



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

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

David Black
and
Harry Phillips

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YVONNE DAPHNE HENDERSON



MLA Gosnells 19 February 1983–4 February 1989; Thornlie 4 February 1989–14 December 1996 (ALP). Minister of State 25 February 1988–16 February 1993. Shadow Minister 1993–1996. Member of several standing committees including Public Accounts Committee 1983–1986 and Standing Orders Committee 1986–1988. Member Select Committees on Bushfires 1983–1984; on a Breach of Privilege 1983–1984; and on Heritage Laws 1994–1995.

Yvonne Henderson, first elected to the Legislative Assembly as the member for Gosnells in 1983, was a formidable supporter of equal opportunity, particularly on the grounds of gender. In 1984, although still a backbencher, she was invited by the newly elected Labor Government to give the second reading speech and, as she relates in her own 'Reflections' in this publication, she led through the Legislative Assembly the historic Equal Opportunity Bill. She had been very active in the drafting of the Bill which provided for remedies in respect of discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status, pregnancy, race, political conviction, or involving sexual harassment. Although at one stage it was expected that the Legislative Council would seek to amend key aspects of the Bill, only minor amendments were sought, with the Opposition of the day supporting the establishment of an Equal Opportunity Commission, which was to investigate and conciliate complaints as well as engage in community education programs. Yvonne also chaired a Government Domestic Violence Committee and was a Western Australian representative on a Joint Commonwealth Task Force on Domestic Violence.

Born in Yorkshire on 16 May 1948, she was the daughter of Patrick Finn, a bookseller who emigrated with his family in January 1949 to Western Australia. Her secondary education was at John Curtin Senior High School before she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Education at the University of Western Australia. Commencing as a science teacher at Melville Senior High School she became a senior mistress at Morley Senior High School from 1973 and was deputy principal of Mirrabooka Senior High School from 1977 to 1982. From her early teaching days Yvonne was an active member of the State School Teachers' Union, holding various posts including membership of the executive committee. In 1975, on behalf of the Women's Electoral Lobby, she presented a case before the state industrial commission in support of

minimum wages for women. Three years later, again before the commission, she presented a case in support of maternity leave for women employed in the private sector. On 28 January 1971, she married Jeremy Henderson, who was to become secretary of the Municipal Officers Association in 1983. A mother of five children, Yvonne in 1988 became the first woman in Western Australia to give birth while a member of Cabinet.

Apart from her union activities Yvonne was very active in community groups. In 1973 she was a founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby, the Gosnells Stroke Club and an Armadale–Gosnells Women's Refuge Group, as well as Chairperson of the Gosnells Community Youth Support Group from 1982 to 1987 and a member of the Coastal Protection Society. Her membership of the Labor Party dated from 1975 and within a year she was a member of the State Executive. Prior to entering Parliament she held various branch posts and was a delegate to electorate councils and to the Australian Labor Party national conferences in 1982 and 1984. In 1978 she served as State Convenor of Labor Women.

In her Inaugural Speech in Parliament Yvonne spoke strongly about the place of the Labor Party in Australian society representing the hopes and aspirations of the ordinary working people. As she said:

It [the ALP] has always represented the tradition of a fair go for everyone, coupled with concern for those who find themselves in difficult economic circumstances. It is the party which says that all people are equal while at the same time recognising the varied talents and skills of each individual. It is the party which stands for those things that make life in a civilised society possible—sharing, concern for others, and compassion and help for the poor, the sick, and the disadvantaged. It puts concern for the well-being of society above promotion of self interest. It is the party which grew out of the need for working people to have representation in the law-making processes of this country. It is the oldest political party in Australia and one which rejects the promotion of vested interest and privilege.¹

Although keen to uphold the egalitarian principles espoused by the Labor Party Yvonne was also mindful of the need to keep abreast of the changes in the society and economy being induced by modern technology. She forecast:

There is no doubt that Australia will not escape the consequences of this technical information revolution which has already swept other industrialised countries. Undoubtedly the growth of the largest and strongest companies and the growing internationalisation of production will have a dramatic impact on our small business sector which currently provides the greatest employment opportunities of any component in of our economy.²

Yvonne's ministerial career dated from the assumption of office by Peter Dowding as Premier in February 1988. Between that time and until Labor lost office in 1993 she held a range of demanding policy portfolios, including housing, the arts, consumer affairs and industrial relations. Thereafter, as member for Thornlie, a seat she had held since 1989, Yvonne had responsibility for several shadow portfolios. In this latter period, she fought strongly against the Coalition Government's successive 'waves' of amendments to industrial relations legislation which broadly sought to weaken the role of the Industrial Relations Commission, foster workplace agreements

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 2 August 1983, p. 592.

² *Ibid.*, p. 593.

and generally restrict the role of trade unions. Although she was still comparatively young, the demands of nearly two decades of leading roles in the party, Parliament, Government and Opposition, had understandably taken their toll on Yvonne leading to her decision not to contest the 1996 state election. She then opted to undertake studies in law and set out to apply her extensive political knowledge and skills to her employment by the legal firm of Gibson and Gibson during which period she provided pro bono advice to the Sussex Street Community Law Society.

Although Yvonne was a prominent political figure she did not choose to be demonstrative in the public arena. She was efficient and firm in her style and did much to enhance the standing of women holding public office. In her Inaugural Speech, after noting the under representation of women in the chamber, she had observed that:

... in government, the Public Service, in law, in education, and in management, women have rarely been involved in the making of decisions that affect their lives.³

As it was, during her 14 years in Parliament Yvonne Henderson was able to make a significant contribution to redressing the imbalance for women in society's decision making institutions. Nor did this end with her departure from politics. Having completed her law studies and practised law until 2003, in that year she was appointed initially as Acting Equal Opportunity Commissioner, a post she had played a major role in creating, and then a few months later to the substantive position, which she still occupies at the time of writing. In 2010 as recognition of her contribution she was awarded the Sir Ronald Wilson Leadership Award which recognises leadership and commitment achievement in the areas of social justice, human rights, equality and anti-racism.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

The February 1993 election produced victory for the ALP led by Brian Burke. I was elected as part of a team of new MPs in what was a heady and joyous win after nine years in opposition. Now at last came the opportunity to implement the many policies we had worked so hard to draft over the previous five years.

As a newly elected backbencher I was only too conscious of the needs of those who had elected me—the result of months of door knocking. My new electorate secretary, an old friend and campaigner from numerous campaigns in the women's movement, Robyn Murphy, and I were inundated by requests for assistance. The phone rang incessantly for weeks as we tried to cope with the flood of calls. Life as a new member was frantic indeed as not only individuals sought help, but clubs, associations, sporting bodies, and local councils invited me to their functions.

On the parliamentary front my first priority was to assist Brian Burke who as well as being Premier was Minister for Women's Interests. There were no women in the first cabinet. I was given that task of prioritising and commencing implementation of the promises we had made in relation to women. I determined that the first task was to set up a Women's Advisory Council to include women from all walks of life and backgrounds to advise the Premier. This body we hoped

³ Ibid., p. 594

would be a useful ally in implementing our reforms to assist women. Next a Women's Information Service was needed to provide a central agency for women seeking advice and help in relation to a wide range of issues (legal, government, welfare, housing et cetera). We established this service modelled on the successful South Australian service and it was an outstanding success responding to thousands of calls in its first year of operation.

Rape law reform was another key issue we had undertaken to address and we set up a committee to draft legislation to ensure among other things that rape victims could not be questioned about their previous sexual history and to remove the 'victim on trial' approach often seen in courts. Funding for women's refuges and childcare services was also high on the agenda and required strongly argued submissions to the appropriate Minister as part of the budget process. Funds were allocated and much needed services for women including health care centres and learning centres were established in the suburbs. This was a period of frenetic activity as we implemented our election pledges. With each service came demands for and a recognition of a need for more.

In 1984 after many months of drafting, I introduced the Equal Opportunity Bill into the Legislative Assembly. This was the culmination of several years of work, firstly to put a commitment to such legislation into the ALP platform, then to gain cabinet approval for the principles of the Bill, before steering it through a male dominated caucus, and finally through the Parliament. This legislation was only introduced after an intense campaign amongst women's groups and general community groups to raise awareness of, and to gather support for, the proposed Bill. We set up a committee to plan this campaign and the work paid off as the Bill was ultimately supported by both sides of the Parliament. The Bill outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex, pregnancy, marital status, race, religious or political belief, and also outlawed sexual harassment. I gave a commitment in my second reading speech on behalf of the Government to future amendments to outlaw discrimination on the basis of age, parenthood, physical and mental impairment and sexual preference. All of these grounds were later added to the Act with the exception of sexual preference when my attempt to do this in 1996 was defeated.

In 1988 I was elected to cabinet. My pace of life and workload increased tenfold and my single greatest priority was to set aside time in my frantic schedule for working on initiatives to implement our promises to the electorate as set out in the ALP platform. The consensus style of government which we adopted to overcome our lack of control of the upper House meant a commitment to numerous meetings and consultation sessions for each piece of legislation to win over the interest groups and ensure their support for the Bill being drafted. These groups would then in turn put pressure on the Coalition Opposition to support the legislation in the upper House. This was enormously time consuming and meant that a single piece of legislation could take up to two years in the drafting and consultation stage before it began its journey through the Parliament.

In the consumer affairs portfolio, long but fruitful consultations resulted in the passage of the Retirement Villages Act (providing protection for the first time to residents of retirement villages), the Home Building Contracts Act (giving protection to consumers signing contracts for home construction), the Commercial Tenancy (Retail Shops) Agreement Amendment Act (giving increased protection to tenants to retail shops) and the Residential Tenancies Act (giving protection to tenants in residential properties for the first time).

Non-legislative reforms were much easier and more simple to enact. For example, there was the establishment of an Independent Appeals Tribunal for Homeswest tenants; the granting of

excisions from pastoral properties for 99-year leases to Aboriginal communities with traditional links to the land (land rights legislation having been rejected by the upper House); and reallocation of housing funds to ensure a more substantial program of construction of public housing with a greater range of options including housing co-operatives.

Tripartite consultative bodies representing employers, employees and government had been established by statute before I became Minister for Industrial Relations. This required a great deal of time to be spent discussing and negotiating proposals to reform the Industrial Relations Act. However, very little was achieved in terms of legislative change as the employer groups opposed any changes perceived as benefiting employees. The result of this was minimal legislative change and where I sought to make changes by regulation (e.g. by reducing the permissible levels of workplace noise and tightening regulations controlling manual handling procedures at work), these were immediately dismantled by the incoming Coalition Government in 1993.

However, major workplace improvements were able to be effected by, for example, ensuring adequate resources and inspectors to ensure compliance with the Occupation Health, Safety and Welfare Act, and by providing support and assistance to ensure positive outcomes to workplace bargaining in the public sector and greater protection for low-paid workers.

In 1993 the ALP lost government and I spent the next four years as a Shadow Minister. During 1993 the Coalition Minister for Industrial Relations introduced and guillotined through State Parliament major changes to the state's industrial relations and workers' compensation laws. These changes were designed to compel individual workers to enter into contracts with their employers and removed the award safety net of wages and conditions that had been built up over 90 years. It was a rude shock to me after our painstaking consultations in order to make minor improvements to the industrial relations system to see a government Minister dismantle a whole system with no consultation and by the savage use of the guillotine in Parliament to stifle debate. It was a grim reminder of the shackles that our Government had laboured under without control of the Legislative Council.

Nevertheless, these industrial changes did serve to galvanise the wider labour movement and provided a focal point around which many meetings occurred leading to mass protests, rallies and other forms of dissent. I consulted widely and many from within the labour movement assisted in drafting in excess of 100 amendments to the Workplace Agreements Act most of which were never debated due to the Government's ruthless use of the guillotine. Despite this it was a time of great camaraderie and energy—unions received a boost to their memberships as workers saw the Minister threatening their right to the protections offered by trade unions.