



**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
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SHEILA MARGARET McHALE



MLA Thornlie 14 December 1996–26 February 2005; Kenwick 26 February 2005–6 September 2008 (ALP). Deputy Chairman of Committees 1997–1999. Acting Speaker 1999–2001. Shadow Minister 1997–2001. Minister of State 16 February 2001–23 September 2008. Member Select Committee on the Human Reproductive Technology Act 1991 1997–1999.

Sheila McHale entered the Legislative Assembly when she won the marginal seat of Thornlie in December 1996 by a little over 600 votes, making her the only new ALP woman member in that chamber. Even before she had taken her seat in the Legislative Assembly, she was appointed as the Labor Party's shadow Minister for Arts and Heritage and, in this regard, the practice of appointing nearly all members of the Opposition party as shadow spokespersons has helped to ensure that newly elected MPs quickly come to grips with the 'cut and thrust' of Parliament. In her Inaugural Speech she recognised the pioneering work of her predecessor, Yvonne Henderson (q.v.), who was described 'as a tenacious, thorough and dedicated Minister of the Crown'.¹ She also commended other Labor women Kay Hallahan and Judyth Watson (qq.v.), who were regarded as excellent role models for women considering a political career. Nevertheless, at the time, Sheila warned that:

We as women must strengthen our presence at the next election so that we do not lose the ground gained during the 1980s and 1990s. Women represent 50 per cent of the population, yet only 21 per cent of this House across all parties are women. That is not good enough for our community and it not good enough for us. For my part, like many women with dual careers—that is, management of family and full-time employment—I am no stranger to hard work, long hours and juggling many responsibilities at once.²

A reference was also made in Sheila's Inaugural Speech to the naming of her son Keir in remembrance of a great British Labour figure, Keir Hardie, the first Labour candidate elected to the British Parliament, in 1892.³ Hardie founded and edited the *Labour Leader* and was

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 March 1997, p. 109.

² *Ibid.* p. 110.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

known as a strong pacifist. In his Inaugural Speech he had concentrated on the problem of unemployment a concern Sheila also addressed. A commitment to social justice, service and accountability were other themes of her speech. Special attention was given to the epidemic proportion of youth suicide, particularly amongst young men. Learned observations were made about the phenomenon. This was accompanied by a call for greater consideration, respect and tolerance for our young people. In fact she said, 'I make a plea to government to refocus on our youth by ensuring that future policies address the alienation of our youth'.⁴ Labour programs and quality education were seen as important strategies to improve self-esteem for youth.

Sheila McHale was born in Yorkshire, England, on 1 September 1953. Her father, Aiden McHale, was a factory worker and her mother, Eileen Murphy, a book-keeper. Her main school education was received at St Mary's College in Leeds. It was not until 1978 that she arrived in Western Australia for the first time and even then she spent a further period in the United Kingdom and in Canberra before settling in the west. She has completed a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in sociology and a Graduate Diploma of Social Science, which partly accounts for the faith in education expressed during her parliamentary career. Immediately prior to entering Parliament, she was an employee relations manager at St John of God in Subiaco, but previously in the United Kingdom she had been a research officer for Nottinghamshire Social Services and a policy officer for the Equal Opportunity Commission, and she had undertaken research contracts in Canberra. She also had experience in Western Australia as a research officer for the University of Western Australia and for the State School Teachers' Union, and at one stage in the 1980s she was the Director of Women's Interests. She had joined the Labor Party in 1984, serving as a branch Vice-President and Treasurer for Labor Women, and was also a member of many community organisations such as the Parents and Citizens Associations and the management committee of the Karawara Community Project. Sheila's professional memberships included the Australian Institute of Management and the Australian Human Resources Institute. Before her election to Parliament she had been an elected councillor at the City of South Perth for three years. Local government had been a stepping stone to Parliament for men and it was now proving to be an avenue for women.

In her first term as a backbencher, Sheila demonstrated a consciousness of the forces of change. Organisations, she asserted, needed to be flexible, value-driven, quality-oriented and customer or client-founded. In her view, a parallel can be drawn between this model and the responsibilities and behaviour as MPs. Of special significance to Sheila were the qualities of integrity, hard work and accountability which had been canvassed in report 3 by the Commission on Government. Accountability considerations were deemed especially important when she spoke to the Legislative Assembly, only a week after her Inaugural Speech, about the Global Dance affair, which had come within the ambit of her shadow arts and heritage role.⁵ Again in late 1998 she led the Opposition's quest to seek an investigation of the funding arrangements of the Western Australian Constitutional Centre by the Legislative Assembly's Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee (subsequently renamed Public Accounts Committee).⁶ More broadly, however, the main thrust of several of her speeches on financial matters, has been the delivery of a 'social dividend', a phrase she heard articulated several times by Premier Court during the electoral campaign of 1996.

⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁵ *WAPD(LA)*, 19 March 1997, pp. 594–595.

⁶ See, for example, *WAPD(LA)*, 10 March 1999, p. 6341; 20 April 1999, p. 7368; and 15 June 1999, pp. 8992–8993.

When Dr Geoff Gallop became the new Labor Party Premier after the 2001 election, Sheila, given her work as shadow Minister, was appointed as the Minister for Culture and the Arts. Other portfolios allocated to McHale were Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth and Disability Services. Then followed more than seven years of very busy ministerial life with responsibility over the years as well for Indigenous Affairs, Consumer Protection and Tourism. In March 2008 she announced that she would not contest the forthcoming election originally expected to be held in February 2009, but as it eventuated she left the Parliament and the Ministry earlier than expected in September 2008. Following the abolition by redistribution of the seat of Thornlie, which she had held from 1996 to 2005, Sheila had represented Kenwick from 26 February 2005 to 6 September 2008.

Sheila's range of very challenging portfolios was devoted to 'heart and soul'. Her approach, where possible, was to be consultative and establish consensus. This enabled her to be remarkably successful at avoiding divisive controversy perhaps best exemplified in her Community Development portfolio. As part of this strategy she had endorsed the involvement of the Department for Community Development in the National Children's Services Workforce Project which had the three goals: to increase the recruitment and retention of qualified staff across centre based services, to improve training and pathways, and to improve the status and standing of those who work in children's services by increasing the recognition of the value and importance of working with children.⁷ In 2004 she announced the establishment of the Child Care Advisory Committee. The independent committee was to play a significant role in not only providing the Minister with advice, but also influencing policy development related to child care in the Department for Community Development.⁸

When Sheila moved the introduction of the Children and Community Services Bill 2003 she indicated it was:

... a milestone for the wellbeing of children, families and communities in Western Australia. It is the culmination of much detailed work over many years, and repeals legislation [Child Welfare Act 1947, Welfare Assistance Act 1961 and the Community Services Act 1972] that is more than 50 years old'.⁹

Consultation had taken place with the key stakeholders and the findings of the Gordon Inquiry into the Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities had been considered. Feedback from children who had been in care was sought, as the overriding principle of the legislation was that the best interests of the children 'must always be paramount'. The Minister indicated how the objects of the Bill clearly articulated the breadth of legislation designed to promote:

The wellbeing of children, other individuals, families and communities; acknowledge the primary role of parents, families and communities in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of children; encourage and support parents, families and communities in carrying out that role; provide for protection and care of children in circumstances in which their

⁷ Hon Sheila McHale (2004), National Childcare Conference, Curtin University of Technology, 23 October 2004, p. 3.

⁸ Hon Sheila McHale (2004), National Childcare Conference, Curtin University of Technology, 23 October 2004, pp. 7-9.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 4 December 2003, p. 14244.

parents have not given, or are unlikely or unable to give, that protection and care; protect children from exploitation in employment; and protect and promote the best interests of children who receive child care services.¹⁰

The legislation was attempting to provide a new way of responding to complex social issues that have emerged in recent years. It required the regulations for child care in Western Australia to be rewritten in a sector that has grown from a cottage industry to a multi-million dollar business in less than a decade. It was not surprising that the Act was subject to amendment in 2007 and then again in 2010, but the significance of the legislation should not be underestimated particularly when it is viewed in concert with the Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking) Act 2004. The legislation as Minister McHale indicated:

[meant] that persons employed, or who volunteer to work with children, or who are in business, must have extensive tests of any criminal records. If they have certain convictions or charges assessed as putting children at risk of sexual or physical harm they will be barred from starting or continuing to work with children.¹¹

Sheila had certainly ‘made a difference’ in the Community Development portfolio as one of the best examples of her range of ministerial roles, which as already indicated had also included Indigenous Affairs, Tourism and Culture and the Arts. After leaving Parliament in 2008 she became the Chief Executive Officer for the Palmerston Association which provides an important community service across the state that helps support individuals and families who are facing issues with alcohol and drug use. The association operates from a number of locations with a therapeutic community 35 kilometres south of Perth, which is supported by the Residential and Family Support Service at the Palmerston Perth office, the South Metropolitan Drug Service Team with offices in Fremantle, Rockingham and Mandurah, and the Great Southern Community Drug Service Team located in Albany and providing services in Katanning, Denmark, Mt Barker, Walpole and other outlying towns. Another of her roles was as Deputy Chair of the WA Drug and Alcohol Network. In concert with her work in Parliament Sheila after leaving politics continued to be devoted to upholding and delivering dividends in terms of the highest ideals of the Labor Party.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999).

When I took my seat in Parliament in March 1997 having been elected on 14 December 1996, I was only the twenty-fourth woman to be elected to the Legislative Assembly since 1920 when women were ‘allowed’ to stand for office. It is staggering that as we move into the twenty-first century, women are so disproportionately represented in Parliament. As one of 13 women members currently in the Assembly, we represent just 23 per cent of all Assembly members. On the other hand, 554 men have been elected through the decades and have been responsible for shaping the laws of this state. Inequities therefore prevail, when only four per cent of all Assembly members elected in the history of the Western Australia Parliament have been women.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ WAPD(LA), 20 October 2004, p. 6946.

Although we are still in the minority, the contribution by women to the political parliamentary system has been significant.

Much social reform over the last decade and a half has been as a result of the tenacity, persistence and fortitude of women and I am delighted and honoured to be part of that political process. Life as a parliamentarian is in my view a richly rewarding and fulfilling experience, but it comes with significant personal cost.

In my Inaugural Speech delivered on 11 March 1997, I concluded with a quote from May Holman (q.v.), the first female Labor member to be elected (1925–1939), in which she said:

I think you will find women as successful as men, but the women will be judged by harder standards.¹²

Frankly, her words ring just as true today as when she first uttered them in 1936.

As members of Parliament and I think particularly as female members, we are seen to be ‘fair game’ for personal attack and abuse.

When I was campaigning in 1996, at a shopping centre in my electorate, I was told that of course ‘you’re all criminals’ (i.e. members of Parliament). Obviously the look on my face prompted the person to add swiftly that perhaps I wasn’t a criminal, but the others are! It is unfortunate that the public’s perception of members of Parliament is not particularly high!

Being acutely conscious of this, I made reference in my Inaugural Speech to the importance of addressing our image problems:

As a Labor Member entering Parliament a mere three years away from the twenty-first century, my task is to adopt an approach to my parliamentary responsibilities which will reassure the community that there still exists a high order of ethical standards among our members of Parliament.¹³

Many personal attacks on members of Parliament are made on a relatively frequent basis; most of them deserve no response and in fact they ought to be ignored, as one’s personal integrity would otherwise take a great hammering. But we must work, in my view, to turn around the poor opinion members of the community hold of us.

Much good work is undertaken by members of Parliament on behalf of individuals and community groups. As an Assembly member with an electorate of over 24 000 voters, the demands from constituent enquiries are enormous and can fill the week, to say nothing of our parliamentary duties. Often, I would work in excess of 70 hours per week and as a single parent of a teenage son, there is a price to pay for such hours. When Parliament is sitting, I may not see my son, Keir, from Tuesday morning until Thursday evening, other than for 15 minutes as we eat breakfast, exchange lunch money and make sure he has got his homework!

¹² *WAPD(LA)*, 11 March 1997, p. 112.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 109.

Being a member of Parliament is a seven-day occupation, so juggling work and family commitments assume legion proportions, and as is often the case the family commitments lose out.

Personal strength and determination are therefore critical.

The following comments again from my Inaugural Speech are pertinent in this context:

I have been asked on numerous occasions whether I am tough enough to put up with political life. I honestly do not think toughness is particularly relevant if it means thick skinned. As with most women who make it to Parliament, the quality of strength is most important—the strength to be focused on task and principle, to be flexible and yet resilient, and to have a vision and deliver it. I do not see myself as tough but I do see myself as strong.¹⁴

The theatrical environment of Parliament is still typically male—at times, gladiatorial, or resembling a bear pit. Only in our case, the public does not have to pay to see the blood being spilt! The women members are still judged—in part at least—by their appearance, dress sense or degree of aggressiveness in debate. In reality, some of the best speeches, penetrating questions are of course delivered by the women.

My strength of character has been very useful during my responsibilities as Deputy Chairman of Committees (Acting Speaker), particularly during the abortion debate when emotions were extraordinarily high. The public gallery was usually full of both pro and anti choice campaigners, many of whom understandably wished to express their point of view. One persistent anti choice campaigner felt it her right to suggest that pro choice members were akin to Hitler by signalling the Nazi infamous salute and calling us ‘murderers’. Such outbursts had to be managed by the Chair, along with the clapping and shouting, all of which of course are ‘unparliamentary’.

The abortion issue would have to be the most significant debate for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was not argued along party political grounds, but according to individual consciences—‘the conscience vote’. Observers would have seen the forging of alliances across party lines, sometimes in strong opposition to members of one’s own party; briefing sessions where Independent, Liberal and Labor members would be working collaboratively together, women members against women members and members trying to undermine the arguments of their political colleagues. Party politics were suspended for the duration of the debate. It was an interesting time indeed, draining, emotional and personally challenging, but as a pro choice member of Parliament, the final outcome was a just and rational one.

Being a member of Parliament offers many challenges indeed. One wonders sometimes why you would be attracted to an occupation with no job description, no conditions of employment, and no fixed hours of work other than long hours over seven days a week.

Yet for me it is without doubt the most rewarding position I have ever had. Recognising the trust given to you by the voters, the power derived from the position which can be put to excellent use on behalf of constituents who themselves feel disempowered, and the privilege

¹⁴ WAPD(LA), 11 March 1997, p. 110.

of shaping legislation for the state, then the reasons why it is most rewarding hopefully become transparent.

I am proud to be the member for Thornlie.

Addendum to Reflections on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 2012).

It is interesting to revisit my first reflections 12 years ago. What struck me in reading my article which I crafted when in opposition in 2000 was just how optimistic it sounded. After my first four years of parliamentary life in opposition. I spent eight glorious, productive but personally confronting years in government as a Cabinet Minister. Looking back over my twelve-year parliamentary career, I feel an enormous and enduring sense of gratitude for the opportunity to serve the people of Western Australia, both at the local level of my electorate as member for Thornlie and Kenwick and at a state level as a Cabinet Minister for eight years during the Gallop and Carpenter Governments.

I cannot help observing though that when I wrote the first reflection, the apparent sense of awe had not yet been challenged by the ferocity of the political system nor the relentless hounding by some aspects of the media machinery. Nevertheless the closing remarks of my earlier reflections ‘I am proud to be the member for Thornlie’ resonate strongly today. I am immensely proud of the achievements of the Labor Government between 2001 and 2008 and humbled by the opportunity I was afforded to play a part in the development of the state of Western Australia and the community through the many portfolios the Premiers asked me to administer.

To some extent, however, I need to measure the impact of Parliament not only on my life but also by its impact on my family. My son, Keir, was a mere 12-year-old-boy when I was first elected in 1996. When I resigned, he was a man of 24 years. He spent his formative years, often with me distracted by the volume of work, often away sitting long hours in the House or, in his eyes, constantly having the mobile phone intrude upon his time with me.

Politics is not for the thin skinned by any means. But it should not intrude upon the lives of others. Unfortunately it does.

From 2001 until my decision to retire in 2008, I had the privilege of administering nine different agencies and portfolios. Such a range of responsibilities generated a diverse range of issues—from the plight of those with disabilities, children abused in the most horrific family circumstances, to encouraging investment in the arts or enticing international holiday makers to see Western Australia as a preferred destination. To keep on top of them required a determined and driven approach, often to the exclusion of others. They also created many great opportunities for the development of new legislation and parliamentary debate. Some of the highlights were the comprehensive overhaul of the child protection legislative framework bringing it out of the dark ages into the twenty-first century, the first carers’ recognition act, the establishment of the first Children’s Commissioner.

Some of my initiatives were at the time subject to ridicule inside and outside of Parliament. The notable one was my decision to relocate the Western Australian Museum collection of over three million objects from damp, overcrowded and grossly inadequate conditions to a storage facility in Welshpool. As a result of the choice of location, I featured—and not in a flattering way—in Dean Alston’s cartoons (the *West Australian* newspaper) appearing to shift everything from hospitals to housing to Welshpool! My caricatured earrings got longer and my hair seemed more punk with each cartoon. It is gratifying that today the ‘warehouse in Welshpool’ is now referred to as the research centre of the Museum. Progress needs time for acceptance!

Putting it simply, I loved my career in Parliament and cherish every moment, even those moments when crises happened and I was subjected to a barrage of abuse. There are many reasons for going into Parliament and one is to maintain the process of democracy which should not be taken for granted nor have its importance diminished. The reasons for leaving Parliament are also many and in my case a desire to encourage renewal amongst the ranks of Labor Caucus as well as, for me, a start of a new career.

Leaving a legacy, whether it be modern legislation, the first state-owned theatre, government appetite for a new state-of-the-art museum or improved systems for children in care is a great reward.