



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

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

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## **MICHELLE HOPKINS ROBERTS**



MLA Glendalough 19 March 1994 (by-election)–14 December 1996; Midland from 14 December 1996 (ALP). Shadow Minister 1994–2001 and from 2008; Minister of State 8 March 2001–23 September 2008. Member several parliamentary standing committees; Select Committee on Recycling and Waste Management 1994–1995; Select Committee on Crime Prevention 1997–1999. President of State Labor Party 2000–2007.

For nearly two decades Michelle Roberts has been a significant Labor Party person in government and Parliament. Indeed, a strong commitment to civic life has been an outstanding feature of her career. At the age of 26 she became a City of Perth councillor and six years later was the youngest Deputy Mayor. Her uncle Charles Hopkins as a former Lord Mayor of Perth was very supportive of her early entry to public life.<sup>1</sup> After serving on a plethora of boards and community committees, Michelle won the seat of Glendalough in a by-election made necessary after former Premier Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) resigned in early 1994 to contest the federal seat of Fremantle. Entering Parliament through a by-election has the effect of providing an MP with an immediate profile and Michelle, who had improved the Labor district vote, was quickly assigned a range of shadow Ministry responsibilities, including Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs, Seniors, Planning and Heritage. At the 1996 state election, following the abolition of Glendalough through redistribution, she was elected as the MLA for the new seat of Midland and soon became the manager of opposition business in the Legislative Assembly, a post she held until August 1999. In this regard, it is believed that Michelle was the first woman in government or opposition to hold this office, which has grown considerably in importance in modern Parliaments.

When the Australian Labor Party (ALP) won government in 2001 with Dr Geoff Gallop as Premier, Michelle was allocated the major Police, Emergency Services and Local Government portfolios. Her ministerial duties had quickly moved beyond the traditional caring and nurturing portfolios which had been considered more appropriate for women politicians. Throughout Labor's seven-year plus term of office she also held other significant portfolios

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 30 March 1994, p. 11066.

including Housing and Works, Consumer Protection, Employment Protection, Indigenous Affairs and Heritage. When Labor lost office in September 2008, Michelle was on the front bench of the shadow cabinet with portfolios including Education and subsequently, for a time, Treasury. At the beginning of 2012, with Mark McGowan as the new ALP leader, she was again the shadow spokesperson for police with road safety, crime prevention and tourism, and manager of opposition business.

Having joined the Labor Party as early as 1978, Michelle has been a major administrative contributor to the party, initially holding a range of branch posts fulfilling several secretary and treasury roles. From 1983 to 2003, she was a member of the State Executive and the influential Administrative Committee from 1987 to 2003, and in turn held the post of senior vice-president and then state president of the ALP for seven years, the first ever ALP woman president. To these achievements can be added membership of the National Executive of the ALP and attendance as a delegate to all national conferences from 1988, in addition to holding positions on numerous policy committees.

Michelle Roberts was born on the special leap year day of 29 February 1960, daughter of William Thomas and Frances Hopkins, who were both business managers. She was educated at Sacred Heart (Point Peron), Highgate and North Inglewood primary schools before completing her secondary education at Mercedes College. Subsequently, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Education from the University of Western Australia. In 1983, she began her career as a secondary teacher at John Curtin Senior High School and married Gregory Roberts later in the same year. Despite her busy life, she entered Parliament as the mother of two daughters and in 1999 she followed the path of her colleague Judy Edwards (q.v.) by giving birth to another child whilst being an MLA. During Michelle's five years as a teacher, she was prominent in the Teachers' Union, later also holding a number of posts with responsibilities for policy formation and research in local government and in the Department of Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare. Her membership of boards has included the East Perth Redevelopment Authority, the Festival of Perth and the Perth Theatre Trust. Moreover, for Michelle the list of local community and other groups with which she has been associated as a member or patron is formidable. When she moved to represent Midland, she added organisations such as Midland Pensioners and Police Legacy (as patron) and Swan City Youth Service, as well as the Midland tennis club. Some of the other sporting groups of which she has been patron have included the Tuart Hill amateur sporting club, the Leederville Croquet Club and the United Districts Racing Pigeon Club.

Instances of Michelle speaking forcefully for her Midland electorate included the several occasions she called for the regeneration of Midland. She was a driving force behind the establishment of the Midland Redevelopment Authority along the lines of the East Perth Redevelopment Authority and the Subiaco Redevelopment Authority. As she told the Legislative Assembly:

We have a town crying out for help and I ask the government and ministers to listen to that cry for help. Midland people, like people throughout the region, want a town they can be proud of, a thriving centre for the East Metropolitan Region. Once again, I point out that the Government has a responsibility ... to stop shirking that responsibility and act immediately to establish a redevelopment authority for Midland.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 19 August 1998, p. 498.

The Court–Cowan Government did go ahead and create the Midland Redevelopment Authority, which has been recognised by both sides of politics as a very successful venture. Eventually, under the Barnett Government, a Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority (MRA) was established to bring together the work of four agencies which had led to the urban renewal of East Perth, Subiaco, Armadale and Midland. Michelle has always exhibited a faith in public enterprise, often regarding this approach as vital to providing a stimulus to the private sector. Privatisation of public utilities and services such as the Water Authority was to be resisted. As she told the Legislative Assembly in April 1995:

The Water Authority of Western Australia is a very efficient organisation with good productivity levels. The Water Authority is probably one of the success stories of the Labor Government, which effectively began the corporatisation process...which enhanced productivity levels, reduced debt burden and increased the revenue to [the] consolidated fund from that government agency...[Moreover] it has an integrated system which is the envy of [overseas water companies]. It has a high level of expertise in water and sewerage and generally sound environmental practices.<sup>3</sup>

One of Michelle's major contributions to public office was her six years as Minister for Police and Emergency Services. In retrospect, it was the handling of this difficult portfolio which contributed to several favourable assessments of Dr Geoff Gallop's period as Premier between 2001 and 2006. One unusual feat was her ability to gain all party and Independent support in the Legislative Assembly for the Road Traffic Amendment (Impounding and Confiscation of Vehicles) Bill, which was legislation 'designed to target the reckless and selfish behaviour of the individuals who threaten other road users by their continual disregard for road rules and safety'. Commonly known to the community as 'hoons, these individuals continue to be a menace to members of the law-abiding public, who are often the innocent victims of their reprehensible actions'.<sup>4</sup> It was central to the Government's crackdown on the so-termed 'hoons' that the police would be empowered under the Act in certain circumstances to impound the vehicle driven by an offender. In the case of persistent offenders, the police would be able to apply to the courts for long-term impounding orders, and eventually a confiscation order.<sup>5</sup> This legislative framework was retained when the Barnett Alliance Government came to office in 2008, although some of the amendments were not on the same consensus basis.

Significantly, another of Michelle's safety initiatives was the outcome of a great deal of cooperation between local government and government agencies. As the Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, she announced on 14 November 2001 that the new 50-kilometre-an-hour default built-up area speed limit on local streets would come into effect on 1 December 2001. This announcement coincided with the launch of an extensive community education campaign advising motorists of the impending new speed limits on local streets. The primary motivation for introducing the speed reduction program in Western Australia was the expectation that a 20 to 30 per cent reduction in serious crashes could be achieved. This was based on similar gains achieved in both local and overseas jurisdictions. Research by the Monash University Accident Research Centre indicated that the program did result in statistically significant reductions of casual crashes. Surveys also indicated strong

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<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 5 April 1995, pp. 808, 812.

<sup>4</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 4 March 2004, p. 410.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

community support for the measure.<sup>6</sup> Later, as shadow Minister for Road Safety, she was reported as prepared to support a 30-kilometre-an-hour speed limit in limited locations.<sup>7</sup>

When Alan Carpenter became Premier in early 2006, following the resignation of Dr Geoff Gallop due to illness, Michelle assumed a demanding range of new portfolios including housing and works, heritage, Indigenous affairs and land information, as well as Employment Protection. It was publicly revealed that she had requested the ever challenging Indigenous Affairs Ministry.<sup>8</sup> The scale of her role was subsequently too extensive to be canvassed in this biographical sketch, but to some extent it can be illustrated by inspection of the *Hansard* Index and ministerial media statements. Encompassed was a wide range of reconciliation actions, housing, employment, cultural and sporting initiatives. She travelled to Canberra to witness, on 12 February 2008, the historic apology to the Stolen Generation, which she described as a ‘great day in our nation’s history’.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, she reiterated that Dr Geoff Gallop had engaged in prompting the Richard Court Government to deliver an apology in Parliament to the Indigenous people of Western Australia in 1997.

Earlier one of her significant actions was her decision in 2007 to announce the creation of a task force, managed by the Department of Indigenous Affairs, to investigate the scope and extent of Indigenous ‘stolen wages’ in Western Australia. Stolen wages referred to entitlements and money that should have been paid to Indigenous workers for the long period between 1905 and 1975.<sup>10</sup> When the Western Australian Government announced in March 2012 that payments would be capped at \$2 000, the offer was criticised as inadequate,<sup>11</sup> but by that time Labor was not in government and Michelle was not the responsible Minister.

Returning to Opposition in September 2008, one of Michelle’s leading roles for a time encompassed being shadow Treasurer. She exhibited regular concern in both Parliament and the press about the state’s mounting debt during the Barnett years of Government and led an assault on the foundations of the May 2011 state budget. In fact, she said:

... the budget is not only a callous and misleading document through its conception and implementation of public policy, but also flawed at its heart. Although the assumptions about population, the dollar and unemployment rates are all so flawed that they generate uncertainty, the one area of certain revenue growth that the government can count on is the amount that it is ripping out of Western Australian households for fees and charges.<sup>12</sup>

A major concern she expressed concerned the rise of household utility charges which meant that in the three years leading to 2011, a representative WA household had faced increases of the magnitude of \$1 073 per annum. A percentage increase in electricity prices under the

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<sup>6</sup> See Reducing Travel Speeds in Urban Areas of WA – the Impact of 50 km/h Default Build-Up Areas Speed Limits: Road Safety Council Summary Paper.

<sup>7</sup> Ronan O’Connell, ‘Road safety expert calls for 30 km/h limit trials,’ *West Australian*, 7 February 2012, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Phillips and Liz Kerr, ‘Political Chronicle: Western Australia, July to December 2006,’ *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 53, No. 2, June 1997, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Michelle Roberts (2008), ‘The State Government welcomes the Federal Government’s apology,’ Ministerial Media Statements, 12 February 2008.

<sup>10</sup> See Amanda Banks, ‘State to Pay Millions back to Aboriginals,’ *West Australian*, 31 May 2007.

<sup>11</sup> David Weber Report 7 March, 2007, ‘WA Government’s ‘stolen wages’ offer slammed’, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/212/s3447334.htm> (Accessed 22/03/2012)

<sup>12</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 25 May 2011, p. 3962.

Barnett Government was calculated and publicised as high as 57 per cent. Water tariffs and the emergency services levy were also attacked as having been well above the consumer price index. Another statistic that was well in excess of inflation was that of general government spending, which was said to have blown out by a massive 36 per cent since Colin Barnett came to office.<sup>13</sup>

As an example of her continued commitment as a local Midland district representative, Michelle ‘applied the blowtorch’ to transport Minister Troy Buswell over revelations in October 2011 that none of the 15 train sets on order were set aside for the increasingly busy Midland line. She had seized on Public Transport Authority figures published in the *West Australian*<sup>14</sup> to ask the Minister the next day in the Legislative Assembly if the revelations were accurate. When the Minister was evasive, she insisted that he specifically respond to the question.<sup>15</sup>

With extensive parliamentary and governmental experience combined with a major contribution to Labor Party affairs, Michelle has been one of the most formidable public figures in Western Australia who has ‘made a difference’. She was the first woman State President of the ALP and has regularly been mentioned in leadership calculations for the party. Her career has been fulfilled in concert with a young family of three daughters aided by the strong support of her husband Greg. She has demonstrated that public life and family responsibilities can be fulfilled in a manner not envisaged in the early literature of women in politics.

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

*(The following includes extracts from the Reflections Michelle wrote in 1999.)*

Women have made up only a small percentage of parliamentarians over the past 100 years and, unfortunately, younger women have been a rarity. Yet in recent years there has been a gradual change to that trend.

Traditionally, women entered Parliament after raising children and largely completing child rearing and family responsibilities which may have extended to caring for elderly parents and other relatives.

Many other factors have also made it difficult for women, even when free of family responsibilities, to enter Parliament and, moreover, to be preselected for winnable and safe seats.

The reasons for these difficulties lie in the structure and preselection processes of the major parties. Both formal and informal factors warrant examination.

Very few people are preselected for winnable seats in the Labor Party without a significant ‘history’ in the party either at the political activist level or through the union movement. Long-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 3963.

<sup>14</sup> *West Australian*, 10 October 2011.

<sup>15</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 19 October 2011, pp. 8552–8353.

term participation at the branch, electorate council and State Executive level, together with significant campaign involvement, features in the CVs of most successful preselection candidates for safer seats. In the past, very few women met this criteria of long and active involvement and hence very few were rewarded with safe seats.

These days, however, more and more the community has supported greater representation of women in politics. The advantage of women candidates for marginal seats has been recognised. So, along with the high profile and other electorally saleable candidates, women became preferred candidates for marginal seats. Female candidates were actively sought for marginals where a female candidate was believed to be electorally advantageous.

Yet filling the marginal seats in a Parliament did little to entrench women for the long term. Keeping a marginal seat is largely a lottery and while many women worked effectively to build their margins, many also lost out through no fault of their own.

Recent years have, I believe, seen some changing trends. State Labor frontbenchers like Alannah MacTiernan (q.v.), Judy Edwards (q.v.) and myself all have long histories in the party and relatively safe Labor seats. Our long-term involvement and commitment to the party are to our advantage; we are part of the mainstream and are acknowledged to be around for the long term. We have a significant stake in the future of the party and are more able because of that to have a greater influence in the party than many who went before us.

We are not a novelty or a passing trend, but a firmly entrenched part of a new tradition. All three of us have, like most men, combined a political career and family at the same time. This new tradition has already seen women take up significant roles within the formal and informal structures of both the parliamentary and lay party. It is now taken for granted that women will take on leadership roles, negotiating roles and less traditional portfolio areas.

*(These Reflections were written by Michelle in 2012.)*

For me, being a Member of Parliament has always been about making a difference, about doing something worthwhile for the betterment of our community. I am motivated by a desire for fairness and justice; for the provision of real opportunities and choices for all our children; for a community that protects our most vulnerable people. I have always sought both real and immediate solutions to current problems and long-term, structural solutions so that future generations might receive a real and lasting legacy.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to join the front bench in the first year that I was elected and to have that opportunity to demonstrate my capacities in the Parliament. Serving my first seven years in opposition was a hard work, but a wonderful grounding for when I joined the Gallop Ministry in 2001.

Being a Minister is both intellectually and physically demanding. You are required to be deeply familiar with a wide range of portfolio issues; to give regular speeches; to hold media conferences; to develop and announce policy initiatives; to make and fight for budget bids; to make meaningful contributions to Cabinet. And these are just a few of the challenges! It is also, however, the greatest of opportunities. It's the opportunity to make real and beneficial changes in one's allocated portfolio area. It's also the opportunity to sit around the Cabinet

table and shape the future of our state and the people in it. Cabinet is able to set an agenda for a term of government, to provide for fairness and equity, to improve services that make a real difference to people's lives and to provide a lasting legacy for the future.

Serving in the Gallop and Carpenter Ministries was certainly an honour, but more importantly it was an opportunity to achieve some really worthwhile things. I was proud to be part of a Government that stopped old-growth logging, protected Ningaloo Reef and got on and built the Mandurah rail line. I was able to deliver three brand new replacement primary schools for my electorate of Midland.

In opposition, Geoff had asked me to take on the portfolio of Police and Emergency Services. In government, it was the key portfolio with which I was entrusted for five years. Where many see this as a policy area that is about rules and punishment, it is also one that is about social justice. The key to this lies in police numbers, police training and police deployment. There are no smart low-cost solutions here, just feet on the beat and access to the latest crime-fighting technology. That meant that I needed to find ways of increasing police numbers at a time of government restraint. I also needed to ensure that policing infrastructure was up to scratch across a vast area, and its equipment up to date.

I am proud that we were able to make real reforms and provide new services in my portfolios. We dramatically increased the police budget; we provided occupational health and safety coverage to police officers; we provided the medivac chopper; we introduced the firefighting helitacs; we provided a sustainable funding model for Fire and Emergency Services, we put protections in place for State Emergency Service Volunteers; we implemented the Gordon report reforms including the construction of 12 remote multifunction police stations; we built major new forensic and traffic facilities in Midland; we introduced a whole raft of road safety measures and myriad other things.

One thing which had particularly concerned me in opposition was that serving officers did not have access to the same occupational health and safety protections as the rest of WA's workers. As a policy officer, I had worked on improving Western Australia's occupational health and safety industrial environment. As a Minister, I found myself horrified that WA's police were excluded from this critical aspect of workplace justice and took immediate action to remedy this. In 2002, I introduced the Occupational Safety and Health Amendment Bill into the House which phased in the application of occupational health and safety laws and practices, giving our police the same workplace protection as are enjoyed by all other WA workers, including emergency workers.

There are those with ideological positions that are founded upon the mistrust of government and a rejection of its role in any but the most essential of services. There are also those who see government as the most important single guarantor of social justice through the provision of education, community support and the imposition of redistributive taxes. I do not see government as either inherently good or naturally evil. Rather, I see government as the vehicle by which the community chooses to keep itself safe, by which it provides for its needy, and through which it expresses its hopes for the future. To me, principally, government is about ensuring fairness and providing a voice for those who would otherwise be marginalised.

Being a member of Parliament means more than simply governing. A member of Parliament is the principal activist and advocate for their community and its citizens. That means dealing with constituent issues, interceding with Ministers and departments, attending local events and

getting the Government of the day to improve local facilities and services. This puts one in the role of social worker, counsellor, advocate and speech maker. It is the particular duty of a local member to raise local constituent issues in the Parliament.

Parliament is the place where laws are made and Government is held accountable. Making and scrutinising laws is very different from the electorate role. It requires a more forensic, legalistic approach and, whilst this work is important, it can also be arduous. The aspect of Parliament most often viewed by the public is question time. This is always an hour or so of parliamentary theatre in which Governments try to praise themselves and Oppositions seek to hold Ministers accountable for their decisions. It requires considerable research and some theatrical skill to succeed in this most dramatic part of the parliamentary sitting day.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had an enduring parliamentary career. It won't surprise most to learn that I enjoy just about every aspect of the job. I enjoy the social aspects of the job, talking with constituents or discussing portfolio matters. I like the stimulation of the research and policy work. I also enjoy writing, giving speeches and parliamentary debate.

When I reflect on my time in the Parliament, I can certainly say that I have found it both stimulating and productive. I have met so many wonderful people and I have achieved so much more than I could have anticipated when I first nominated for the job. I have found that you can achieve for both your constituency and your portfolio area whether you are in Government or in Opposition. I have met and made friends with people from all walks of life. I have dealt with the most varied portfolios and matters arising in them. I have brought into the Parliament legislation of which I am truly proud. I have voted on the most significant of issues. To me, this is a dream job, not an easy job—but a most worthwhile one.