



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

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

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and
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WENDY MAXINE DUNCAN



MLC Agricultural Region 29 January 2008 (casual vacancy)–21 May 2009; Mining and Pastoral Region from 22 May 2009 (NP). Leader of the Nationals in Legislative Council from September 2008. Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Regional Development and other portfolios from September 2008. Member Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs 2008–2009; Parliamentary Services Committee from 2009. First National Party Woman President

Wendy Duncan has risen to become one of the most influential and respected women in Western Australian politics. She was first elected to the Legislative Council in January 2008 to fill a casual vacancy following the resignation of the Hon Murray Criddle from the Agricultural Region. Then in the 38th Parliament from 22 May 2009 she became an MLC for the Mining and Pastoral Region. Born on 7 October 1954 in Kalgoorlie to pastoralist John Tonkin and Maxine Tonkin (nee Davies), both of whom had been awarded an Order of Australia Medal, she received her early education with her siblings from the Kalgoorlie School of the Air.¹ She has never lost her strong links and commitment to regional Western Australia, although she had the benefit of secondary schooling at Methodist Ladies College and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Australia as well as a Diploma in Secretarial Studies at the Canberra College of Advanced Education and a Graduate Diploma in Business Management through the Curtin Graduate School of Business. One of the highlights of her studies at the latter institution was a two-week study tour of China with time spent at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics studying the art of doing business with the Chinese.

Politics may have been fortunate to capture Wendy, as she initially gained entry to study medicine at the University of Western Australia. However, after a year in South Africa on Rotary Youth Exchange she had returned to Western Australia to complete a Bachelor of Arts

¹ Parents Stephen John Tonkin and Shirley Maxine Tonkin (nee Davies) are known by their second names.

in politics and Australian history. Significantly, giving an indication of her economic and political philosophy, she stated in her Inaugural Address to the Legislative Council:

Having studied a smattering of economics along the way, I decided that the basic theories of “Economics 101” are fatally flawed; therefore much of the theory of economic rationalism is also fatally flawed. There is no such thing as a level playing field. It is impossible, even with modern communication technologies, to have full knowledge of the marketplace and, unfortunately, we cannot depend on that marketplace to be benevolent ... I believe we need to govern our state and nation for the benefit of our citizens, and in doing so, ensure our future sustainability and security ... I also share the concern about too much foreign ownership of our resources. I believe that governments should not be passive bystanders as market forces run roughshod over the little bloke, the weak and vulnerable. I believe that governments have the ability and power to influence the future direction and development of our nation through truly visionary investment projects that will bear dividends for future generations. The courage and foresight of Sir John Forrest to commit a whole year’s state budget to the C.Y. O’Connor pipeline gave us the vibrant, exciting and self-sufficient city that Kalgoorlie-Boulder is today.²

Wendy’s understanding of and attachment to the regional way of life has been enhanced by partnering her husband in their family pastoral and farming business. She had married Ian Duncan on 1 March 1980, and has one son and three daughters. Despite these family commitments Wendy has been able to fulfil a host of employment roles, including working as a legal executive in law firms in Esperance and Kalgoorlie, in aged care and finance with the Shire of Esperance and as a company secretary and executive officer to the Esperance Wool Exporters and Centre Cinema, an Esperance joint venture. As a strategic project officer with the Shire of Esperance, Wendy oversaw the development and delivery of the shire’s strategic plan. Additional contributions to the Esperance community include obtaining funding for the first purpose-built childcare centre in the town, new tennis courts and extensions to Esperance Home Care. Another role was that as the independent chair of the Recherche Advisory Group, seeking to create a community-driven management plan for the unique marine environment.³

In addition to extensive community regional contacts, Wendy also brought to the Parliament considerable grassroots and administrative experience in key rural organisations and the National Party. After completing her secretarial studies graduate diploma in Canberra, she had a period of employment with the Australian Woolgrowers Graziers Council and then the newly amalgamated National Farmers’ Federation. Her entry into Nationals politics came via her role, from 1994 to 1998, as electorate officer for Ross Ainsworth, MLA, the member for Roe. She joined the National Party in 2001. In 2002–2003 she was president of the Esperance branch of the Nationals, and in 2003–2004 was an executive member of the Nationals before successfully standing for State President of Nationals WA at the 2004 annual conference. She became the first female to hold that position. During her four and a half years at the helm of the lay party she oversaw two federal elections, two state elections and a major state electoral redistribution in 2007.

The Electoral Amendment and Repeal Act 2005, which introduced ‘one vote, one value’ for the Legislative Assembly, was strongly opposed by the Nationals, and its passage being accompanied by many pundits predicting the demise of the party and loss of ‘party status’. As Wendy recalled, ‘the Nationals in Western Australia had the choice to throw in the towel when the ‘one vote, no value’ legislation left the regions with only 11 members of [the Legislative

² WAPD (LC), 26 February 2008, p. 257.

³ Ibid.

Assembly] and the metropolitan area with 48 [members]’.⁴ While vote weighting had been preserved in the Legislative Council, under the presidency of Wendy the Nationals resolved to maintain a voice for regional people with a carefully planned ‘balance of power’ strategy. Central to the strategy was an attempt ‘to gain a commitment from whichever party is in power to allocate the equivalent of \$1 out of every \$4 from mining and petroleum royalties to infrastructure so that some of the benefits of the boom can flow back to whence it came’.⁵

With a brilliant ‘royalties for regions’ slogan, the Nationals exceeded expectations at the 2008 state election, winning the balance of power in both the lower and upper House. It was not a fait accompli that the Nationals would support the Liberals, their traditional coalition partners, as it was rumoured that party president Wendy and leader Brendon Grylls had an inclination to support a governing arrangement with Labor.⁶ Following a week of very intense negotiations the Nationals signed an agreement with Colin Barnett for an ‘alliance’ Government, elevating Liberal Party leader Colin Barnett to the office of Premier, with Grylls accepting the major Regional Development portfolio. Wendy had been at the centre of critical decisions by those holding the reins of power in Western Australia. From 23 September 2008, after moving to forgo the presidency of the National Party, she was to be the Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development: Land; Minister assisting the Minister for State Development; and for Transport. She was also appointed, from November 2009, to the Parliamentary Services Committee, having earlier been a member of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs.

One of her responsibilities was to lead the debate in the Legislative Council for the introduction of the Royalties for Regions Bill 2009. As she indicated:

The central and simple principle behind this legislation is that every person in Western Australia should be entitled to basic services and infrastructure no matter where they live—schools, hospitals, government services and recreation and sporting facilities—as well as the ability to develop business and economic prosperity. However, this legislation is not just about structural development. It is about people being encouraged to live and grow within their communities, to bring up families without having to move to cities for education or health services, to become long term residents and to drive and plan the future of their own communities. In broad terms, the object of the bill is to promote and facilitate economic, business and social development in regional Western Australia; that is, through the operation of the fund and its subsidiary accounts it is hoped to build capacity in communities, retain benefits in local communities, improve services to achieve equity with metropolitan communities, attain sustainability, expand opportunity, and grow prosperity.⁷

Wendy also indicated that, as the fund would hold significant public funds, a statutory authority was required to provide oversight in the management of the funds. She recognised that such significant ventures had to be well administered if they were to maintain public support. As she suggested, her view about royalties for regions ‘is also shared by many in the metropolitan area who empathise with the regions, whether it be through some business or

⁴ Ibid., p. 258.

⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

⁶ See Harry Phillips, ‘The 2008 Western Australian State Election: The Snap Poll Blunder’, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2009, Vol. 24 (1), p. 236.

⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 13 October 2009, p. 7796.

family connection or simply through an understanding of the difficulties that country people face because of a lack of, or decline in, services and infrastructure'.⁸

As a leading spokesperson for the National Party in the Legislative Council, Wendy's governmental and parliamentary roles altered some of her constituency contributions, which in addition to those mentioned have included various positions with the Shire of Esperance, the Esperance Twin Towns Committee, the Esperance Child Care Centre and the Women's Investment Group and membership of the South East District Health Advisory Committee and the Castletown Pre-Primary Committee. Worthy of additional mention has been her sporting service, which has encompassed roles as secretary and management committee representative of the Esperance Tennis Club, founding secretary of the Esperance Soccer Association, president of the Esperance Junior Netball Association and president of the Esperance Amateur Swimming Club. These roles constitute part of a formidable background for Wendy to exercise the important place she has acquired in Western Australia as part of a 'minority government', which she told an Australasian Study of Parliament (ASPG) seminar 'can work, [as] they very often result in a better and more democratic government and they are probably here to stay'.⁹ In fact, though, for Western Australia she had helped author a new model of flexible 'responsible government' for the thirty-eighth Parliament. Her *Hansard* record since her election to the Legislative Council has been substantial, and she has been accorded significant respect from her parliamentary colleagues across the political spectrum.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

I have on occasion described myself as an 'accidental politician', but when I stop and think about it I realise that I am kidding myself.

From a very young age on the isolated sheep station where I grew up north east of Kalgoorlie, the evening meal was a very formal affair where all were sworn to silence while the ABC evening news was on the radio, then the dinner conversation would be very vigorous debate about the politics of the day. I relished these conversations and the willingness of my parents to be 'devil's advocate' to ensure all sides of the issue at hand were explored.

Following an early education through the correspondence school and Kalgoorlie School of the Air, I went to boarding school at 11 years old and soon became engaged in debating and school leadership. However, my interest in politics did not really crystallise until I went to South Africa for twelve months on a Rotary Exchange scholarship. I was based in Cape Town at the time of the peak of apartheid. Nelson Mandela was still imprisoned on Robben Island and one of my host families had a connection with *The Cape Times* newspaper. There were conversations around the table about fear of retribution if anti-government material was published. One of my host sisters was secretly seeing a 'coloured' man and had to leave the country when this relationship was about to be exposed.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Harry Phillips, 'Hung parliaments—summary of proceedings of seminar held by the Western Australia Chapter of the ASPG, November 2010,' *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn, 2011, Vol. 26 (1), p. 216.

Prior to my gap year in South Africa, I was enrolled to study medicine. On my return, having decided that we all had a responsibility to serve and protect our precious democracy in Australia, I enrolled in a double degree in politics and Australian history at UWA.

It was very interesting times in politics and I can remember, just before a history exam, sitting on the steps of Winthrop Hall crying with my politics peers over the dismissal of Gough Whitlam.

While politics was my interest, party politics was not, and I spent most of my working life on the periphery working for lobby groups, local government and law firms. Even during my time as electorate officer to Nationals member for Roe, Ross Ainsworth, I was not a member of the party and over the years have voted for all sides of the political spectrum.

It was the ‘recession we had to have’ and interest rates in the 20 per cent range that decimated rural communities, along with the inexorable chant of economic rationalism that made me realise that regional Australia needed a strong voice and did not have one.

In the 2001 state election the Nationals in Western Australia were crushed by the rise of One Nation, something that concerned me greatly. I remember sitting on the balcony of a friend in Esperance with the newly elected member for Merredin, Brendon Grylls, bemoaning the fact that the Nationals had lost their way and no longer represented regional WA with the courage that was required in the face of economic rationalism and city-centric politics. We talked about forming a new political party. The acronym ‘WAR’ came to mind—‘WA Regions Party’. Instead, we decided to fix the one we had and use its structure to create a revitalised party representing the people who live and work outside our capital cities.

I joined the party in 2001 and became its first woman president in August 2004.

While I understand the need for the feminist movement, I was never really a feminist myself. I think my upbringing on the sheep station where everyone was expected to pull their weight and any sign of weakness drew the wrath of the boss meant that I did not really believe there was a difference between men and women and what they could achieve. It was quite funny when I first realised that I was a woman. It was when a group of Rotary Exchange students were on a safari into Namibia and the boys were having this giant wrestle in the pool. I launched in to give a hand and was told in no uncertain terms I was not welcome. For a while I was quite bemused by this exclusion as I could fight as well as the best of them!

So it was this fighting spirit that I took to the Nationals as its first woman president from 2004 to 2008 and as its first woman leader in the Legislative Council from 2008 to the present.

The task was huge. The party was left with no funds after the 2001 election and was forced to terminate the employment of its entire staff and its office lease. The management of the party was moved to Esperance, my home town, where I undertook everything from managing the membership database, paying the bills, complying with Electoral Commission audits, securing corporate sponsorship and preparing for the next critical election.

In this task I received incredible support from my executive, the Nationals members of Parliament and staff, particularly in the leader’s office.

The 2004 federal election and 2005 state election came and went without the turnaround we knew we needed.

In June 2005 Brendon Grylls took over the leadership of the party and there began a partnership that saw a complete renewal of the executive of the party, a strategic rethink of who we were and what we stood for and the momentous decision that the party would return to its roots of being an independent stand-alone political party devoted to serving the people who live and work in regional Australia. This was confirmed at a historic state council meeting in Wagin in March 2006.

Contrary to popular expectation, the passage of the one vote, one value legislation in early 2005 did not decimate the National Party, but in fact sowed the seeds for its renewal. We made the strategic decision not to rail against the decision but to run an awareness campaign—the ‘48/11 Campaign’—alerting regional residents to the fact that now they only had 11 representatives in Parliament while the metropolitan area had 48, and the only way they could have a voice from here on was through having the balance of power.

It was whilst Brendon Grylls and I and the Nationals team were on our ‘48/11’ campaign around the state of Western Australia during 2006 and 2007 that we continually heard the cry that the regions were creating all the wealth but it was all being spent in the city.

A defining moment was when I took Brendon Grylls to the town of my birth, Kalgoorlie, and he stood in the main street in awe of its grandeur and beauty.

‘You can see there was a boom here a century ago,’ he observed. ‘Why doesn’t Karratha look like this now?’

It was also in Kalgoorlie that I was approached by two senior local identities who showed me a document they had prepared on reserving a share of mining royalties for regional areas. The first political party they presented the document to rejected it; we did not.

The name for the program, ‘Royalties for Regions’, was devised as Brendon was enjoying a barbecue with his brother and his partner in a caravan in Karratha. That is that 25 per cent of the royalties paid to the state must be spent in the regions on facilities and services over and above normal government expenditure.

The campaign was a hard slog, with effort and personal appearances taking the place of slick, expensive media campaigns. Underpinning this was a long and low-budget television advertising campaign that slowly galvanised the people in the regions to rethink their politics and support the Nationals.

The outcome in the 2008 state election was that instead of the Nationals being reduced to a ‘party of one’ as predicted by Robert Taylor in the *West Australian*, they doubled their numbers and 10 Nationals were returned with the balance of power in both Houses. Kalgoorlie Independent John Bowler strengthened the Nationals’ hand by throwing his hat in with us.

During the election campaign the Nationals said that as an independent, stand-alone political party, it would deal with either side of politics should there be a hung Parliament.

This is exactly what happened in the 2008 election and the ensuing week after the election was one of the most challenging of my life. Negotiations were undertaken with Labor leader Alan Carpenter and Liberal leader Colin Barnett. In the end the offers on the table were very similar and the decision of the party to go into an Alliance, not a Coalition, with the Liberal Party was more to do with the fact that if we had gone with Labor, we would have had to share the balance of power with the Greens.

This was a period that required strong and thoughtful leadership. My inspiration and guiding light has always been Nelson Mandela. I had in my briefcase (and still carry with me today) the July 2008 edition of *Time* magazine with the article '*The Secrets of Leadership: eight lessons from one of history's icons*'

His first rule is '*Courage is not the absence of fear—it's inspiring others to move beyond it*'. The position that the Nationals found themselves in took a great deal of courage. Publicly stating that we would deal with both sides of politics meant we were cut off from funds from the conservative 500 Club when we needed them most. It also meant that we were greatly challenging the loyalty of our conservative grassroots.

This is where his second rule '*Lead from the front but don't leave your base behind*' is so important. When I was asked to take on the role of state president in a new executive, I said that I would only do it if we had a member of the 'old guard' as my vice-president. That person was the wonderful Allan Holmes, who not only fiercely and fearlessly supported our strategy but also worked with our core constituency to keep them on side.

However, the most influential rule from that edition of *Time* magazine for me at the time of deciding who to support to form government was rule No. 7 '*Nothing is ever black or white*'. That does not sound like a lot of help as he observed '*Life is never either/or. Decisions are complex and there are always competing factors*'. The message was that a true leader must make the decision in a 50:50 call and then lead with confidence and not look back.

And that is what we did. The Liberal–National Alliance Government in Western Australia was formed with the key platform of royalties for regions being implemented.

My time as a member of Parliament leading up to the 2008 state election and following it has been both challenging and rewarding. I often say 'How lucky am I? I am a member of Parliament who can actually keep my promises!'

My entry into Parliament was as member for the Agricultural Region on the retirement of Hon Murray Criddle, at that time the only Nationals member of the Legislative Council. His retirement was part of a strategy to ensure that the Nationals did not fall into unseemly bickering over who got what seat in the aftermath of the one vote, one value redistribution. The redistribution meant that the seats of Avon, held by Nationals veteran Max Trenorden, and Merredin, held by leader Brendon Grylls, were amalgamated into Central Wheatbelt. It was agreed that I would move into the Agricultural Region seat, the safest for the Nationals and use that to campaign for Mining and Pastoral—notionally not winnable—so that Max Trenorden could then take a position in Agricultural Region and Brendon Grylls could stand for Central Wheatbelt at the 2008 election. As state president I wanted to lead by example and encourage our supporters to have the courage to stand in seats that were not considered winnable for the Nationals.

Following our hugely successful 2008 campaign, we won 1.5 quotas for Mining and Pastoral and to my delight I became the first Nationals member for the Mining and Pastoral Region. I was joined in the Legislative Council by four other Nationals members—three in the Agricultural Region and one from South West.

With my roots in the goldfields and my love of ‘red dirt country’, the Mining and Pastoral electorate suits me perfectly. Although it is huge—stretching from Esperance to Wyndham and from the WA eastern border around the coast to just north of Kalbarri and then inland through Southern Cross to Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun—the people are inspiring and the beauty breathtaking. It is a great honour to travel around this electorate to meet the people who have decided to make their home in these vast and remote areas. They are gutsy, innovative, independent and very special. Contrary to popular opinion, they love where they live.

One of the things that annoys me most and that we are slowly but surely breaking down is the assumption that everyone in Western Australia is hanging out to move to Perth; that the climate in the north is inhospitable and no-one in their right mind would want to live there. This is a very ethnocentric point of view that needs to be challenged every time it rears its ugly head.

Only two weeks ago I was at a launch where the Premier described the climate in Karratha as ‘inhospitable’. Yet look at how many people in the world live in a similar climate. Look at how many people in the world love to live in places like Iceland, Mongolia, the Middle East and Alaska—all perfectly adapted and loving where they live. Not long ago a person in Port Hedland told me how she hates going to Perth because the climate is too cold and wet.

As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Regional Development and an architect of the royalties for regions policy, I am very proud of the transformation that is occurring in regional Western Australia. I am also very excited to see other states in Australia adopting similar policies and look forward to the Federal Government matching these initiatives.

One of the attractions of being a member of the Nationals is that every member has a conscience vote on every issue. This means you can truly represent your constituency.

However, sooner or later philosophy inevitably collides with politics and I believe this is the defining moment for every politician. For me that time was the stop-and-search legislation put forward by the Liberal Minister for Police. The legislation allowed a person to be stopped and searched by police without them having to have ‘reasonable suspicion’ that the person had done or was about to do something unlawful. It was legislation like this that first inspired me to turn my back on medicine and enrol in politics way back in the 1970s. I could not support that legislation and I was very proud of my colleagues in the Nationals when we decided not to allow it through.

Being a woman parliamentarian is not something that I have focused on greatly. However, I do believe that it is still difficult for a woman to be elected to an Assembly seat because of the bias of voters. This explains why our Legislative Council has such a strong representation of women—they are elected by party rather than as an individual.

The other impediment to women entering politics is the treatment they receive at the hands of the media and commentators. It is difficult enough for members of Parliament in general to deal with the close scrutiny, lack of respect, denigration and cynicism of the media and

talkback radio without women also having to deal with close scrutiny of what they wear, how their hair looks, who they sleep with and whether they are married or not. Our society needs to move beyond these fixations.

I certainly could not do this job without the support of my amazing and long-suffering husband, who is home alone except for the dog for much of the year. This is a particular challenge for women politicians who are normally the primary homemaker. It is an even greater challenge for those with a young family or who have a child whilst in the job. My undying admiration goes to them. As a mother of four who has worked throughout my childrearing years, I am acutely aware of the challenges this brings, but the unsociable hours and time away from home that is a prerequisite for members of Parliament make the task even more difficult.

However, I do believe that women are essential in our political system and bring balance, intelligence, a strong social perspective and a steadying influence into Government. And we still get asked to make the tea and take the minutes!