



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

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

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

DIANE PHYLLIS AIREY



MLC South Metropolitan Region 2 February 1993–21 May 1993 (Lib).

Diane Airey was a member of the Legislative Council between February and May 1993, during which time Parliament did not sit and she was not sworn in. In 1989 she had contested the South Metropolitan Region in third place on the Liberal ticket behind the successful candidates, Legislative Council President Clive Griffiths and Phillip Pandal. When Pandal resigned his seat prior to the 1993 election to contest successfully the South Perth seat in the Legislative Assembly, Diane was elected on a recount of votes cast in 1989. After leaving Parliament, she did not again contest a parliamentary seat but in the mid-1980s she twice opposed future Premier Geoff Gallop for the Victoria Park seat in the Legislative Assembly. In addition, in the 1990 federal election, after leading on every count except the last, she came within 1 037 votes of winning the federal seat of Cowan.

She was born in Perth on 4 February 1943, the daughter of Shirley and Ronald Frederick Tough, a manufacturing engineer who was also awarded an MBE for his services to yachting. Her school education was at Dalkeith Primary School and at Claremont High School before she went on to attend the Subiaco School of Languages and Culture and complete a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia with a double major in Italian. She worked as a draftswoman from 1960 to 1963, at which time she married consulting engineer Peter Airey, by whom she had four children, two sons and two daughters.

From 1979 to 1985 Diane was in business as a landscape designer and during these years she was also the inaugural wine mistress for the Les Femmes Wine and Food Club and the founder and president of the WA Dance Company. By this time she had become actively involved in politics, serving as president and secretary of the Mount Pleasant branch and, after contesting the Victoria Park elections, she was State Women's President from 1987 to 1989 and a member of the State Executive. In 1990 she received the Liberal Party Meritorious Award. In 1993 she became electorate officer to Paul Filing, then Liberal MHR for Moore, and stayed with him until 1997, after which time she became marketing manager for Airey Ryan and Hill, consulting engineers of West Perth.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Undoubtedly, contesting the federal seat of Cowan in 1990 was the most significant experience of my political career. To lose despite securing a swing of 4.6 per cent when the average swing to the Liberal Party was less than one per cent was very disappointing. At the same time, contesting both that seat and the state seat of Victoria Park were inspiring experiences. I was moved by the depth of loyalty and support of my family and a staunch band of friends and supporters. Those years of adrenaline, endless literature drops, doorknocking and fundraising functions gave purpose and strength to my life, and continue today to shape it. The other inheritance was a greatly heightened political awareness, and a permanent loss of naivete. I have believed ever since that the essence of campaigning lies with individual commitment from those who share the political beliefs of the candidate, and who care about them personally. No one else would sustain the pace for so few rewards.

I recall doorknocking over 50 000 homes in the years between 1986 and 1994, my first experience being the 1986 state election. I was asked to stand for the seat of Victoria Park to support Phillip Pental in his fight against the Labor Party in South Central Metropolitan Province. The view was that by conducting a very active campaign for the Legislative Assembly in Labor's heartland, efforts to attack Phillip's upper House seat would be diffused. I responded to this challenge with gusto, and systematically doorknocked the entire electorate house by house. The experience was one I will never forget. I met people whom I remember still, brave and wonderful people with often terrible crosses to bear, but who participated as fully as possible in the campaigning process. I came away from that campaign (and the countless doors knocked in other electorates on behalf of other candidates) with a deep respect for the essential decency of the Australian electorate at large.

My actual parliamentary experience was non-existent, but I was an active member in the party room, assisting wherever I could with support for the Cabinet. I still think that the parliamentary party process is a difficult one for most politicians, demanding pragmatism over ideals, the achievable over the possible. Party politics, like all corporate activity, is built around teammanship, individualism is regarded as indiscipline, and attention is often deflected away from the contribution of the individual member. The process of political survival, too, often muscles enlightened thoughts into the shadows of power, where it remains as a beacon to be lit on that far-off day when no crisis or emergency exists.

If my time within this structure was short, my three years as State Women's President of the Liberal Party was a satisfying and rewarding length of time for development of many ideas. This organisation was made up of women from every region of Western Australia, and we met to further the aims and objectives of the Liberal Party through our forums and regional activities. I inherited a strong, well-intentioned organisation, and set about to put it among the newly emerging women's forums of the 1980s. Together, we set five organisational goals, and undertook to pursue vigorously any proposal put by a member of the State Women's Council (SWC) if it met with four of the five! This simple golden rule was always adhered to, and kept harmony and a strong sense of purpose amongst us for those three years.

Our most significant undertaking was the direct encouragement of Liberal women's participation in pursuing an active political career. In this goal we were supported by Margaret McAleer (q.v.) and Senator Sue Knowles, and we continued to develop a training course which had been formulated for potential female candidates by the SWC in the early 1980s. In time, the seminars

and media training sessions undertaken by the State Women's Council became sophisticated, professional expressions of our dream to involve more women in the political process. Recognition of the worth of the training course was given by the President and Executive of the Party, and an active program of country seminars was undertaken. The relevance of the activities of the SWC became apparent to those intent on winning Government! In the election year of 1989, 17 of the 56 Liberal candidates were SWC trained!

Looking back, I do not believe that the spirit of feminism, so active in those years, cut across, or in fact deeply altered, the essential conservatism of the Liberal Party. In the SWC we trod a careful diplomatic course between our own dreams and our customary supportive role within the party, and found, as women have often had to, a way of bringing our dreams into reality. Many of our male friends were supportive, and, as is often the case, it was the lower bureaucracy of the party who set the obstacles. Much of our support came from older male office-bearers. Perhaps the competitive edge having been blunted, they could participate in the larger picture shared by the women of the SWC.

The sense of privilege of being President of the SWC is something I have never lost. Participation at the National Women's Conference in Melbourne and Sydney was inspiring and I made several friends for life among the other State Women's Presidents. It is not generally realised that in 1941, amidst a general upsurge of political anxiety about the then rise of Communism in Australia, 11 women were responsible for the founding of the Liberal Party in 1941. Robert Gordon Menzies was approached by this group, and the rest is history! In 1987, at national level, the women of the party were quite powerful, and I took pains to communicate this to my fellow members in the west. In turn, we took a leadership role within the National Liberal Women's agenda with our initiatives with candidate training courses and, as far as I am aware, other states followed suit.

Although this profile is not directly concerned with a parliamentary career, I believe that the course I set during those years offers a perspective on general political life which might be of interest to other women contemplating a political career. Being at the right place at the right time is still the crux of whether or not one actually gains a seat in Parliament, and all the effort in the world by an individual candidate cannot hold sway against a strong swing away from the party. The rewards are frequently quite intangible, but enormously powerful in the future shaping of one's ability to cope, to survive, to communicate, to perhaps inspire. A great training session for life!