



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

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

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and
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ELIZABETH LLOYD BEHJAT



MLC North Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2009 (Lib). Member Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations from June 2009; Standing Committee on Uniform Legal and Statutes Review from June 2009.

When Elizabeth (Liz) Lloyd Behjat was elected to the Legislative Council for the North Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2009 as a Liberal Party member she was believed to be the first Liberal parliamentarian in Western Australia, if not Australia, to represent the same party and constituency covering a similar geographic area as her father Richard John Lloyd Williams. Known as John Williams, he had played a key role in the creation and development of the standing committee system of the upper House during his 18-year service as a member of the Legislative Council for the former Metropolitan Province from May 1971 to May 1989. Remarkably John Williams' third given name was Lloyd and Liz's mother Sylvia had a surname Lloyd Williams. When Liz was born in the United Kingdom at Wolverhampton on 30 December 1958 she was named Elizabeth Lloyd Williams. Older sister Bronwen and younger brother Rick, also had the given name Lloyd bestowed upon them. So when the family landed at Fremantle on 6 July 1966, with Liz being eight years of age, the completion of their immigration forms required multiple references to Williams and Lloyd.

When delivering her Inaugural Speech to the Legislative Council on 16 June 2009, Liz had her family including husband Reza, whom she married on 21 December 1991, and son Ali, in attendance. She could recall having been in the public gallery, as a 12-year-old girl, listening to her father's debut speech on 22 July 1971 and recounted the excitement of coming to Australia on board the *Castel Felice*.¹ She recognised that their family had been fortunate to already have relatives in Perth so it was not necessary to stay at Graylands Migrant Hostel, which had proven an ordeal for some families. Arrangements were made for the family to stay in the suburb of Innaloo, a suburb that now encompasses part of her electoral region. In fact, Liz attended the North Innaloo Primary School, now known as Yuluma. Most of her high school years were spent at Churchlands high schools, after one year at Scarborough Senior

¹ WAPD(LC), 16 June 2009, p. 5005.

High School. In confessing that she was a ‘ten-pound Pom,’ she said she did not regard this as derogatory phrase. Indeed, she ‘believe[d] that that we have gone overboard in the politically correct arena in recent times and we need to return to a time when common sense and mutual respect automatically prevails, without compulsion or legislation being necessary’.²

In terms of political socialisation, Liz’s father had been a member of the British Conservative Party from 1955, before immediately joining the Liberal Party upon arrival in Western Australia. Liz, too, had joined the Liberal Party as a young person, as early as 1975. However, prior to her entry to Parliament she held a wide range of employment positions before she worked in the electorate office of former Liberal Senator Chris Ellison and then federal member of the House of Representatives Don Randall. She thought this experience was ‘pivotal’³ to her political career, but she was also very generous with her mention of a wide range of family and friends. Some of the former members of Parliament mentioned included former President of the Legislative Council George Cash, a friend of her father, who was described as a ‘friend, mentor and close confidante’.⁴ Sincere appreciation was also recorded to George Cash’s daughter Michaela Cash, who had recently become a ‘hard-working’ Western Australian Senator, for invaluable advice and support.⁵ In addition, former Speaker of the Legislative Assembly Jim Clarko, ‘a great friend’ of her dad, was acknowledged, as was former MLC Ray Halligan’s ‘great contribution within the Parliament’.⁶ Gratitude was expressed for those who sat on her preselection committee with special thanks expressed to Daniel Blain, Robyn Nolan and the Women’s Liberal Council. In the electorate division of her party the ‘enthusiasm and drive’ of Marie Grout and Anne Johnson were recognised, especially in relation to elections and fund raising activities.⁷

One former member to whom Liz owed great respect was the former Attorney General Hon Ian Medcalf. Indeed for 18 years both John Williams and Ian Medcalf were the representatives for the Metropolitan Province during which time they developed a long-lasting working and personal relationship. When speaking to Ian Medcalf’s condolence motion, Liz indicated that he had been the longest serving Attorney General and that he was largely responsible for setting up the Legal Aid Commission.⁸ She praised him for persuading the Liberal Party in 1983 not to oppose or be equivocal about the new Labor Government’s Equal Opportunity Bill, as it was designed to give women in particular better opportunities than they had in past.⁹ A quote from Medcalf was also recited as it was in concert with Liz’s states’ rights outlook:

Uniformity is not a panacea for all the ills and we should not slavishly accept it. It has a proper place, and that is in areas to which it applies: but we should be careful we do not say, ‘Ah! Uniformity’, and leave it at that, because uniformity on its own justifies nothing.¹⁰

As mentioned, while Liz joined the Liberal Party at a young age she held a wide range of occupational positions before she became a ‘political gladiator’, either as an electorate officer or parliamentarian. Some of the several jobs she held included working as a clerk in the

² Ibid., p. 5004.

³ *WAPD(LC)*, 16 June 2009, p. 5008.

⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 16 June 2009, p. 5004.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5004.

⁶ Ibid., p. 5004.

⁷ Ibid., p. 5008.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 17 May 2011, p. 3167.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3168.

¹⁰ Ibid.

State Law Department (1977–1979); as a conveyancer with Ratto Parker (1979–1980); as an administrative officer in the racing and hospitality industry with the Belmont Bloodstock Agency and the Launceston Country Club (1984–1985); and as pre-opening coordinator and guest services manager at the Burswood Resort Casino (1985–1987); then back to paralegal roles specialising in conveyancing and commercial law at Parker and Parker (1988–1990). Many part-time jobs followed in London and France between 1990 and 1992, as well as another paralegal role at Mazza McCallum and Robinson between 1994 and 1997. Also worthy of mention was the experience associated with going to Karratha in 2005 when her husband took up a posting with the Australian Customs Service in Dampier. Whilst the life style was fully embraced, the three-year contract only lasted 15 months due to the lack of medical services and associated support for families.¹¹

In today's hectic and electronic society Liz believes we must ensure that old fashioned values such as good manners, respect and caring for each other are forward. She has been encouraged by some of the programs being conducted in contemporary schools. One example is the Virtues Project at Ashdale Primary School attended by her son Ali. Each fortnight the students, under the guidance of their teachers and their peer support groups, concentrate on learning and practising one of the identified virtues. Included in the virtues identified are caring, compassion, consideration, diligence, enthusiasm, honesty, humility, humour, loyalty, justice and unity. So important are the virtues they led Liz to make them available to members of Parliament.¹² She contended that 'if we do not maintain respect for ourselves and our fellow Australians regardless of creed, religion or colour, what hope have we got of maintaining the peace and the fantastic lifestyle' that our climate lends itself to so well.¹³

Given her own immigrant experience, Liz was very conscious of the impact of the influx of many ethnic groups that today form the diverse community both of her North Metropolitan region and the wider society. She has recognised problems in the funding of different ethnic groups to help maintain their heritage and sense of identity, and also to help integrate them into Australian society. Even before the election of the Barnett Government she observed that funding of programs could be 'a bit of a hit and miss affair and it was squeakiest wheel that seemed to get the most oil'.¹⁴ She applauded the creation of the Ethnic Organisations Fund, which after extensive consultations had developed a triennial rather than annual funding model.

Almost immediately upon entry to the Legislative Council Liz was appointed to the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review as well as the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Relations. With father John Williams, as mentioned, being a key figure in the creation of the Council's standing committee system it was not surprising that on one occasion she said:

I am a big supporter of our committee system. It is something that all members who serve on committees take very seriously. More often than not, committee work goes largely unrecognised by people in the community, including the amount of work done behind the chair and how consensus is reached between people from different political persuasions.¹⁵

¹¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 17 June 2009, p. 5007.

¹² *WAPD(LC)*, 16 June 2009, p. 5006.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 25 May 2011, p. 3019.

This judgement was made when she was speaking to a ‘minority report’ she had presented on the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Relations Report following an inquiry into the removal of senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 courses at 21 district high schools. The Government provided a lengthy response, with Liz indicating that she was prepared to speak her mind with well-reasoned argument.

Another instance of Liz carefully presenting her case on a contentious issue took place with her participation in the Voluntary Euthanasia Bill 2010. She admitted that as a relatively new member she did not think she would be involved in a debate that allowed a free or conscience vote so soon in her first term. She was respectful of the intentions of Robin Chapple, the sponsor of the legislation, but she promised the people in her electorate who had contacted her on the issue that not only would she be voting against the legislation, but that she would be speaking in the Legislative Council chamber to place her reasons on the record. This was the approach she adopted, providing extended analysis leading her to believe there were not enough safeguards in the legislation and agreeing with party colleague Hon Nick Goiran, who had said earlier that ‘Western Australia does not support capital punishment for the same reason—there are not enough safeguards to protect people’.¹⁶

If Liz was to survive the 18 years that her father served in the Legislative Council she was likely to face many more difficult policy issues. Part of the reality of political life is the need to retain a winnable place on the Liberal Party ticket in the North Metropolitan region. The vitality of her performance in her first term would indicate that longevity is possible. From her point of view she promised ‘to faithfully serve the people of Western Australia as their representative in this place for as long as they permit me’.¹⁷ Backed with the support of her long-time mentors in the Liberal Party, her electorate staff, friends, family—particularly her ‘wonderful husband’ Reza and ‘darling son’ Ali, she was delighted to take on the political journey, which she described as ‘a fulfilment of a life time ambition’.¹⁸

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Usually when someone is asked to reflect on a period of their life it is at a time when that particular phase or chapter if you like, has come to an end and you are either moving into retirement or off in a completely different direction. I have no intention of doing either anytime soon, but I am happy to make a few reflections of my experiences thus far.

So with that in mind I offer this as my contribution to *Making a Difference*.

I am not certain that women per se in Parliament are making a difference in any way that is different to the way men in Parliament make a difference. I also am not certain that any of us will make a difference until such time as there is no need for books such as this one to be written. Members of Parliament in general by the very nature of what we do make a difference; it is not gender specific.

Having said that, I am happy to contribute to this publication, if for no other reason than it is very difficult to ever say no to a wonderful person like Harry Phillips. One of the first things

¹⁶ WAPD(LC), 21 September 2010, p. 6897.

¹⁷ WAPD(LC), 16 June 2009, p. 5008

¹⁸ Ibid.

you learn coming into this place is that if you need to know anything about the history of the WA Parliament in either recent or long-past times, then the ‘go-to’ person is Harry Phillips. In the three years that I have been here I have enjoyed having a chat with Harry on numerous occasions (usually about the committee system), and I am always in awe of Harry’s deep knowledge and understanding of everything that goes on here.

As a Government backbencher in my first term, there is not much opportunity to make an impact on the floor of the chamber—unless I was to use the opportunity during members’ statements time to do or say something sensational to make a name for myself but that is not in my nature and not likely to occur.

If one day I am fortunate enough to be appointed a Minister, I may make more of an impact or substantial contribution to Western Australia. At this point of my career if I am to nominate an area I think I could possibly make a difference in, I would have to say it is as a member of a standing committee of the Legislative Council.

I am a firm believer that it is the role of the Legislative Council to act as a true House of review and that legislation that comes before the Parliament should be thoroughly scrutinised to ensure that we are presenting to the people of Western Australia the best possible laws with which to govern the state.

As well as being a firm believer in the committee system, I am also a true federalist and I am horrified at the ways in which the commonwealth Government is continuing in its quest to nationalise just about everything and attempting at every turn to have everything administered either out of Canberra, Victoria and New South Wales. The Parliament of Western Australia is sometimes groaning under the weight of legislation that introduces a national scheme or gives effect to another scheme agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) through its numerous ministerial councils.

This is why in Western Australia we have a Legislative Council committee, the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Statutes Review, which is tasked to specifically look at legislation that gives effect to a national scheme or decision of COAG. Until recently I was a member of this committee and very proud of the work undertaken by it. It is a committee that I feel is one of the most valuable in our chamber, as through its enquiries and investigations it endeavours to ensure that the sovereignty of the state and the law-making powers of the Parliament are protected at all times.

Some of the reports produced by the uniform legislation committee have made recommendations to Government about ways in which legislation can be amended after highlighting potential problems, ranging from sovereignty issues to problems with enforcing the legislation through to technical drafting error, and more often than not these recommendations have been accepted by Government, resulting in better and more complete legislation being enacted.

The terms of reference of the committee were changed at the end of 2011 when the Standing Orders of the Legislative Council were extensively amended and the committee’s focus as to the matters they may investigate is now somewhat narrowed. It is my fervent hope, however, that these changes will not in any way diminish the good work done by the committee previously, but only time will tell.

I am also a member of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, and again, this is a most important and productive committee of the upper house. Twice yearly the committee holds formal estimates hearings; after the handing down of the budget and also after the tabling of departmental annual reports. It is before this committee that the relevant directors general and heads of departments appear together with their responsible Minister to answer questions relating to the financial operations of the state. The books of the Government are laid open for scrutiny and detailed questioning by the members of this opposition-dominated committee. As a government member sitting on that committee, the role I play is somewhat different to that of an opposition member, but is still a very important role.

Estimates committees by their very nature are generally vehicles for oppositions to find 'blackholes' in government accounts and it is the role of a government member on this type of committee to ensure that if there is a problem, the damage done to the Government is kept to a minimum. I am very proud to say that in the three years that I have been a member of the committee my skills as a 'plugger of holes' have not been required.

Good Governments should never be concerned about having their books or departments scrutinised and as long as the actions of Government commence from a base of transparency and go on from there, they will not have a problem with scrutiny. I am very happy to say that the current Government, of which I am a proud member, is always willing to provide answers to all the questions raised by the estimates committees and all the Ministers are public servants who appear before this committee treat their appearances very seriously.

Will any of the work I do on a committee make a difference? Who knows? As members of Parliament, it is our solemn duty to serve the people of Western Australia to the very best of our abilities and I am constantly striving to achieve this. We are in positions of privilege and it is indeed an honour to serve the state as a member of Parliament. We do need people from all walks of life to take on these roles and whether they are female or male to me does not matter; we just have to get on and do the very best we can.