



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

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

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## HELEN MARGARET HODGSON



MLC North Metropolitan Region 22 May 1997–21 May 2001 (AD). Leader of the Australian Democrats 1997–2001. Member Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance 1997–2001; Select Committee to Review the Legislative Council Committee System 1997; Select Committee on Native Title Legislation 1998.

In December 1996 Helen Hodgson was one of the first two members of the Australian Democrats to be elected to the Western Australian Parliament, taking her seat in May 1997. As a new member she faced the immediate challenge of leading her fledgling party which, along with the three members of the Western Australian Greens, held the balance of power in the upper House. As a consequence, in the words of one commentator, she was exposed from the outset to ‘some hard-nosed and high-pressure wheeling and dealing’.

She was born Helen Margaret Applin in Bristol in England on 19 August 1961 and came to Western Australia with her parents, both teachers, in 1963. Educated at Osborne Primary School and Perth Modern School she completed a Bachelor of Business degree at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University) in 1986, before specialising on the legal side of accountancy attaining a Postgraduate Diploma in Business Law in 1991 and a Master’s degree in taxation from the University of New South Wales in 1994. Between 1980 and 1988 she was employed in the Australian Taxation Office and then, until her election to Parliament, as a lecturer in taxation law at Curtin University, where she helped develop a double major in accounting and taxation. An active member of the Australian Society of CPAs and fellow of the Taxation Institute of Australia, she was also a member of the Australasian Tax Teachers Association (treasurer/secretary from 1993 to 1996) and the Business Law Section of the Law Council of Australia. She served as company secretary and a director of AD Properties Pty Ltd and AD Holdings Ltd and published *The Law and Taxation of Trusts* in 1996 as well as various journal articles between 1990 and 1996. In September 1984 she had married Allan Hodgson.

Helen joined the Australian Democrats in 1988 and was treasurer of the WA branch from 1989 to 1993 and national treasurer from 1993 to 1996, as well as representing WA on the national executive from 1990 to 1993. She contested Curtin and the Senate at the 1990 and 1993 federal elections respectively, and opposed Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) in Glendalough in the 1993 state election before winning a Legislative Council seat in the 1996 election from number one place on the Australian Democrats ticket for the North Metropolitan Region.

To quote Helen herself 'Someone once said that luck is the intersection of timing and hard work. That was the case with me.'<sup>1</sup> Her role in Parliament she contended is aimed at 'ensuring accountability and facilitating good government' given that minor parties have a special role as 'the only checks and balances we have in our system', while also in all likelihood frequently adopting a stance which is outside the mainstream point of view. In her Inaugural Speech in May 1997 she went on to contend that far from being considered revolutionary, the change in the balance of power in the Legislative Council should be seen as:

... an inevitable step in the evolution of government in this State. Essentially, the history of the Legislative Council in Western Australia is the story of the increasing democratisation of this Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

Accepting that the traditions of the House should be maintained where they did not have a detrimental effect, she declared herself, with reference to debate on the industrial relations legislation, as saddened:

... that the advent of change in the composition of the House has contributed to the breaking of a number of conventions, at what I believe will be a serious cost to the community.<sup>3</sup>

Helen described herself as:

... part of a generation of women who entered the work force with the belief that anything is possible. The feminist movement of the 1970s had already removed, on paper, many of the barriers, but my experience was that those hard won reforms did not translate to equal opportunity. The taxation industry to which I belonged still provides ample evidence of the existence of these glass ceilings, which limit the ability of women to achieve their full potential.

There seems to be a return to the Victorian belief that a woman should be able to lead a full life within the confines of her home. While I admire women who are fulfilled in this role and believe firmly that there should be adequate support systems for them, for many women this is not an option. In many families, the woman is either the sole breadwinner or cannot survive on the income of her partner alone. Other women need the stimulation of a life outside the home for the sake of their mental health. Women must have choice in balancing a career with domestic duties.<sup>4</sup>

In the speech Helen described her decision to join the Australian Democrats because of what she referred to as 'three core values', honesty, tolerance and compassion and she wove the remainder of her Inaugural Speech around these three themes and a fourth criterion 'reason':

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Robertson, 'Helen Hodgson Profile', *Australian CPA*, December 1998, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 27 May 1997, pp. 3195–3196.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3197.

Law and other proposals must be reasonable to be acceptable to the community. We will be reasonable people to deal with in this Chamber.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2001 election Helen lost her parliamentary seat as did her only party colleague Norm Kelly. A brief scrutiny of the *Hansard* index of speeches shows the enormous range of topics with which Helen had to deal during the four years she was in Parliament including Aboriginal land rights and stolen generation issues, family law matters, labour relations, grain marketing, taxation and budget matters, Sunday observance laws, disallowance of fishery regulations, iron and steel agreement, and gender-based issues, to name but a few. On issues relating to superannuation she argued strongly for, and attempted herself to introduce, legislation preventing discrimination in superannuation legislation on the basis of sexuality.

In her valedictory speech given during an Address-in-Reply debate in May 2001 Helen described the contribution she and her party had made to the house:

We looked at the issues on their merits and without the baggage that came from an agenda that had been passed through the party processes ... We took the role of review of legislation seriously; so seriously that I remember on one occasion being accused of needing to have our thumb prints on everything that came through this place.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for example, she asserted that after she failed to have a requirement for the Iron and Steel (Mid West) Agreement Bill to be referred to the Auditor General, such a requirement was nevertheless included in some subsequent privatisations including the AlintaGas agreement. Over the years she considered that issues to which she had given particular attention included the empowerment of Indigenous people, sexuality law reform, the debate on abortion law reform, domestic violence, prison reform, workers compensation and the deregulation of the dairy industry. With regard to the latter she described as 'tragic ... what has happened, particularly to farmers, since deregulation. She also spoke of an area of special professional and political issues to her namely the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax. Indeed, after leaving Parliament she resumed working as a lecturer in taxation law at Edith Cowan University until 2004 when she moved to the University of New South Wales where she was still on the staff in 2012 and in the process of completing her PhD. One final hope in 2001 which did not come to fruition was her prediction that 'the Australian Democrats will be back' and also, arguably at least, her belief that the Legislative Council would still continue as 'a multi party chamber and a balance-of-power Chamber' in the wake of expected electoral reform.

*Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(These Reflections were written in 1999.)*

I was elected at a turning point in Western Australian politics. The Legislative Council had been dominated by conservatives since WA was awarded self-government, and was overdue for reform. It was generally disregarded as being no more than a rubber stamp for a conservative Government and an obstruction to an ALP Government.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3197 and 3200.

<sup>6</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 3 May 2001, p. 118.

In the 1996 election the electorate was not yet ready to trust the ALP in Government following the scandals of the previous decade, and yet it was becoming disillusioned with the conservative Government which was also seen as secretive and lacking in accountability.

In this climate I was one of the new members elected by the public as a statement of their disillusionment with the two-party system, on a platform of accountability and open Government.

I am very conscious of the responsibilities of being part of the balance of power and I see my role in Parliament in several ways:

1. I was elected in a proportional representation system to represent the views of the minority. I have no hesitation in putting forward the minority view where that is necessary to progress the debate. I believe that all views need to be part of political debate as it is only by taking account of the more extreme views that the middle ground can be reached.
2. Paradoxically, I also need to consider the interests of the majority of Western Australians. Where the two major parties are locked into opposition politics on a particular issue, the role of holding the balance of power comes into play. Holding the balance of power is often viewed with suspicion—but the reality is that it is only significant where the two major parties are in conflict over an issue. In this situation I make my decision in the light of what I believe to be best for the Western Australian community.
3. As part of the accountability function, I believe that Parliament has a responsibility to examine the legislation that is brought before it, to remove anomalies and to keep the powers of the executive and Parliament in balance. In the Legislative Council the Australian Democrats have adopted a policy of scrutinising legislation and moving amendments where we see anomalies. This has been criticised as slowing down the parliamentary process, but we believe that it is necessary in the interests of better legislation.

My political philosophy is based largely on a belief that Government must do more than merely provide a stable economy, allowing all members of society to compete in a free market. I believe that since the 1980s there has not been enough attention paid to ensuring that society is one that provides the social conditions under which citizens of Australia can achieve their full potential.

I do not agree with the basic premise of economic rationalism—that the market place can operate efficiently to protect the rights of all. While it can be argued that an efficient market will ensure that all participate in economic benefits, the focus on economic benefits is arguably at the expense of non-economic wellbeing.

I have found that, although my background and training is in business and commerce, much of my work in the past year has been focussed on human rights. I believe that the Government has an obligation to intervene to correct the imbalances caused by the free market. An example of this can be seen in the area of native title. The major arguments used to justify the extinguishment of native title are based on the economic imperative of providing 'certainty' to

resource and pastoral industries, which are the major economic interests in the state. I believe that it is necessary to balance the economic arguments against the need to restore to Aboriginal people, who are on all measures the most disadvantaged group of people in our society, some sense of control over their own destiny.

I think that one of the issues yet to be addressed in Australian Parliaments is the representation of minority groups in Parliament. As a woman, it is interesting to note that we can still only achieve about 20 per cent of the seats in Parliaments across Australia. As a member of the Australian Democrats, I am proud to note that we generally achieve a better level of women members of Parliament than the old, established parties. I think that this is largely due to our participatory membership and policy system, which allows women to actively participate in the internal workings of the party while still managing the multitude of other matters that women still take responsibility for in our society.

There are other minority groups in the community that are still under represented, however, and I am concerned about the lack of parliamentary representation of these other groups. For example, it is disturbing to see the low representation of Aboriginal people in Australian Parliaments. The recent election of Aden Ridgeway for the Democrats was only the second time that an Indigenous person has held a seat in the Senate; and the first of those, Senator Neville Bonner, was appointed rather than elected by the people.

I find that the hardest question I am asked to answer is whether I enjoy what I am doing. It is hard to say that you enjoy taking on a career as intense and pressured as politics, especially when you are part of the balance of power. It is very demanding on your personal life, and without the strong support of my husband Allan I would not be able to do it. It has, however, opened up opportunities and experiences in which I never thought I would be able to participate. In one day I may have a meeting on tax reform, tour a prison and talk with a constituent over ambulance services.

To me, what is important is that I believe that I am making a difference. Whether I fully achieve my personal—and my party's—policy objectives or not, I do believe that the debate has shifted in the past year, and that the Legislative Council is now taking its true place in examining whether government policy is in fact in the best interests of the state.

*(These Reflections were written in 2012.)*

My parliamentary career was, regrettably, limited to a single term in the WA Legislative Council. It is a matter of record that the negotiations that accompanied the introduction of the GST in the federal Parliament resulted in a change in the way that the Australian Democrats were perceived by the electorate. In 2001 I was one of the first Australian Democrats to face the electorate after the introduction of the GST, and with an electoral swing back to the Labor party, I was not re-elected.

This essentially demonstrates the dilemma for third parties and Independents in a two-party system. Elected to hold Governments accountable, negotiation with the Government is seen as selling out this platform of accountability—yet failure to negotiate is portrayed as blocking reform.

Nevertheless, during my term I was able to participate in significant reforms that, I believe, had a lasting impact. I was privileged to be in the Parliament when abortion was decriminalised. I am particularly proud that the women in Parliament took leading roles in the debate. I recall this time as one that united members across party lines as members of Parliament worked together without reference to party affiliations. However, it was also divisive and I was fortunate that the debate in the Legislative Council was far more civilised than in the Legislative Assembly.

During my time in Parliament one of my core issues was the removal of discrimination on the basis of sexuality. I introduced legislation to amend the Equal Opportunity Act to include protection against discrimination on the grounds of a person's sexuality. While I was not successful in having the law passed during my term, I was immensely moved to be sitting in the public gallery in 2002 when the Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Act was passed to reform the law in relation to same-sex relationships. At the time I was told that equality in marriage was a step too far; it is interesting to reflect on that now, as 10 years later the move for marriage equality is gaining momentum.

I have returned to my pre-parliamentary career as an academic, teaching in tax law at the University of NSW, but my perspective has changed. My term in Parliament sharpened my interest in public policy, particularly how the tax system facilitates policy goals. My PhD is nearing completion, examining how families have been supported through the system of tax and transfer payments since the early 1970s. In particular I am looking at the issue through a gendered lens: how have changes in employment patterns interacted with Government support systems, and what impact this has had on women and families.

In 2011 I was appointed to attend the Tax Forum in Canberra, established by the Federal Government to discuss issues of tax reform. I was appointed as I had recently co-authored a report for the Equality Rights Alliance, funded by the Commonwealth Office for Women, in which we consulted with a range of women about their interaction with the tax, transfer payments and superannuation systems. This was an opportunity to again raise the concerns of women with policymakers.

I am often asked whether I miss the WA Parliament. Although my departure was not at a time of my choosing, and I believe that I had more to contribute, I no longer have any regrets. My term in Parliament has shaped who I am today. I am still able to contribute to the policy process through different processes, and I am still working to improve the lot of women and other minority groups in Australian society.