



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

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

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and
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SUSAN ELIZABETH WALKER



MLA Nedlands 9 June 2001–6 September 2008 (Lib; Ind from 2008). Shadow Minister 1 July 2001–4 February 2008. Member Community Development and Justice Standing Committee 2002–2004.

When Sue Walker was elected to the Legislative Assembly on 9 June 2001 for the seat of Nedlands, she was not only the first woman to represent the electorate but also the first person other than a member of the Court family to hold the seat for nearly half a century. Sir Charles had been MLA for Nedlands from 1953 to 1982 and his son and future Premier Richard succeeded him, representing the seat until his resignation after losing office in the February 2001 election. Moreover, for the 20 years prior to 1950, the seat had been held by Nationalist and then Liberal Norbert Keenan with student David Grayden providing the one interlude between 1950 and 1953. From the outset Sue was to play a prominent and frequently controversial role in the opposition ranks before losing the seat as an Independent in 2008.

Susan Elizabeth Walker was born in Plymouth, England on 14 September 1951, daughter of Joseph Herbert Walker, a builder, and Sheila Webster. The first 16 years of Sue's life were spent in England where she attended West Park Infants Primary School from 1955 to 1957, Honicknowle Junior School from 1957 to 1961 and Honicknowle Secondary Modern School from 1961 to 1967. She arrived in Western Australia in 1967 with her parents and four siblings and during the following 13 years before she enrolled at the University of Western Australia she was a pastoralist and grazier on Mooloo Downs in the Gascoyne from 1973 to 1976 and then on the Hamelin Pool Sheep Station from 1976 to 1978. Between 1978 and 1980 she was state vice-president of the Isolated Children's Parents Association. On 12 March 1973 she married future MLA and Senator Philip 'Ross' Lightfoot, by whom she had one son and one daughter and from whom she was subsequently divorced.

Between 1980 and 1992 Sue was enrolled in the arts and then law faculties at UWA, graduating with a BJuris and LLB. Between 1989 and 1992 she worked as a professional research assistant to crown prosecutors and future judges Graeme Scott and John McKechnie, and from February to December 1992 she was the head of the Director of Public Prosecutions

research unit. After a term as an articled clerk in the Crown Solicitor's Office from December 1992 to January 1994, she worked as a crown prosecutor in the DPP office from 1994 until her election to Parliament. During those years she was a member of and/or held official positions in numerous organisations including the WA Club (on the board of management) from 1998 to 2000, the Karrakatta Club from 1996 to 1998 and the Palmerston Association from 1998 to 2001. She was a member of the committee of the Criminal Lawyers' Association from 1997 to 2000. Other organisations to which she has belonged over the years include the Samuel Griffith Society, the 500 Club, the Western Australian Theatre Arts Trust and Friends of the WA Art Gallery.

Sue had joined the Liberal Party Carnarvon branch as early as 1975 and from 1982 she was active in the Dalkeith branch, serving as president from 1994 to 2001. Dating from 1984 she had been a state conference delegate; from 2000 she was a senior vice-president of the Curtin division and from 1997 to 2000 she was a state councillor. During all these years she served on numerous campaign committees and her active role in the district contributed significantly to her preselection for the blue ribbon seat of Nedlands after former Premier Richard Court decided to leave politics and return to a business career. In the general election, with six candidates, Richard Court had held the seat with 49 per cent of the primary vote and a majority of 55 per cent, after preferences defeating Liz Davenport who had polled 18.2 per cent compared with the ALP's 19 per cent. In the by-election four months later there were eight candidates, including ALP and Greens candidates, and Sue's majority over the Greens after preferences was a little over 1,000 votes, with 53.4 per cent of the two-party vote. Sue effectively achieved much the same level of support as Richard Court in the general election. In 2005, with six candidates contesting the seat, Sue polled 51.9 per cent of the primary vote and won with a majority of more than 4,000 votes over the ALP candidate, receiving 58.4 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, a swing of more than three per cent from the 2001 result.

With her strong background in law, and in a party with few Liberal MPs with legal qualifications, Sue was included in the Barnett shadow Ministry in July 2001, firstly as spokesperson for tourism and then in addition for justice from February 2002. From February 2004 she was designated as shadow Attorney General and moved from responsibility for tourism to community services. In the coalition shadow Ministry formed in May 2004 she was shadow Attorney General and Minister for Justice, and remained shadow Attorney General after the 2005 election, with one short exception in 2006, with one year also as shadow Minister for Women's Interests, until February 2008, when she refused to accept a position in a reformed shadow Ministry under new leader Troy Buswell and resigned from the Liberal Party, designating herself as an Independent. This occurred even though one of her frontbench colleagues said that if she remained in the party, she would have been preselected unopposed for Nedlands.¹

In her Inaugural Speech on 28 June 2001 Sue paid special tribute to pioneering woman MP Edith Cowan for her role in achieving the passage of the Women's Legal Status Act, which was designed to remove women's disqualification from entry into the legal and other professions.² Subsequently, issues concerning the position of women in party and parliamentary politics arose for Sue on many occasions during her seven years in Parliament. Over the years, however, she received strong support as well as criticism from a number of

¹ *West Australian*, 9 February 2008.

² *WAPD(LA)*, 28 June 2001, p. 1575.

quarters for her views, referring to what was described by one commentator as ‘the boys’ club view that many people have of the Liberal party’.

As it was, however, during the second four-year term of the Labor Government Sue found herself increasingly in conflict with Liberal Party leaders. In March 2006 she was critical of a number of proposals put forward by leader Matt Birney and was sacked as shadow Attorney General, only to be reinstated ten days later by new leader Paul Omodei. Subsequently and throughout 2006 she was very critical of her party’s apparent weakening of its stance in opposition to the Government’s proposal to sell all or part of the old Sunset Hospital site, a proposal linked to an agreement with the University of Western Australia to redevelop the site allowing for a museum, aged care and residential apartments.³ For her part Sue proposed, though without the backing of her party, to bring the site under the control of the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, the authority which also controlled Kings Park, but as it eventuated the heritage listing of parts of the site and other issues eventually prevented the proposal proceeding.⁴ Towards the end of 2006, and again a year later, Sue went further, attempting to introduce a Bill to amend the Heritage of Western Australia Act to give owners the right to force the state to buy their property if it was put on the state’s Register of Heritage Places.⁵

Throughout the seven years she was in Parliament Sue made numerous contributions to debates on Bills; censure motions, in particular those connected with various aspects of civil and criminal law; and a variety of issues connected with the environment. In her Inaugural Speech, describing herself as ‘a former pastoralist and grazier who lived in the Australian bush for a number of years’ she referred to her:

deep appreciation of the beauty and frailty of the natural environment and all living things. Western Australians of all age groups are concerned about the preservation of our planet. They ask us, as parliamentarians, to ensure that we carefully protect our planet and talk with and listen to the community when deciding on issues that affect the environment.⁶

In the first two months of 2008 Sue finally broke with the Liberal Party during the change of leadership from Paul Omodei to Troy Buswell. She did not attend the meeting at which the leadership changed and on 4 February she rejected an offer by Buswell to enter his shadow Ministry as shadow Attorney General.⁷ In making this decision, and choosing to contest the next election as an Independent, even though she had attracted no opposition for Liberal preselection as the candidate for Nedlands, she indicated that her position had been undermined by others in the party and was particularly critical of the influence wielded by former Senator Noel Crichton-Browne.⁸

During the remaining months before the election due later in 2008 or early in 2009 Sue continued to play an active and independent role in parliamentary debates. Thus during debate

³ See, for example, *West Australian*, 2 November 2006.

⁴ For Sue Walker’s views on this issue generally see her hour long speech on the *Sunset Hospital Site Bill* in 2006 (*WAPD(LA)*, 17 August 2006, pp. 4810–4820).

⁵ See, for example, *West Australian*, 9 December 2006, p. 19.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 28 June 2001, p. 1575.

⁷ *West Australian*, 5 February 2008.

⁸ See, for example, *Subiaco Post*, 6 September 2008 and 8 March 2008 (for reply from Crichton-Browne).

on the Criminal Law Amendment (Homicide) Bill designed, inter alia, to remove the distinction between murder and wilful murder she informed her colleagues:

I do not think that the conservative members of this house understand that in this bill, the Attorney is proposing to abolish not only the offence of wilful murder, but also the mandatory term of life imprisonment for the offence of murder ... The conservative members of this house want to impose a mandatory term of imprisonment for people who assault a police officer. However, they also want to abolish the mandatory term of life imprisonment for murder ... I do not agree with that.⁹

When the election was held on 6 September 2008, there were six candidates for Nedlands, with Sue polling 22.75 per cent of the primary vote compared with 45.46 per cent for the endorsed Liberal candidate, Bill Marmion. Although Sue received more than 80 per cent of the preferences from the ALP candidate, in the final preference distribution she fell about 1,000 votes short and in the wake of her defeat she moved to New South Wales.

During her seven years in the Assembly Sue had always given special attention to environment issues, stemming from her discussion in her Inaugural Speech about the protection of old-growth forests and the proposed development of bushland in the Underwood Avenue area in Shenton Park. She cited old-growth forests as ‘an example of the concern that the Australian community has about the retention of irreplaceable community assets’.¹⁰ Other issues attracting her attention in that first speech were the pressing need for improved aged care facilities and issues related to drugs. In terms of her overall parliamentary involvement Sue can be considered as one of the most environmentally conscious Liberal Party MPs and also as one who placed great emphasis on the views of her constituents. This latter in particular reflected an outlook which would have helped in part at least for the significant strong personal following in the electorate which she enjoyed during her seven years in the Parliament and for her strong though eventually unsuccessful attempt to retain the seat as an Independent.

Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career

In the immediate aftermath of her defeat in the 2008 election, when she contested Nedlands as an Independent, Sue Walker indicated that ‘she was unlikely to nominate at the next election’: ‘I’ve done my bit and worked very hard ... My family say they will be happy to have me back’.¹¹ With reference to her decision to leave the Liberal Party she contended:

I was made aware that if the Liberals won I was to be ‘Pendalised’—they were happy for me to do all the hard work in opposition but I would not be appointed minister.¹²

Shortly before the poll she had asserted that she would not ‘bring down a Liberal government if she held the balance of power’. Claiming that she had always found her party leader, Colin Barnett, as ‘reasonable and willing to listen’ she indicated that ‘if he behaves with integrity

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 6 May 2008, p. 2445.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 28 June 2001, p. 1575.

¹¹ *Subiaco Post*, 20 September 2008, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.* The reference is to the failure of Liberal MP Phillip Pendal to be included in the Court ministry in 1993 despite being a member of the Shadow Cabinet.

towards my electorate, as I expect he would, I would support his government. But if a bill doesn't benefit my electorate I would vote against it'.¹³

Whatever the nature of her relationship with her own political party Sue always asserted a strong concern for and empathy with the needs and interests of her constituents, a view particularly associated with her sustained campaign to keep the old Sunset Home site in Dalkeith under public ownership. As the lead speaker for the Opposition in the House on 17 August 2006 on the proposed agreement with the University of Western Australia to develop the site, she spoke for an hour commencing her remarks by asking 'I wonder how this appalling Bill ever got this far in this Parliament'. In her view:

Successive governments have not listened to the community. There has never been genuine community consultation on this issue ... My questions are on behalf of my electorate. How and why does the government propose to give away 90 per cent of the land ... The argument of my constituents is that, as the land is no longer needed for the old men's depot, it should revert to recreational land ... The question my constituents ask is: why did successive governments not legislate to return the land to the purpose of recreation as Sir John Forrest envisaged in 1890 and as was the original purpose for which it was set down.¹⁴

Having argued for bringing the Sunset site under the authority of the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, she returned again to her theme that:

The Sunset site is a state treasure and since the closure of the hospital it should have been treated accordingly [and promoted] as a unique and historical example of the great history of Western Australia. This great man, Sir John Forrest, thought that was what should be done ... The strategic policy should involve the development of a relationship with local schools and authorities to promote the cultural and historical significance of the Sunset site ... The government should inject some money into it and the authority could look after it and make it beautiful.¹⁵

During the debate in October 2006 on the Bill to provide for a trial period and a referendum on daylight saving, Sue argued again that she would make her decision on how to vote on behalf of the electorate. Quoting the figures from the various contacts she made through emails and personal visits, she indicated that the impression was that 'it is young people who want a daylight saving trial'¹⁶ and that country voters or those with country connections were strongly opposed. The content of her speech was based on reading from the various emails and letters she had received, and her conclusion quite simply was that she would support the trial:

I have sympathy for people from the country, but I am representing my electorate now and trying to do the right thing by them.¹⁷

In terms of the parliamentary process and the demands they placed on members within the House, in September Sue spoke forcefully against proposals (eventually adopted through the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal) of making additional payments to the chairpersons of

¹³ Ibid., 6 September 2008.

¹⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 17 August 2006, pp. 4810, 4811, 4816.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4820.

¹⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, p. 31 October 2006, p. 7928.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 7930.

standing committee, including in her remarks opposition to emoluments for parliamentary secretaries when shadow ministers received no comparable remuneration:

I did not know that members in those positions are given extra money ... I would like a list of every member of this house who gets money over and above a backbencher's pay and what it is for ... I did not know that members get extra money for doing that while I have been going around like a packhorse for years doing shadow ministerial work for nothing ... Shadow ministers work very hard with no resources ... I am sorry that there is not an amendment from my side of politics that would allow a complete review of all additional responsibilities of members of Parliament, other than for the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition.¹⁸

As one linked from time to time with assertions that the WA Parliament and her own party functioned as a 'boys' club', Sue made thoughtful and frequently forthright speeches on so-called 'women's issues'. In particular, Sue made two speeches of approximately an hour's duration in total on legislation designed to regulate or control prostitution. The central thesis of her arguments in 2007 was that so-called 'containment' legislation effectively:

... supports organised crime and seeks to protect the clients of prostitutes... [and others] who feed off this industry.¹⁹

She argued that while prostitutes under the 2007 Bill could not be licensed if they had committed a number of offences, no such restrictions applied to the so-called 'client'.

Four years earlier she had asserted that prostitution was 'demeaning to women and that it is very much violence against women'. As such she 'would not encourage [women] into the world of prostitution and organised crime. I will not encourage them to allow older people—sleazy, slimy operators—to use their bodies to make money for them. That is what this legislation will do'.²⁰

By contrast on the Human Reproductive Technology Amendment Bill 2007 Sue found herself 'conflicted' in that while during her preselection for the 2001 election she had told potential supporters that she did support abortion law reform, in 2003 she had voted against legislation regulating research on excess human embryos basically because the 'embryos were live'. Specifically, with the 2007 Bill the conflict was between the belief that 'some people in the community need continuing scientific research' and her concern that no-one was advocating for the embryos that 'are being created and are destined to live for only 14 days'. As with the debate on prostitution Sue considered that this was very much 'a women's issue, and I think it is important that women in this Parliament represent the interests of women in the community'.²¹ Sue's approach to many important pieces of legislation can be summed up by her conclusion on this occasion:

I am glad that this is only the second reading debate and we can discuss this further during consideration in detail, and I can find out a lot more, which I will endeavour to do.²²

¹⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 14 September 2006, p. 6069 (see also 6025).

¹⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 25 September 2007, p. 5696.

²⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 12 June 2003, pp. 8707–8708.

²¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 29 August 2007, p. 4513.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4514, 4513.