2 March 2010, p. 3; 9 March 2010, p. 11; 10 March 2010, p. 10.

⁵ *WAPD(LA)*, 13 May 2009, pp. 3955–3956.

The Attorney General gave a lawyer's response to what is a bigger issue. It is an issue about women and mothers in society.⁶

Despite the Government's stated opposition the bill passed through the Assembly on the voices in 2009 and the Council in 2010.

Two years later on 14 November 2011 Rita gave birth, via IVF, to twins (a boy and a girl), making her almost certainly the only Australian politician to give birth to three children during the life of one Parliament.⁷ Any suggestion that she might not be in a position to carry out her parliamentary duties when burdened with such family responsibilities should be measured against her contribution in the last few months before the birth of the twins, to the point at which she appeared in the House four days before the babies' birth to present a petition from 210 residents in her area concerning the proposed extension to a poultry farm.⁸ Earlier between 11 August and 2 November she had asked questions or spoken in debate 17 times, including a short contribution on the Cat Bill in which she protested against the level of penalties provided for in the bill⁹; on the proposed football stadium at Burswood, during which she focused on issues concerning the gaps and uncertainties in the costing of the proposals¹⁰; on an Opposition sponsored Bill for the promotion of skilled local jobs for Western Australians¹¹; and on the proposed government Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill.¹²

Earlier Rita had taken the opportunity on each of three occasions in 2009, 2010 and 2011 to speak on the Premier's Statement.¹³ On each occasion she focused on the state's overall financial position as well as on a significant array of issues arising within her electorate. Her vigorous approach is clearly evident from the *Hansard* reports of her speeches which more often than not are punctuated with interjections from her opponents. Similarly, her ongoing focus on the needs of her constituents and the impact of government policy on the public at large can be summed up, firstly, by her taking the initiative in September 2009 and moving a motion seeking to condemn the government for 'budget cuts that are leading to job losses and cuts to core services',¹⁴ and then by her concluding remarks during debate on the Premier's Statement in 2011:

The big projects are great, but when families are not able to go about their business, are not able to catch public transport and are not able to turn on the heater or the air conditioner, what is the use? The government has to get the core things right before it proceeds with massive projects.¹⁵

On the evidence so far Rita has demonstrated that she will certainly be able to reconcile the demands of simultaneously raising a young family and pursuing an active parliamentary career.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 9 September 2009, pp. 6665–6666.

⁷ *West Australian*, 18 November 2011, p. 16; see also *Sunday Times* 19 June 2011, p. 37.

⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 10 November 2011, p. 9334.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 7 September 2011, pp. 6959–6960.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 27 September 2011, pp. 7787–7789.

¹¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 31 August 2011, p. 6524.

¹² *WAPD(LA)*, 31 August 2011, pp. 6512–6513.

¹³ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 March 2009, pp. 1660–1665; 25 February 2010, pp. 7319–7322; and 16 February 2011, pp. 459–463

¹⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 9 September 2009, pp. 6669ff.

¹⁵ *WAPD(LA)*, 16 February 2011, p. 463.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

It is indeed a privilege to serve the community as a member of the State Parliament. Representing the seat of West Swan and as the Labor member has brought much pleasure and an interesting range of issues in which I have been able to get involved.

My electorate is diverse, which makes every day very interesting. What I have enjoyed most about being a member of Parliament is the people. This includes getting to meet a range of people, listening to their concerns, acting on those concerns and, where possible, getting results to improve their lives.

I enjoy politics because I enjoy the ability of being able to do something that improves people's lives. Whether it's developing policy at a macro-level, or whether it's assisting a constituent at a personal level—what we do can make a difference.

A great example recently is when I lobbied to get a bus stop reinstated. The Government had removed a bus-stop and moved it across four lanes of very busy traffic and a fair distance away, making it unsafe and inconvenient for a group of residents. I lobbied the Minister through the media and the Parliament until we got that bus stop reinstated. I was extremely happy I was able to help in that way.

Of course my experience as an economics advisor also allowed me to help set policies for the Gallop and Carpenter Governments. One of our best achievements, and one I was very involved in, was ensuring that the annual increase in the basket of household charges remained below inflation—thus keeping down cost-of-living pressures on households.

In relation to being a woman in Parliament, I have been told that I am possibly the first female politician to give birth to three children in one term of Parliament. And my first term at that! To say it has been hectic is an understatement. It has been and still is a massive juggling act. With a 25-month-old and four-month-old twins every second of my life is accounted for. It is absolutely relentless—but of course very enjoyable and I would not change it for the world.

I have found combining motherhood and being a member of Parliament quite difficult. Like all working mothers, I carry a lot of guilt when I am away from my children. You worry you are not giving the attention and attachment they so deserve. I counter this guilt by giving 100 per cent when I'm at home. My husband and I also have limited our involvement in anything else but work and parenthood.

The irregular and long hours of my job, particularly when Parliament is sitting, makes arranging childcare very difficult. Every week is very different, requiring flexibility in childcare arrangements. I have been lucky that my elderly mother is stepping in on occasions when I am required somewhere and our normal childcare arrangements are not available.

I have also had to undergo IVF treatment for my pregnancies. That in itself has been challenging. As anyone who has undergone IVF treatment would tell you, IVF is a physical and emotional rollercoaster. There are many intensive procedures to go through. These include the drug injections and the tests at the clinic. Then there's the emotional anguish when you receive your negative results, which I went through on a number of occasions.

I did not tell many people I was undertaking IVF treatment. I was not embarrassed in any way, but I was quite emotionally raw when I was in the middle of the process. Now I have been successful I am much more able to talk about IVF freely.

By pure chance, I did not have one day off from Parliament through my six IVF procedures and related operation. It was amazing that all days that required time off work were on non-sitting days. However for me personally, persevering with IVF treatment throughout Parliament sittings was an extremely demanding and exhausting experience. The few colleagues that did know were very supportive.

An interesting anecdote from this time was when I was seven weeks pregnant with my first child. At that time a media outlet ran a story on me that was not entirely correct and as a result did cause me significant stress. When I attended Parliament a week later, the Premier and some of his senior Ministers were very keen to attack me on this issue. On the Sunday before Parliament resumed, I had a miscarriage scare and was told to take it easy, however I did not want to stay away from the sitting week because it would seem as if I had something to hide. A colleague wanted to let the Premier know about my situation, just to assist me in dealing with my pregnancy. I remember I sought advice from Alannah MacTiernan (q.v.) on whether we should let the Premier know. Her advice went something like this 'Never show weakness, Rita, they will always use it against you'. She believed that women should never show weakness as it would always be held against them.

Given my situation I thought she was being a bit over the top in her advice. But of course, she was 100 per cent correct in her analysis. The Premier showed little concern for my situation, and has referred to the situation in debates since then (obscurely thus far) to try to embarrass my colleagues and me. I now subscribe to her view—when you show weakness you become a fair game target in the Parliament, regardless of your personal situation.

Going through IVF as a member of Parliament has also made me appreciate the enormous public policy dilemmas in respect to dealing with infertility. As technology improves and as people grapple with fertility problems more openly, significant moral and ethical questions are being put to policy makers. These policy areas such as surrogacy and adoption are deeply, deeply personal matters. It is only when you are faced with the possibility of not having children do I believe that you can comprehend the extent that you would go to to achieve parenthood. It is an area of public policy that I believe will get greater attention in future years.

I lastly would like to touch upon the work environment for women in Parliament. There has been a lot said, creating a lot of controversy over recent years. Lines like 'Parliament is a boys' club', are often used to describe the Parliament as a working environment.

I want to preface any comments about the Parliament working environment with acknowledging that there are many workplaces that are much more hostile to women than Parliament. Parliament is of course a comfortable and beautiful environment to work in and I am privileged to work there. Nevertheless, there is somewhat of a 'boys' club' or more traditional element to it.

Recently a number of new parents, including myself and a number of male MPs, asked the Speaker of the House if the billiards room could be converted to a parents' room. Many MPs now have children under the age of six, and it is very difficult when families come to visit, as

there is no safe place to take your children. They end up running through the corridors or in the parliamentary dining room. We offered to convert the billiards room ourselves, with no cost to taxpayers, bringing in old toys, change tables et cetera. That proposal was rejected and we continue to have no safe place for children to visit.

Of course I also created a lot of controversy when pregnant with my first child and I went to see the Speaker regarding the prospect of bringing my newborn to Parliament. Members of Parliament do not have maternity leave, and as I was intending to breastfeed and was required to attend Parliament just six weeks after giving birth, I was intending to bring my newborn to Parliament in the early months. I was not intending to sit in the chamber for long periods with my daughter. I just wanted to find out that if there was a division, and I was required for a vote, could I bring my newborn daughter in for that vote. The Speaker refused my request.

When a journalist asked me about the conversation with the Speaker and I explained to them what happened, it made the front page of the newspaper. I never intended this to be a big story and regret the controversy it made. I never wanted my daughter to be subject to such media coverage. Two male members of the Liberal Party and National Party went out and attacked me in the media. Again I learnt a lesson. People may talk about supporting new mothers in the workplace, but when the crunch comes, traditional views still hold and there is limited flexibility for mothers of newborns to be able to get back to their career.