



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

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

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## JUDITH MARY EDWARDS



MLA Maylands 26 May 1990–6 September 2008 (ALP). Deputy Chairman of Committees 1991–1993. Shadow Minister 1993–2001. Minister of State 16 February 2001–25 January 2006. Member several joint standing committees, standing committees and select committees 1990–2008. President of Parliamentary Labor Party 2007–2008.

When Judy Edwards won the seat of Maylands in a by-election in 1990, caused by the resignation of former Labor Premier Peter Dowding, she had been a most active person in civic life. At a relatively young age, she became the first woman to win a contested by-election for the Legislative Assembly and also the first woman medical practitioner to represent the Labor Party. In her Inaugural Speech she expressed her pride at being the tenth Labor Party woman in the Parliament and, after a reference to the present ‘menace’ about the blocking, deferring or defeating of supply by the Legislative Council and her concern about a cleaner and safer environment, she indicated how, while representing the people of Maylands, she would:

... work towards achieving a just and fair society. In measuring this, I am influenced by my background in medicine and my work as a health professional. I know from my background that health and illness do not occur randomly within or between groups of people. Health is a product of the social environment.<sup>1</sup>

She went on to suggest that:

... in Australia, there is now overwhelming evidence that people’s chances for life or death, health or illness are linked to their socio-economic status ... [I]t is worthwhile noting also that those groups in society which are most economically and socially vulnerable are the same groups likely to suffer not only ill health but violence and victimisation. Domestic violence, for example, affects women and children. Homeless and unemployed youths and Aboriginal people are most at risk of not only being victimised but also being criminalised and imprisoned.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 31 May 1990, p. 1602.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Judy Edwards was born on 10 April 1955, daughter of farmer Brian Edwards and his wife, Patricia (nee Horan), a nurse. She began her education at Presentation College and Beverley Junior High School before completing her secondary education at Loreto Convent in Claremont. After graduating from the University of Western Australia as a medical practitioner, she also undertook some part-time study for a Masters degree in public health. Although she began in medical practice in the Mount Lawley District, she was soon also associated in a professional capacity with a range of community agencies, many of which were linked to the delivery of health services. Some of these bodies included the Family Planning Association, the Sexual Assault Referral Centre and the Aboriginal Medical Service. She was both the National President (from 1987 to 1989) and State President (from 1986 to 1989) of the Doctors' Reform Society and a member of the Abortion Law Repeal Association. Between 1979 and 1986 she was Vice-President of the Western Australian Council for Civil Liberties, and between 1986 and 1990, a member of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. At one stage she was a member of the State Advisory Committee on Publications, and in 1986 authored a publication entitled "Prostitution and Human Rights: A Western Australian Case Study", published by the Human Rights Commission of Australia. In December 1990, shortly after entering Parliament, she married Alan Philp.

Within the ALP Judy had been vice-president of the Bassendean branch and for three years convenor of the party's health policy committee. Upon her election to Parliament, she immediately assumed a range of committee duties, but loss of Government by the Labor Party in 1993 denied her the opportunity at that time to gain a ministerial post. However, she was appointed to the shadow ministry, on which she served continuously except for a time surrounding the birth of her son, as she had showed herself to be extremely articulate in parliamentary debates, in the process gaining a public profile. One of her most challenging domains of responsibility was the environment, and from her first speech in Parliament she demonstrated a wealth of knowledge and commitment to such causes. When the opportunity arose to speak about the Maylands electorate, she also gave focus to local concerns. Drainage provision, flood control, industrial pollution, air pollution, waste management, acidic ground water, the Swan River foreshore and preservation of the wetlands and bird life are just some of the matters given attention. As shadow spokesperson for the environment, she frequently questioned the Government's record, and at one stage she undertook a review of the 216 environmental commitments made by the Coalition before the 1993 State election. In her assessment, the Coalition Government, by March 1996, had delivered on only about 20 of more than 200 promises. Moreover, some major projects, such as the Northbridge tunnel, were not subject to satisfactory environmental assessments. Later, she cogently illustrated many of the environmental failings of the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA), the shortcomings of which she claimed to have recognised long before it became a major public controversy.

As mentioned, Judy consistently linked environment with health outcomes. She sought the establishment of a Health Services Commission as an agency to provide information and an avenue for complaints on health problems, and she invariably paid special attention to the welfare of less privileged groups. Other areas of interests for her have been issues of prostitution, abortion, domestic violence and employment conditions which are closely linked with women's interests.

When the Labor Party led by Dr Geoff Gallop won office in 2001, Dr Edwards began a period of more than five years as environment minister, which, for various periods, she held in association with the portfolios of water resources and heritage. This was a phase of

Government when major environmental issues were widely debated in the public and parliamentary arena, with Judy a high-profile minister. Key issues included native forests, the Swan River, waste management, marine conservation and industrial emissions, as well as salinity, for which the Gallop Government signed a bilateral national plan.

One major piece of legislation which passed through Parliament early in Dr Edwards' Ministry was the Environmental Protection Amendment Act 2002. It was recognised that when the original Act first came into effect in 1987 'it was at the forefront in the rapidly developing world of environmental protection'. Since that date, reviews of the Act and extensive consultation had identified problems so the amendment Act made processes more flexible, efficient and effective and, together with the forthcoming Contaminated Sites Bill and waste management Bill, was said to provide 'a complete suite of tools to ensure the environment is protected.'<sup>3</sup> For Dr Edwards the Bill (Act) represented a key part of the Government's commitment to ecologically sustainable development and delivered on commitments for:

- ensuring the independence of the EPA (Environmental Protection Authority);
- effective protection of native vegetation and clearing controls;
- open decision making and the public's right to know;
- providing for a level playing field where everyone is treated the same—Government, private citizens, city and country, small business and big business;
- incorporating sustainability principles into the Environmental Protection Act;
- making the Act's assessment processes better able to address cumulative and regional impacts; and
- providing for more effective post-approval monitoring of major projects.<sup>4</sup>

From the beginning of Dr Edward's tenure as environment minister, she was embroiled in a highly controversial development plan to build a coastal resort at Mauds Landing, a site located on the portion of the Ningaloo Marine Park in the north west of the State. An international campaign led by author Tim Winton, who claimed that '(g)overnments who entertain such plans will live on in infamy'<sup>5</sup> was eventually successful when Premier Gallop announced in July 2003 the rejection of the project coupled with a declaration that his Government would seek World Heritage listing of the area. In this instance, the Premier had assumed responsibility for the project, as Judy had stepped aside from the Ningaloo decision due to the fact that previously as shadow Environment Minister she had made a submission criticising the scale of the Mauds Landing resort development. This in turn prompted a complaint to the *West Australian* from Opposition environment spokesperson, Bernie Masters, who asserted that Edwards 'lacks clout within Cabinet and listens to green groups more than she should.'<sup>6</sup> As it eventuated, during a Cabinet reshuffle undertaken by Premier Gallop in 2004, there was some speculation that Dr Edwards would lose her Cabinet post, but apparently she had the rare experience of key stakeholders of the environmental movement making representation to Premier Gallop that she be retained as Minister for the Environment. Nevertheless, in 2007, consequent upon Dr Gallop's resignation and the formation of the

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<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 June 2002, p. 12302.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Lesley van Schubroeck, *The Lure of Politics: Geoff Gallop's Government 2001–2006*, Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2010, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> *West Australian*, 10 April 2003.

Carpenter Ministry, Dr Edwards decided to return to the backbench and not to contest the seat at the forthcoming election.<sup>7</sup> In the interim, before the 2008 election she served as the President of the Parliamentary Labor Party.

During her last years in Parliament after leaving the Ministry, Judy resumed her very constructive role in the parliamentary committee system. Her final committee service was as a member of the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Economics and Industry and, for instance, spoke on the extensive report into the Karrinyup Lakes Lifestyle Village when she reiterated one of her favourite sayings ‘that the personal is the political’. She observed how the report detailed ‘some very serious complaints that have had a grave impact on the lives of many seniors ... and that they [be able] to age gracefully and [with] great dignity.’<sup>8</sup> Earlier in her parliamentary career, Judy had committee roles in which her medical education could be exercised, including serving as Deputy Chair of the Select Committee on Intervention in Childbirth, and as a member of the Select Committees on Country Hospitals and Nursing Posts; on Wittenoom; on Recycling and Waste Management; and on Perth’s Air Quality. She also had tenure on the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation and the Public Accounts Committee.

After she left Parliament in 2008, Judy’s expertise was utilised by Mental Health Minister Hon Helen Morton in establishing the State’s first mental health advisory council to which Judy was an inaugural appointment. Another of her post-Parliament community roles has been activity with the McCusker Alzheimer’s Research Foundation. As a highly educated woman, Judy had a reputation as a very pleasant, intelligent and constructive contributor to the parliamentary and governmental system, and these attributes are now being applied to broader community concerns.

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

‘The personal is political’ wrote prominent British feminist Sheila Rowbotham 20 years ago. In reflecting on my experiences as a woman in the Western Australian Parliament, this is the approach I will take and describe one of the greatest challenges I have faced—combining motherhood with my role as a parliamentarian.

When discussions were first held with me about entering Parliament, I made it clear that ‘the biological clock was ticking’ and that at some stage I would be having a baby. Much to my delight I fell pregnant shortly after the State election in 1993.

Being rather private people, my husband and I wanted to keep this news quiet. However, antenatal appointments and tests were only available in parliamentary sitting hours and of necessity one of the first people let into the secret was the parliamentary whip. About an hour later the whole Parliament knew—so much for privacy!

Pregnancy proceeded smoothly and over the months I got to hear many male members’ stories of the birth of their first child. There was no doubt that some of the more mature members felt they had missed out on an important experience—practices in those times dictating that men

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<sup>7</sup> Phillip Pental, David Black and Harry Phillips, *Parliament: Mirror of the People*, Perth: Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, 2007, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 19 June 2008, pp. 4204–4205.

were excluded from the birthing process. These are confidences I value, knowing that these people may not have related their experiences to men, but were comfortable sharing these with a woman colleague.

Ultimately labour arrived—a very equalising experience! In a more lucid moment in the final stages of labour, it dawned on me that my husband and the obstetrician were having a discussion about some of the personalities involved in State politics. One of life's defining moments and as my firstborn was about to enter the world, they were discussing politics! Was there no escape?

A few days later I went straight from hospital to a party room meeting to farewell then Labor leader Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) and vote for a new team led by Ian Taylor. My son is one of the few 'strangers' to have attended a Labor caucus meeting and so commenced a very interesting stage in our family life and my parliamentary career.

In the weeks that followed, at times I marvelled that I had been successful as a doctor and then commenced a parliamentary career, but that none of these achievements settled a screaming baby or got him to sleep any earlier. My understanding of the difficulties and demands of raising children increased immeasurably and I was mortified to think that as a doctor I had given advice on raising children that was fine in theory, but lacked the practical understanding I now had. My observation is that women bring this type of personal experience into their political considerations and decision making and that such insight benefits the whole community.

When my son was six weeks old, Parliament commenced its autumn session. I was determined to breastfeed for the first year and so had engaged a nanny who accompanied my son and myself wherever work took me. My husband agreed to take on this evening shift when Parliament was sitting! With some trepidation I approached the Speaker and informed him of my arrangements. The baby would always be supervised but would be in my office at Parliament when it was in session. I was asked to put this in writing and was relieved when the Speaker gave his blessing to this unprecedented situation. My office then rapidly filled with all sorts of paraphernalia not usually seen at Parliaments—a bassinet, change mats and spare dummies.

Immediately a problem became apparent. I had been allocated a room a long distance from the chamber and if I happened to be feeding the baby when the division bells rang, I was at risk of missing the division completely. The only solution was to breastfeed discreetly in the corridors near the chamber. Although it raised a few eyebrows, no comment was made and there were no more near misses with divisions. In the months that followed, the parliamentary dining room purchased a modern highchair and my son's progress was shared by members and staff alike.

When my son was about seven months old he became suddenly ill with a chest infection. Within a few hours he was in hospital and hooked up to oxygen. At this age there is little that can be done beyond riding out the infection. As he was still being breastfed, I needed to stay with him and would have wanted to anyway. I informed my colleagues and, while there was some sympathy, their overriding concern was whether I would be able to attend Parliament the following day to speak on a particular report. I was not greatly impressed. My annoyance increased the next morning when I was paged by the hospital switchboard—the fact I was a doctor apparently letting this happen! When I responded the leader of parliamentary business

wanted to know why I wasn't answering my mobile phone! I did manage to attend Parliament later that day and respond to the report, but at some personal cost.

A night in hospital with a very sick baby is a traumatic experience and this was compounded by virtually no sleep. This was an invaluable lesson in political priorities. No person is indispensable; another could have presented my speech. My male colleagues seemed barely able to understand the family situation I faced, let alone respond in a sensitive manner. On the other hand, women colleagues and parliamentary staff were very supportive and helpful. Fortunately, my son recovered quickly.

My own experiences have accentuated Rowbotham's claim that the personal is political. My interest in politics arose from my work in medicine and my political priorities have been reinforced by my own experiences—as a woman and a parent. The account of events around the time of the birth of my child is a snapshot of one year in nine of my parliamentary career to date. It is said that women bring their own experiences to Parliament. In my own case for part of a year I brought my child as well! While it is a challenge to combine parliamentary life with raising a young child, it can be done. I hope my example will be an inspiration to younger women wanting to enter Parliament and experience the joy of parenthood.

#### *Addendum to Reflections*

*(This addendum was written in 2012.)*

To me there can be no greater privilege than having served as a member of State Parliament. The position allows great connection with and huge insight into communities you represent, with the opportunity to meet an array of amazing people who work quietly to make a difference. Ministerial appointment provides a unique chance to formulate policy and laws, and really effect change and reform in your areas of responsibility. In all of this, families share the journey.

There are challenges. Families and children in particular don't necessarily appreciate the demands of politics. Try explaining to a six-year-old that we won't be taking home the raffle prize we just won, but donating it back; why ministerial paperwork must be done on weekends; or the fact that due to a decision, some people really don't like your mother!

But at the end of the day in my experience, my son and family brought balance and insight to my personal, political and community life. No matter what fantastic power might have been exercised in the day, nor what problems remained to be resolved, this all faded into the background with that first step through the front door of home. Like any other family, there are those practical things to be done—football socks needing a wash, the dog to be fed. But, most importantly, there is the burning desire to catch up on family business and hear all about the school day!

Combining parenthood and parliamentary duties can be challenging but every moment is worthwhile! The experience of parenthood is a great reality check and in my view has helped my understanding of the value of good child care, a responsive healthcare sector and a sound education system. This has added value in my political role. At the same time, there is nothing more grounding than changing a nappy or checking homework. These experiences quickly bring the real world back into sharp focus.