



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

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

David Black  
and  
Harry Phillips

**Parliamentary History Project  
Parliament of Western Australia  
2012**

## JACQUELINE PATRICIA WATKINS



MLA Joondalup 19 February 1983–4 February 1989; Wanneroo 4 February 1989–6 February 1993 (ALP). Government Whip 1990–1992. Member Joint House Committee 1986–1987. Member Select Committee Inquiring into the National HIV/Aids Strategy White Paper 1989–1990; Chairperson Select Committee on Youth Affairs 1990–1991.

Jackie Watkins was one of the band of women candidates who won marginal seats, and considerable publicity, when Brian Burke led the Labor Party to office in 1983. After retaining the northern suburbs seat of Joondalup in 1986 she won a close contest for the revamped seat of Wanneroo in 1989 only to lose the seat by a similarly narrow margin in 1993 when the Coalition came to power. In her final two years as a parliamentarian Jackie had held the exacting office of Government Whip, during the period of minority government under Premier Carmen Lawrence. Although she did not gain ministerial status she also distinguished herself as the Chairperson of the Select Committee on Youth Affairs, which conducted its hearings in 1991 and 1992. Government and opposition members, together with professional observers, praised the conduct and deliberations of the committee and Jackie was described as being a very good chairperson, efficient, dynamic and determined to investigate issues concerning which she had an open mind. In tabling the committee's final report in the Legislative Assembly she said:

During the course of taking evidence and receiving submissions I was saddened by the fact that many of the agencies dealing with young people do not communicate with each other. In my view there is a plethora of agencies in the inner city but a lack of agencies in the outer suburbs. That is probably a reflection of past events, but it should certainly be looked into.

Members will note that one of the recommendations of the committee is that the State Government should develop a comprehensive State youth policy which addresses the needs of young people, including disadvantaged and at risk youth. The committee also recommends that a ministry for youth be established.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> WAPD(LA), 4 June 1992, pp. 3483–3483.

Jackie Watkins was born in London, England, on 3 June 1949, daughter of waterside worker Charles Fletcher and his wife, Lillian. She received her primary and secondary education in London but left school at an early age and was employed as a secretary in various firms before emigrating to Australia, arriving on 28 February 1971. Before leaving England she had married Ross Watkins and her four children included two boys and two girls. In 1975 she joined the Labor Party, in which she held various posts including vice-president, secretary and treasurer of the Wanneroo branch, secretary of the Moore electorate council and delegate to both state executive and state conference. From the mid 1970s she was also a member, coordinator or patron to a plethora of educational, neighbourhood and community groups, sporting clubs, the Wanneroo Tourist Council and the Bicentennial Committee for the Shire of Wanneroo. Throughout these years she was a strong advocate of the Wanneroo community and not surprisingly an enthusiastic supporter of the Labor Government's successful moves to construct a Perth–Joondalup passenger railway. In 1984 she was appointed a Justice of the Peace, and one year later, she celebrated her second marriage to Senator Jim McKiernan, adding two stepsons and one stepdaughter to her existing family. After losing her state parliamentary seat she worked for a time in a research capacity on her husband's parliamentary staff.

In delivering her Inaugural Speech in the Address-in-Reply debate on 27 July 1983 Jackie said:

I noted with interest that the four seats which achieved the greatest swings in this State were Pilbara with 18 per cent; Joondalup with 16.8 percent; Whitford with 15.1 per cent and Albany with 12 per cent. All those seats had women as candidates.<sup>2</sup>

In other parts of her speech Jackie gave special attention to constituency issues such as health, transport, local government and tourism. She then sought indulgence to mention adoption legislation which she believed 'need[ed] urgent reform'.<sup>3</sup> A furore was soon created with her later admission that she, too, was a relinquishing mother. New adoption legislation was not forthcoming until 1992 and after losing her seat in 1993 she expressed disappointment with the modifications made to the original draft of the Bill.

Early in her parliamentary life Jackie strongly advocated the passage of the 1984 Equal Opportunity Bill. She was proud that the Labor Party had lived up to its promises in several fundamental areas including fostering the appointment of qualified women to government bodies; setting up the WA Women's Advisory Council; appointing a women's advisor; establishing the women's interests division in the Department of Premier and Cabinet; and initiating a women's information and referral exchange centre. In pressing for equal opportunity, Jackie provided evidence of discrimination against women, especially in finance and employment. She was prepared to speak forcefully against many forms of discrimination including that directed at Aboriginal peoples and immigrants.

In December 1989 Jackie advocated the passage of the Decriminalisation of Sodomy Bill, asserting that one of the most common uninformed criticisms was that decriminalisation will lead to the degeneration of family life. She also said it was fallacious to suggest that decriminalisation of homosexuality would increase the spread of AIDS. This was considered to be contrary to informed medical opinion. As indicated, her membership of the Select Committee into the

---

<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 July 1983, p. 412.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 415.

National HIV/AIDS Strategy White Paper placed her in a strong position to be well informed on these contentious matters.

Throughout her 10 years in Parliament Jackie represented highly marginal seats (her majority in 1989 was less than 600 votes) and by both disposition and necessity she served her electorates with great diligence. In her first speech in the Legislative Assembly for the marginal seat of Wanneroo during the budget debate in September 1989, she provided considerable detail of the government services in the electorate. In the course of this resume she was prepared to name individuals and group workforces who provided excellent service to the community. For instance, in praising the Government's new Wanneroo Youth Centre's operations she stated:

...a few cynics did not believe that Wanneroo had the population of young people to support a youth centre. Nothing could be further from the truth. We often have as many as 90 young people attending that centre. Our youth worker, Joanne Brincau, is a mighty young woman. Not only is she able to bring together the youth of that area, but she also plays the role of counsellor, and—dare I say it—surrogate parent. She spends a lot of time talking not only to the young people but also to their parents.<sup>4</sup>

This was typical of Jackie's attempt to connect with the real concerns of her electorate and capacity to understand the expressions of ordinary people. As she wrote in her 'Reflections', 'to me the easiest part of my life as a parliamentarian was looking after my constituents'. Interestingly, though, she also claimed 'the hardest part of my parliamentary life was Parliament itself'. In this respect she was very critical of the sitting hours of the Legislative Assembly, claiming that if the pattern adopted by the Commonwealth Parliament was adopted in Western Australia it was likely that 'parliamentarians and staff in the Parliament would lead healthier and happier lives'.

After leaving Parliament Jackie became very involved with the Former Members' Association serving as treasurer from 2008 and secretary/treasurer from 2010. She also served as Chair of the Hairdressers Association Board of WA from 2006 to 2009; a member of the Governing Council of West Coast TAFE from 2003 to 2005; and a member of the City of Bayswater's School Volunteer Program from 2010.

#### *Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(These reflections were written in 1999)*

**Daunted** – this best describes how I felt when I first entered the hallowed halls of the Legislative Assembly in 1983.

Although I felt daunted about the prospect of 'being' in Parliament, I was not daunted by the fact that I was a woman in a predominantly 'man's world'.

---

<sup>4</sup> WAPD(LA), 19 September 1989, p. 2237.

To be elected to serve the people of the electorate of Joondalup was an awesome responsibility for me, a relatively young (33) woman with a young family with absolutely no experience in parliamentary procedure, but with very good gut feelings for people's problems.

The Legislative Assembly, prior to 1983 when four women (the pioneers) were elected to it, had only ever had four women members, so 'overnight' the four of us—myself, Pam Beggs (q.v.), Pam Buchanan (q.v.) and Yvonne Henderson (q.v.)—became an 'influx of women'. The oft-heard cry was '*we're being overrun with bloody women*'.

Amazingly, the greatest swings that were achieved in the 1983 general election were those achieved by women. I say amazingly because as a woman I had often been told that it was much more difficult for a woman to get elected to the Parliament as the electorate wouldn't 'cop' us.

I'm reasonably sure that the Assembly men didn't really know what to make of us, or make of me anyway. Was it novelty value? I found myself, in the first few months of becoming a member, being patronised with the glib comment or the sexist remark. Fortunately for me, but unfortunately for the patroniser/s, I am blessed (?) with a quick sharp tongue which can, at times, be witty but can also be cutting. I was not patronised for long.

At the time of my entry to the Assembly, the Clerk and Assistant Clerk of the Assembly in Bruce Okely and Lionel Farrell were of enormous assistance to me, always having the time to explain, in plain English, what probably to them were relatively simple matters. I might also add that I was never made to feel inadequate by either of them because I didn't know what something meant.

It did take me some time to overcome my abject terror of speaking in the Chamber. Amazingly really that I was so terrified. When I think back to some of the speeches that were made by other members, I can now in hindsight say there was absolutely nothing to fear except fear itself.

The worse aspect of parliamentary debate is personal vilification. It is used far too often. It is neither clever nor funny to vilify another person if there is no cause other than to score a political point. Such comment is usually recorded by the press and can cause immense hurt to the person and the family of the person at whom the vilifying remarks were directed.

I have never been able to condone such behaviour from either side of the political spectrum. It is a cowardly act. If you have something to say about someone, do it to his or her face, it's far more effective.

In terms of juggling the responsibilities of family, electorate and Parliament, I must confess that my family took a back seat for far too long. If there is one piece of advice I can impart to anyone thinking about a parliamentary career, it is **DO NOT NEGLECT YOUR FAMILY**. In time I learned to prioritise things and always tried to ensure that I had at least one day per week being mum and wife.

To me, the easiest part of my life as a parliamentarian was looking after my constituents. I have always enjoyed the challenge of, what on the surface appears to be an insurmountable problem. I do not believe that I can remember one that I was unable to either fully or partially resolve.

I did not always like those who came to me for help, but then I guess they didn't always like me. Nevertheless, they always got help unless they had been unbearably rude to my staff. I would not tolerate that. Help was then only given if an apology was made, not to me but to my staff member.

The hardest part of my parliamentary life was the Parliament itself. Why?

The sitting patterns were then quite ridiculous: the very first time I 'sat', the sitting went on until 6am the following day. Crazy. No sane person can function properly at the point of exhaustion and no staff working in the Parliament should have to endure such unhealthy hours.

My view is that the Parliament should adopt a sitting pattern similar to that of the Commonwealth Parliament. Two weeks on and two weeks off, sitting from Monday to Thursday, varying the hours of sitting such as 12.30 to 22.30 on Mondays, 14.00 to 22.30 on Tuesdays, 09.30 to 19.30 on Wednesdays and 09.30 to 16.00 on Thursdays. Perhaps that's too simplistic, but if such hours were adopted maybe parliamentarians and staff in the Parliament would live healthier and happier lives.

Being a woman, in what essentially was a 'man's world' was always an interesting experience. For instance, I remember attending my first seminar/meeting on transport: it was about the design/layout of new trains as I recall. There were at least 100 people in the room, five of whom were women, but only one (me) a parliamentarian. I was able to make a positive contribution in terms of facilities that should be made available for parents with young children.

An indication of my success is that toilets on long haul trains have baby changing facilities: a simple thing but nonetheless very important. I do remember that when I made this suggestion the response was, 'gosh we never thought of that'. From then on, I was often asked my opinion from 'a woman's perspective'.

The most positive part about being a woman parliamentarian was being sought out by my male colleagues for advice on a 'personal matter' or on a delicate constituency problem. I really do believe that despite the early protestations of '*being overrun by bloody women*' the blokes would be lost without us.

It is my hope that my contribution as a woman parliamentarian, has in some small way assisted those women who have followed me to the House on the Hill. The 1983 quartet of Watkins, Beggs, Buchanan and Henderson may have been a little green around the gills to start with, but each of us, in our own fashion has achieved some pretty remarkable milestones.

*(These additional Reflections were written in 2012.)*

When I made my last contribution to *Making a Difference*, I said that it was my hope that my contribution as a woman parliamentarian had in some small way assisted those women that followed me to the House on the Hill.

The 1983 quartet of women who were elected to the Legislative Assembly were all mothers with relatively young children. Between us, we had 13 children—nine daughters and four sons, and our ages then were 33, 34, 35 and 45.

Despite public opinion at the time declaring that women should be at home looking after the 'kids', we showed, because we were women, we had the tenacity, diligence, compassion and balls, that we could and did make a difference to the lives of ordinary women and men in our community. In those exhilarating times from 1983 until 1993, three of the '83 quartet' became Ministers and each of us fought and won three successive elections, but only one remained in Parliament after 1993. The one who remained had the rare distinction of having a child while a serving Minister.

Thinking back, we were a gutsy bunch. We served with three different party leaders, endured two leadership ballots and we survived! So did we assist the plethora of bright, passionate and enthusiastic women that followed us? You betcha!

Young people, early childhood education, public transport, public health, public housing were all issues that I pursued with vigor as a parliamentarian. They are still a passion for me and some of them are still a focus of my attention.

I am dismayed with the way in which our current education system deals with early childhood. Why, oh why, can't the focus be on social interaction, learning to play and share? Why do we need to dress three year olds in school uniform and have them sit in a classroom two full days a week? Early childhood education is, in my view, the most important part of happy, inclusive and successful school life.

I am also dismayed at our current public housing crisis.

So many people in need.

Mental health issues, poor social interaction skills, financial depression, large immigrant families, homelessness. All these issues put an enormous drain on scant public housing stock. Priority waiting lists have blown out of all proportion, with many on those lists waiting up to two and a half years before they are housed. In my view, public housing needs to be subjected to a serious overhaul. Policy needs to be rewritten; emergency housing needs to be re-introduced to ensure that those most in need are given a chance.

So, what am I doing now?

- Serving as a member of the Department of Housing's Regional Appeals Committee in Mirrabooka, hearing appeals on a plethora of issues ranging from vacated tenant liabilities, to decline of priority housing. Not an easy task but one that I find both challenging and rewarding.
- Mentoring children at a local primary school. Also challenging and rewarding.
- Membership Secretary of the WA Irish Club. Fun and challenging.

- Secretary/Treasurer of the WA Parliamentary Former Members' Association.
- Duty Justice of the Peace rostered at the City of Bayswater's Morley Galleria signing centre.

Most of these things are voluntary, so I can give something back to a community that has been very good to me.

Lastly, some may remember my first speech to Parliament when I spoke about the need to universally change adoption laws and, in so doing, told the world that I was a relinquishing mum. Watching a *Four Corners* program on Monday, 27 February 2012 took me back to that speech I made 29 years ago. Even though it has taken more than a generation, it is gratifying to know that the Commonwealth is recognising the enormous toll adoption practice has taken on relinquishing mums and their families and I look forward to reading the findings of the Senate committee on this matter.