



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

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

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and
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JUDITH HUGHES



MLA Kingsley 26 February 2005–6 September 2008. Deputy Government Whip 2006–2008. Member Community Development and Justice Standing Committee 2005–2008; Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 2005–2006; Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission 2006–2008.

Judith Hughes was elected to the Legislative Assembly as member for Kingsley in one of the surprise results in the February 2005 general election. First created in 1989, the northern suburbs seat had been held continuously by Cheryl Edwardes (q.v.) whose eight years continuous service as a Minister of State had made her the longest serving woman to date to sit in Cabinet in Western Australia. Cheryl's decision not to contest the seat in 2005 paved the way for the preselection as Liberal candidate of her husband Colin Edwardes, but in a close finish Judith, who had led on the primary count by 31 votes, won the seat for Labor with a majority of 383 votes after receiving 44 per cent of the preferences of Community 1st candidate Marie Evans, spouse of a former Liberal MHR for Cowan. When the 2008 election became highly competitive Judith was always going to have a difficult task holding the once safe Liberal seat and although she polled only 1.5 per cent less of the primary vote than in 2005, after preferences she finished 1 800 votes short of her Liberal opponent, Andrea Mitchell (q.v.).

Born in Subiaco on 28 April 1959, Judith Hughes is the daughter of Cornelius Verhagen, a builder and carpenter, and Johanna Maria Jozepha Terhorst, both of whom had migrated from Holland with their respective families in the 1950s. Judith was educated at Westminster Primary School, Balga Senior High School and Dunns Herbal Clinic and College, and on 25 August 1984 at Nollamara she married Colin Noel Hughes, by whom she had three children—two daughters and one son. Between 1999 and her election to Parliament she represented the south ward of the City of Wanneroo and from 2001 she was also on the Mindarie Regional Council. She was named Cowan Volunteer of the Year in 2001. In the ALP she served as branch president for Kingsley and Woodvale and at the time of her election described herself as self employed and a local government councillor.

In delivering her Inaugural Speech on 29 March 2005, when she moved the motion for the adoption of the Address-in-Reply, she stressed that as a ‘daughter, a wife and a mother’ she had been continually active in the community beginning with playgroup associations and school parents and citizens associations and the establishment of the Girrawheen community group.¹ Specifically, she focused on such issues as the ‘New North program of urban renewal’ and on her role with the Mindarie Regional Council in ‘developing a program for the future implementation of a secondary waste treatment plant’.² Other aspects of community work to which she gave attention in this speech included the need for a local general practitioner, the development of family-friendly work practices and the development of educational facilities in the area.³

Early in April 2005 Judith was elected to serve on the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, of which she remained a member until the Parliament was prorogued in August 2008. She was also a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation on which she served until March 2006, at which time she was elected instead as a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission. From April 2006 to August 2008 from time to time she acted as Speaker and from August 2006 she was deputy government whip.

During her three years in the Legislative Assembly Judith was very active during parliamentary debate on issues arising from the departmental estimates. However, she also spoke on a number of occasions during the second reading debate on Bills centred on community and individual values. These included Bills concerned with proposed extraordinary powers to deal with terrorism, surrogacy and human reproductive technology.

Speaking on surrogacy in May 2007 Judith, unlike some of her colleagues, supported the Bill but she stressed the need for adequate protection for the actual biological parents of the child:

Birth is a very emotional time. A woman might go through 10 hours of labour, and when she sees the child she thinks it is very exciting and wonderful. However, as soon as the next day dawns, the woman would fully understand what has occurred and that the child does not belong to her. It should not be underestimated that the people who are being denied are the actual biological parents. It is very important to support the biological parents at the time of the birth.⁴

In subsequent debate on the floor of the House with the Minister, Judith referred back to an earlier part of her speech focusing on the aspect that these arrangements must not be commercial arrangements but ‘true partnerships of the heart’ and that ultimately ‘it must be very clear to the surrogate what she is entering into’.⁵

A few months later she contributed to the debate on the Human Reproductive Technology Bill, citing her involvement with the Motor Neurone Disease Association of Western Australia and the Multiple Sclerosis Society, both of which deal with diseases ‘that will benefit greatly from this type of technology’.⁶ While stressing her belief in the sanctity of life she contended

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 29 March 2005, p. 20.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–22ff.

⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 8 May 2007, p. 1784.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1785.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 28 August 2007, p. 4382.

that one needs to understand that ‘sometimes people suffer under the weight of diseases and conditions that none of us would wish upon our worst enemies’. Her central argument was:

I do not think that it is our place in this house to be concerned about what legislators may do in the future. It will be their job to create legislation for cloning, if it comes before this or any other house in the future For us to stand in this place and fear future legislation is a waste of our time and creates lots of impediments to creating legislation that we know will be able to help people in the near future, not the far future.⁷

Similarly on the Terrorism (Extraordinary Powers Bill) in October 2005 she attempted to provide a balanced approach:

This bill should be supported. However it is sad that we have to support such a bill. I am pleased that this legislation has some balance in it. It tries to protect people and preserve their rights at the same time. That is something we should continue to strive to achieve in Western Australia.⁸

On daylight saving she contended that this was an issue of personal choice and that she would go by the views of her constituents which she claimed, based on the evidence of surveys in her electorate, were clearly in favour.⁹

The premature calling of the election for 6 September 2008 left a number of members planning to retire without the opportunity to make a valedictory speech. When the Parliament rose before the election, Judith’s political career was still alive and from her perspective full of hope but the electoral outcome left her without the opportunity on the floor of the House to reflect on her parliamentary career. However, she had used her budget speech on 13 May 2008 to provide a comprehensive coverage of the developments and future needs of her own constituency. In particular, she referred to one of her ‘personal passions’—namely climate change—with particular emphasis on issues arising at an environmental energy forum with about 40 exhibitors considering the ‘ways of implementing alternative energy sources and making sustainability choices through water recycling ... [and] feed-in tariffs’.¹⁰ In her three years in the Legislative Assembly Judith had played a very active role at the community and parliamentary level alike but like many members before her she discovered that marginal seats are difficult to defend when the tide is out for one’s political party, notwithstanding their dedication and commitment to aiding and protecting their constituents.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Looking around me I could hardly believe that I was seated in the House of the Legislative Assembly awaiting the sounding knock at the door inviting us to join the members in the Legislative Council to attend the Governor’s address, let alone know that it was I who had been chosen to give the reply to the Governor, bestowing on me the honour of being the first member to speak in the thirty-seventh Parliament.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 October 2005, p. 6093.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 31 October 2006, p. 7928.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 13 May 2008, p. 2909.

Both Houses felt grand and old; many prominent people had stood in this same place since its opening in 1904. The venue hadn't changed in over 100 years and I could only imagine what had transpired here over the century, what had been fought for, debated and won, and the thought was mind blowing. How did someone like me find myself here?

It began for me in 1997 when returning from a lengthy family journey travelling around Australia, we realised that our neighbourhood had deteriorated and it was either fight to improve our situation or leave it to itself.

We decided to stay and see how we might make change: violence and crime was commonplace and I wanted a safer place for my children in their growing years. I started my work close to home working with the council to change the general environment, the built structure. Laneways were the obvious start: they were escape routes for criminal behaviour making it difficult for police to chase and apprehend. With some success in these areas I established a community group with fellow residents who also desired change and proper recognition by decision making authorities. No real investment had been made in the southern part of the city for some time and the area was run down and tired. Working closely with the city and commissioners we were able to have our voice heard, and change began.

A new government project was launched in our area called The New North: it was timely and so new community partnerships were forged and our work became enhanced with an influx of funding and a new will to change current status quo. Through this work I was elected to represent my ward in the newly formed Wanneroo City Council in 1999. I continued my work with the community group The New North and the council and Girrawheen began to flourish, with changes to our infrastructure, better parks and safer streets.

After serving six years in local government and serving as president of the Kingsley/Woodvale branch I was preselected by the ALP to run for the state seat of Kingsley. The idea of winning a state seat was a challenge for me even though success was an unlikely outcome. The seat had been held since its formation in 1989 by Liberal Hon Cheryl Edwardes and with the announcement of her retirement contesting the seat became less of a gamble. Contesting a state parliamentary seat was a new experience and although I had run for election in local government this was nothing in comparison—money had to be raised, strategies formed and a lot of hard work to be done. I began the work one year before the election, door knocked and whenever I could afford it I would create printed electioneering material. I visited local schools, attended community groups and worked towards understanding the needs of my future electorate. During this time I was still a member of the Wanneroo council as well as the Mindarie Regional Council, and what with raising my three children it was a busy year. My family were generous with their time and their support; it was hard to find volunteers as the seat of Kingsley was not a priority and an unlikely winner so both money and volunteers were hard to come by. Nevertheless, I was touched by my supporters' confidence and love. We organised our election party and prepared ourselves to celebrate, win or lose.

I am thankful to them all.

The day of the election arrived and although we were happy with the work that we had done the chance of winning the seat was still slim, my feet ached with blisters and we were all tired: the last week had been exceptionally tough. As the numbers from the booths came in we were astounded that the votes were coming our way. My only wish, was I to win, was that I win the

primary vote. This was a big ask but ask it I did, for it would mean that I had won on my own merit. The press had already assumed my loss and had set up camp for a Liberal victory. We all met in the local hall and celebrated; the count had me in the lead with the primary votes by 39. Preferences were still coming in at this stage, I was elated. After days of counting and recounting I was finally declared elected; I had achieved what I thought unachievable.

So here I was, stomach churning, mind racing with speech in hand, I stood and waited for the Speaker to call me, 'Member for Kingsley'. My family was in the gallery—it was a day to be remembered.

I recall when I first met my future colleagues at a gathering at Premier Geoff Gallop's home to celebrate the victory of the Labor Government's re-election—so many new faces, influential and highly regarded. It was overwhelming when they welcomed me and my husband Colin so warmly and this was just the beginning of a valuable period of my working life and personal development.

My office in Kingsley was always open to the electorate and we (meaning my wonderful staff Kim Endersby, Zarlisht Sawari and Heather Walsh) accomplished a great deal during our short time. We were able to assist individuals in need of personal assistance, planned and built a new state of the art primary school to replace old and out of date schools and in partnership with Woodvale Senior High School assisted to build a state of the art music facility that had been in planning for many years. We made our roads safer, increased bus services to rail stations and the local Greenwood Senior High School; we lobbied, consulted and planned extra parking for our train stations in the area; and we assisted the National Trust to develop the historical Luisini Winery—just to name a few. But I think that my most heartfelt accomplishment was when I was able to become useful in saving a baby girl from Timor who was born with a brain condition that was fatal if she remained in her country. Her uncle came to visit me and together we worked with the Minister for Health, Hon Jim McGinty, and the Princess Margaret Hospital to organise her travel and her treatment here in Western Australia. Baby Rosaria went home a healthy child with a future. If this is the kind of outcome being in a position like a member of Parliament can achieve then it is one of great privilege.

During my time in the Parliament I was fortunate to work within the committee structure: this gave me the opportunity to work at the grassroots level where I was able to hear the views of individuals, organisations and cultural groups dealing with issues in the community or problems arising from inadequate legislation. It was rewarding work with reports being presented to the Parliament with recommendations for reform. I was also able to work with members from the Opposition giving me valuable insights into each member on a personal level, understanding their values and contribution to the committee and the Parliament.

Similarly, while serving on committee I was able to travel the various regions in the state of Western Australia to talk to our volunteers and workers in emergency services. This exercise was enlightening and gave me a more in depth understanding of how dedicated these people were, risking their lives for the sake of others' safety. The committee was able to translate their views, ideas and concerns in our tabled report directly to the Minister and the Parliament. My time served on the corruption and crime commission standing committee had taught me a great deal in respecting the privacy and the rights of individuals and how important it is to maintain a balanced view during inquiry into situations, circumstances and personalities and gave me insight to recognise when bureaucracy becomes blinded by dogmatic processes.

My other roles such as an Acting Speaker and deputy whip also instructed me in the workings of the Parliament itself, the order, the ceremony, and the commitment of member involvement and debate. Being Acting Speaker also provided some added challenges in requiring me to become familiar with the standing orders and to understand and help manage the process of legislation. Even with the assistance of the Clerks it was still a nervous and exciting time to be seated in the Speaker's chair directing the business of the House. I loved this role and the entire operation of the Parliament; it was always a pleasure for me to attend the sitting of the House.

As an Acting Speaker I was also on occasion called upon to host and attend delegations from visiting dignitaries. This enabled me to meet and discuss various issues that were important in their respective countries and digest their views and ideas giving me new and interesting perspectives. My husband and I were pleased to have met the youngest woman elected to the Ugandan Parliament, Hon Susan Nakawuki, who, despite death threats and many other obstacles, was successfully elected to her constituency and came to visit the Western Australian Parliament in 2006. She was a brave and inspiring young woman in her early twenties with big ideas for reform with a keen interest in our CCC committee due to widespread corruption in her country. We had a wonderful time showing Susan and Nicholas the sights of Perth, we visited Fremantle where we enjoyed fish and chips, and our beaches were a hit as they waded in enjoying our white sand and clear water. We also tried our hand at a game of golf (golf is only played by the rich and influential in Uganda) and despite our lack of skill we all enjoyed the game and our guests especially enjoyed the kangaroos that ran freely around the course.

I could relate stories that would make your belly ache with laughter or wonder in disbelief at some of the interesting and unusual people and issues that I have dealt with during my short time. For example, I was surprised one morning by a constituent who came for assistance due to a sink hole appearing in his backyard swallowing up his swimming pool and leaving the house and houses around in a precarious position, making their property dangerous and worthless and his backyard a total catastrophe. I was also approached by a constituent who wished to procure funding to go in search of HMAS *Sydney* with the use of unique alternative techniques unfamiliar to most. Together we went through a full account of the technology, visited an acquired ship and perused the entire plan to find the *Sydney*. The whole day was a mysterious and interesting event and my electorate staff were amused and astounded when I arrived back in the late afternoon and recounted the events of the whole day. They were becoming worried about my whereabouts and were beginning to wonder where they had sent me. My staff learned a big lesson that day about organising my diary. Needless to say the HMAS *Sydney* was found not long after, but not by my mysterious visitors, much to their dismay.

I have met some wonderful people with high ideals that were inspiring to spend time with. I laughed at the humour that was displayed by my fellow parliamentarians and met distinguished individuals whom I would never have hoped to share time with in other circumstances and I was able to organise events that would inform and bring people together in my electorate. These are just some of my experiences in the Parliament of Western Australia. My position demanded long hours and hard work; however, my roles were varied and I enjoyed them all. I experienced a diverse array of feelings throughout my term as I was torn by my own conscience and opinions on issues that differed to that of the caucus: this was extremely challenging and frustrating.

Unfortunately my time was cut short with the call of an early election that proved fatal for me in the seat of Kingsley and so my parliamentary career was over. The one vote, one value legislation had changed my boundaries, making my task even more difficult than the election before. However disappointed I was, I was satisfied with my work and the successes we had achieved during the short time we were there. My many thanks go out to my staff for always supporting me in the many ventures we set out to do. Some of them were big community events like our Australia and Cultural Day each year with many cultures, schools and local community groups participating with stalls and entertainment. We were also very pleased to have organised our Environmental and Sustainability Expo which was a huge success providing information about alternative energy and other sustainable options for the community to explore and experience.

Life after my election loss was a difficult time for readjustment, from being very busy all the time to having nowhere to be or nothing to do. My income had stopped abruptly and work was difficult to find as my obvious political position hindered many job opportunities. I found that many of my colleagues in the same position were experiencing similar difficulties. Eventually, after removing 10 years of my work experience from my resume, I was able to reinvent myself and move into new areas of work.

The irony of it all is that the most unique experience became the hardest to overcome—it actually sent me backward professionally, but it has enriched my life, my personal development and my sense of what can be achieved with dedication and hard work.

I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, and now I have served and experienced life as a member of the Western Australian Parliament, in many roles and varied capacities and I trust I will have many more challenges and experiences to come.