



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

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

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## CHRISTINE SHARP



MLC South West Region 22 May 1997–21 May 2005 (GWA). Chairman Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development 1997–2001; Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs 2001–2005.

Christine Sharp was elected to the Legislative Council in December 1996, taking her seat on 22 May following. Describing herself as a tree farmer she is currently a partner in ‘Small Tree Farm’ in Balingup in the south west, a tree nursery and consultancy specialising in innovative tree farming systems. The farm was named as a tribute to Dr E.F. Schumacher’s best-selling economics book *Small is Beautiful*: it is due to Schumacher that Christine attributes making the first distinction between renewable and non-renewable resources. Not surprisingly, she developed from the outset a reputation as a forceful spokesperson on environmental protection and as such was chosen as chairperson of the Legislative Council’s newest standing committee, the Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development. This made her the first woman chair of a standing committee in the WA Parliament and the only Greens parliamentarian to chair a committee anywhere in Australia. With her fellow new Greens member, Giz Watson (q.v.), and Jim Scott, who had sat in the chamber since 1993, she formed a party of three with no formal leadership structure and in which each member had his or her own share of responsibility for the various issues that arose.

Born in London, UK on 18 November 1947, Christine Sharp was the daughter of company director Alfred Sharp and Phyllis (nee Stone) and was educated at Bishophalt Grammar School before going on to university. At the University of Sheffield she completed her Bachelor of Arts with honours in political theory and institutions and then a Master of Arts degree in political science at the University of Kent in Canterbury. After extensive travelling she came to Western Australia in 1973 and ten years later completed her PhD at Murdoch University in the areas of politics and ethics writing a thesis on ‘Perspectives on the Shannon’. Twelve years later she produced *Using the Forests* through the Murdoch Institute of Science and Technology Policy. In 1974 and 1975 she worked as a journalist and her radio interviews with Aboriginal people at Laverton over the arrests at Skull Creek were significant in the decision to call a royal commission

into the incident and the subsequent WA police force policy of employing Aboriginal police aides to assist in liaison with Aboriginal people.

From 1983 to 1985 Christine sat on the Donnybrook–Balingup Shire Council and for a time on the South West Development Authority’s advisory committee. In 1989 she was appointed as the first woman member of the Environmental Protection Authority, retaining her membership with the change of Government until she resigned in 1994 to concentrate on her tree farming work. In the 1980s she had co-founded the Golden Valley Tree Park in Balingup and she was a member of the International Dendrology Society dedicated to the scientific study of trees. When the Greens (WA) party was formed at the beginning of the 1990s Christine was a foundation member. An adherent to the Buddhist faith she lives at Small Tree Farm with her defacto partner Andrew Thamo.

As a tree farmer, Christine’s great interest and passion has been to demonstrate the way the needs of the economic system can be made to harmonise with the environmental protection of native forests. A Small Tree Farm project was launched in 1995 to demonstrate how farmers could grow hardwood sawlogs for solid timber. Foreshadowing her future committee chairmanship she spoke in her Inaugural Speech in June 1997 of the ‘main work’ she intended to undertake during her time in Parliament as fostering ‘ecologically sustainable development in Western Australia’. Whereas twenty years previous she would have described her partner and herself as ‘forest conservationists and city activists’ she had reached the point in 1997 where she wanted to take a more ‘proactive and practical direction’ and to get away from the ‘reactive critique that makes much environmental work quite soul destroying’.<sup>1</sup> Much of the speech was devoted to a careful analysis of the terms ‘ecological’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ with the conclusion that, even in the timber industry where the issues had been most to the fore, on ‘the most charitable of reckonings we are cutting down the jarrah forest at a rate that is 67 per cent above its sustainable yield’.<sup>2</sup> She went on to ask her fellow members:

Where is this Legislative Council at? Is it comfortably complacent, untouched by the human story, deaf to the call of the future, or rather is it caught in the disempowering web of politics and traditional policies, unable to respond?

The proposal for the establishment of a standing committee on sustainable ecologically development would in her view provide the opportunity:

... to bring the work of this Council to the forefront of contemporary concerns and to provide a role relevant to the high community expectations of this new upper House.<sup>3</sup>

Another issue very much to the forefront in her view of the world concerned the position of the Aboriginal people and whose contribution to the environment she paid tribute to in her Inaugural Speech. In May 1998 she seconded the Leader of the Opposition’s motion that the House should apologise to the Indigenous people of Western Australia ‘for the past policies under which they were removed from their families and express deep regret at the hurt and distress’ that had caused:

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 10 June 1997, p. 3546.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3548.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3549

Today gives us a chance to reflect, to seek peace in our own hearts and collectively say “I am sorry”. Sorry Day is not a day for Aboriginal people to celebrate but it is a day on which all those in society can expurgate their souls. Our collective guilt has led us to collectively punish Aboriginal people. Because we failed them, we seize on every opportunity to blame and make them seem victims of their fate rather than the victims of our fate ... People who ask why they should apologise because they have done nothing to Aborigines, miss the point. The point is that our history collectively, and not just individual acts, brought us to this day. Until we come to grips with our history, we cannot move forward’.<sup>4</sup>

One occasion when she specifically focused her argument around the position of women was when she debated the abortion law reform proposals in March 1998. To her way of thinking, being pro-choice was ‘not symbolic of women being anti-life. On the contrary, it is seeking women’s rights to organise how to support life’. As a Green she insisted that ‘our philosophies are usually concerned with the long term survival of ours and all species’ and that ultimately the issue was not a question of morality versus pragmatism but:

... a moral choice for women between the quality of motherhood and the acceptance of life within them ... I have great faith in women and I believe they have always been, and will continue to be, life affirming.<sup>5</sup>

During her second term Christine continued her role as a committee chairman, in this case of the renamed Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. Looking back on her four years with the new committee Christine gave credit for the original proposal for an environmentally dedicated Standing Committee to the Wilderness Society and stressed that committee work had given her ‘a wonderful opportunity to do politics the way I like to do politics; that is, with cooperation across the parties and by being solution-focused’.<sup>6</sup> In 2004 alone she claimed the committee had ‘considered 56 petitions and tabled reports on five inquiries’ making particular reference to its contribution to the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act.<sup>7</sup>

One issue on which Christine had very strong views and participated actively in discussion both inside and outside Parliament, concerned the introduction of one vote, one value legislation. In speaking on the enabling electoral reform Bill she insisted that the Greens had in her view ‘remained rock steady’ in their support for the principle of one vote, one value and she directed attention, for example, to the enrolment of the seats of Leschenault (12 104) and Darling Range (28 609), which she considered as comparable urban seats given that Leschenault covered ‘the suburban areas around the seat of Bunbury’. In her view it was ‘very difficult to defend a system in which one urban electorate has two and a half times the vote value of another urban electorate’.<sup>8</sup> Against this, however, she considered that one could not go past the ‘tyranny of distance’, which very much applied to ‘this enormous state of Western Australia’. The Greens she insisted attempted within the principle of one vote, one value to ‘address the very real concerns of people in regional Western Australia that their parliamentary representation should effectively and adequately represent their interests’.<sup>9</sup> During her speech she emphasised the Greens support since

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<sup>4</sup> WAPD(LC), 26 May 1998, pp. 3161–3163.

<sup>5</sup> WAPD(LC), 18 March 1998, pp. 772–773.

<sup>6</sup> WAPD(LC), 19 May 2005, p. 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> WAPD(LC), 28 April 2005, p. 831.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

2001 for what they described as a ‘state senate’ model with each of the six regions having an equal number of members in the Legislative Council ‘where the real debates for the ways forward for the regions’ can be held.<sup>10</sup> More broadly, she argued that ‘with a bicameral system we have the opportunity to implement different franchises in different houses’ to ensure in the words of Professor Greg Craven ‘that the diversity of interests contained within the State are adequately reflected in Parliament’.<sup>11</sup> In this form the arguments of Christine and her supporters won the day and the legislation was passed.

On 19 May two days before her term expired Christine, who had decided not to seek a third term at the 2005 election, delivered her valedictory speech, which, with time extensions, occupied nearly an hour.<sup>12</sup> Along with her committee experience as chair of two very active standing committees she referred to her five private members’ Bills, the first two of which dealt with the proposed decriminalisation of the use of marijuana and the legislation of hemp. The other three Bills had focused on environmental issues including regulating land clearing, protection for fauna in areas of state forest open for logging and the High Conservation Value Forest Protection Bill, the latter being in her view, despite its rejection by the Legislative Assembly, ‘quite influential in the reversal of the Regional Forest Agreement very soon after that’. At other stages of the speech she discussed in some detail the Greens view on economics (including economic development based on improving everyone’s quality of life rather than just expanding the quantity of money and possessions as well as the abolition of the National Competition Council) and the concept of the present generation’s ecological footprint.<sup>13</sup>

In explaining her decision to leave politics she referred to the difficulties as a country resident on juggling ‘the responsibilities of farming, raising a family, servicing an office that is located 300 kilometres away, chairing a committee and holding the balance of power in this place’. It has required an enormous effort to bring all that together ... [and] during all the years I have been a member the Greens have not been provided with administrative assistance, legal advisers or staff, despite our responsibilities’. In her own words, ‘All members—particularly me—have had a workload from hell.’<sup>14</sup>

In the first ‘Reflections’ that follow, Christine chose to direct attention back to an issue she raised at the end of her Inaugural Speech, namely doing politics differently. For her, the essence of this different approach was to avoid ‘posturing and the adversarial approach, [to] value integrity above ideology’ and to work ‘cooperatively with everyone who cares to join in common objectives, regardless of his or her party’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 833.

<sup>12</sup> *WAPD(LC)* 19 May 2005, pp. 1939–1940.

<sup>13</sup> See pp. 1939–1944 passim

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 1943.

<sup>15</sup> *WAPD(LC)* 10 June 1997, p. 3550.

*Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

*(These Reflections were written in 1999.)*

I want to talk about consensus politics. I believe that this is an area in which women can play a pivotal role politically. That is not to suggest that consensus politics is exclusively female; on the contrary, consensus has no exclusivity. However, I do think it requires an attitude which may come more naturally to women.

What is consensus politics? I step into this with both humility and (with) presumption—I'm not sure that I know myself! Yet I do know that it is important and certainly worthy of our attention. I mean by the use of this term, the development of cross party agreement, working constructively together, and focusing on the issue and trying to move it forwards with authenticity, instead of using issues to orchestrate political point scoring.

This means doing politics differently. Democratic politics are extremely competitive. This is the platitudinous reality that sickens the community. You know the feeling when you turn on the radio to hear a voice speaking—and you can tell it's a politician even before you can identify the issue because of the attitude. It's adversarial; it's a voice more concerned about making others 'wrong' than it is about expressing what is right! Don't you know that voice? Unfortunately all too often this is the voice of politics today.

Recently, an interesting visitor from South Africa was talking about contemporary rural life there. Explaining that many central government services were unable to service community needs, he described how the local communities are taking matters into their own hands. They are conducting forums and negotiating planning for whole districts, gradually building consensus on the allocation of resources. Everyone is involved—white farmers, black tribespeople and so on. There is no democratic majority rule. Things are decided by consensus. And of course it takes time. I have no idea how widespread this process is. We can see it also taking place in Australia in those communities that have decided to refrain from a litigious approach to resolving native title; instead, slowly formulating Indigenous land-use agreements.

By contrast to the consensus approach, in the Parliament of Western Australia we have a democratic majority rule by Government won in the lower House. In our process the winner, even by one seat, takes all. And when I have cause to sit in on that chamber, I am struck by the ambiance there in comparison with what I am used to in the Legislative Council, of which I am a member. In the Assembly it's bear-pit stuff—ranting and abuse, back and forth.

In the new format of the upper House we have experience of the rather special circumstance of five political parties being represented, none with a majority. It requires cooperation. I think that the visitor to the debates there can notice the difference in the tenor of the speeches. They are often very constructive. It is a marvellous opportunity to work on consensus politics.

Examples that come to my mind include the School Education Bill, where three new women members, Ljiljanna Ravlich (ALP) (q.v.), Helen Hodgson (Democrat) (q.v.) and myself (Greens (WA)) worked cooperatively over some months to review and amend the Bill. Over 100 amendments were moved, each focusing on different aspects, with everyone supporting each other and no hostility!

Forests is another such issue, an issue recently described by the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party Colin Barnett, as the most significant issue for a decade. I have had the privilege to communicate regularly with the WA Nationals, the Liberals' coalition partners, as they have grappled with this issue, formulating an excellent and thoughtful new policy. As well, for more than two years now I have chaired an all-party Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development, which late last year produced a unanimous report on the Regional Forest Agreement.

Then there was the amazing passage of the abortion Bill last year, initiated in the upper House by Cheryl Davenport—a conscience vote and 'women's business' if ever there was. Despite the polarisation of the debate in the community, the second reading in the Legislative Council was a delight. Members on all sides spoke so genuinely, so existentially, that I think we all felt a little closer as human beings by the end of that long night.

'Doing politics differently' is a phrase coined by my Greens colleague, former WA Senator Christabel Chamarette. I am a great fan of the way that Christabel did politics, working with integrity on each issue. The irony was that she was not re-elected. This symbolises how consensus politics must struggle to be heard in democratic politics above the noise of political point-scoring readily amplified by the mass media.

*(These Reflections were written in 2011.)*

#### On Being a Woman in Politics

In reading through my remarks of 1999 I am struck again by the emphasis that I, and other female parliamentarians, have placed on good process. One detects that traditional female flair for relationships in this, for I believe that good process will inevitably lead to good outcomes. I guess it's an instinctive trust I have that politicians, like most humans, are invariably well intentioned. The more archetypal male approach is to be fixed on the desired 'right' outcome through controlling the process. That way leads to vested outcomes and adversity.

Of course these are wild generalisations and I apologise to all offended males. In fact I still find it hard to write of my experience in the WA Parliament from the perspective of being a woman. Most of the most notable experiences at first glance seem to be gender neutral. However, below the surface I can see that the female emphasis on good and fair process, on collaboration rather than competition, enabled me to make the most of my opportunities to 'green' government decisions.

One of my proudest moments happened at the special celebration of the centenary of the Parliament in 2002. I was introduced by Norman Moore, the then Leader of the Liberal Opposition in the upper House, to Sir Charles Court, who was visiting the house for the occasion, with the recommendation, 'Chrissy is a politician of integrity, Sir Charles!' What touched me most about those words was the irony that years earlier, as spokesperson for the Campaign to Save Native Forests, I was Charlie's most irritating environmental opponent, although we had yet to meet! I treasure the thought that even when others in opposition disagreed with my position, or thought it too idealistic, they could still respect me.

The time I stood down in 2005, the combination of the fluke of being in the balance of power during the historic first time that the WA Parliament lost its conservative majority, in the Legislative Council from 1997 and then in both Houses in 2001, and thus ‘powerful’ in a reform era, together with this knack for collaboration, found me completely exhausted! For eight years almost every issue I touched upon moved ground. And when you sense you can make a difference, it’s hard to refuse issues. As my reputation for being reasonable and effective grew, I became more and more inundated with requests for help. I was juggling processes on dozens of political issues at any given moment.

All this was integrated into life on our farm, which I would slip into whenever I got back home, feeding the chooks, growing the garden, cooking on the wood stove, raising a teenager with ADHD and being sole carer for my elderly mother. My first thought when I finished in May 2005 was, ‘Thank God I didn’t crash any issue and drop one of the things I was juggling. Now I can collapse!’ I was completely burnt out. All I wanted to do was stay home. Being in Parliament when you are still the mother of the family is extra hard, I think, and ‘walking the green talk’ on a small farm made it even harder.

So it is in my early retirement that I clearly see my gender made a difference. If it had been my partner, Andrew, who had been elected to Parliament, we could have agisted the farmlands and I could have managed the rest with a little paid help, but cleaning aside, it’s much harder to find paid help to be Mum.

Many were surprised when I announced my retirement. People readily supposed my reasons and asked the rhetorical question, ‘You must be completely disillusioned with politics?’ But I wasn’t. I was, and still am, passionate about the role of politics to determine our priorities as a society. However, I *am* more cynical about *people* than I used to be! One of the first books I read when I finished—you can tell where I was coming from at that stage—was *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life* where the author Thomas Moore said that being a politician is like being a societal counsellor, as opposed to a personal counsellor. You are really exposed to people’s objectives. I was bitterly disappointed at how few people had some higher view of what we need to aim for as a society, most are about self-interest. Even many greenies who *do* have higher aims, are still pretty much just about winning. The poor quality of most media coverage makes this worse.

In my last months two issues really fed my disillusionment. One was about a place called the Wellington Discovery Forest near the Ferguson Valley. This was an area of 600 hectares of prime jarrah forest that was managed by the Institute of Foresters for research and education. When we passed the reserve Bills to end the logging of old growth forests, I moved a small amendment to prevent the proposed shift of the WDF under the legislation into the adjacent Wellington National Park. Given that the same package of Bills were making over 850 000 hectares of new forest reserves, I thought we could be generous to the foresters whom we had so roundly just beaten, by letting the institute keep its small plot, which included in part demonstrations of best practice silviculture. Although supported by my party, when this news got out, the forest activists in the main glossed over the sweet victory they were enjoying and turned on me with a vengeance for showing respect to the foresters. They criticised me for years about this small deviation from their line. I think theirs was a very male perspective, although some were women!

My final disillusionment was the more profound. In my very last week in the Legislative Council in May 2005, I again had to take carriage of the Gallop Government’s electoral reform Bills to implement the one vote, one value system for the Greens (WA). I say ‘again’ because we had been

through slow torture in the balance of power role when we legislated for these changes in 2001 and 2002. When those Bills were subsequently rejected in the Australian High Court, the Labor Government reintroduced the package with the handy extra vote that came their way to make up the High Court's required 'constitutional' majority via the Liberal Alan Cadby, who had lost preselection and decided to cross the floor to vote with Labor and the Greens. I say 'torture' because I think the real angst caused by this reform amongst rural constituents, their palpable sense of disempowerment, affected me more than all the hundreds of other issues on which I had worked. Whilst vote equality is a fine democratic principle to uphold as I did, it meant that three quarters of the voters in the western portion of this great continent now lived in one city.

Having pursued WA interests for eight years consistently trying to prevent the transfer of power to Canberra under ever increasing uniform legislation, like in the Gene Technology Act inquiry where we gazumped the federal Act with our little gatekeeping Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act, and most notably the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition (Western Australia) Bill, which I/we held up for years and years to protect WA's quarantine sovereignty, here I was personally responsible for duplicating the centralisation of power under the State Government too. Although my regional upper House model was a real attempt to balance these electoral changes, I never recovered from the pain I felt at making hard working people in the WA regions even further from having influence in their own country.

So since that time, when I stood down from the WA Parliament in 2005, I have been committed to the development of regional governance for the Australia Federation. I have become fascinated by the strong correlation one sees between the geography that distinguishes a region and its resultant economic and social character. This theme has taken me on two occasions to speak in the national Parliament and across regional Australia. Thus as my career in State Parliament ended so did my allegiance to the long-term future of the institution of State Parliament, as much as I loved working there. What irony!