



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

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

David Black
and
Harry Phillips

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

ELIZABETH CONSTABLE



MLA Floreat 20 July 1991 (by-election)–14 December 1996; Churchlands from 14 December 1996 (Ind). Minister of State 23 September 2008–29 June 2012. Member several select committees and standing committees, including Select Committee on Parliamentary Procedures for Uniform Legislation Agreements 1992; Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Intergovernmental Agreements 1993–1996; Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission 1997–2001; Education and Health Standing Committee (co-opted) 2005–2006; and Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (co-opted) 2006–2008.

Elizabeth Constable was the first woman to be elected to the Western Australian Parliament as an Independent without political party endorsement.¹ She also has another unique achievement of being the only woman in Australia's political history to have gained Cabinet office, which she did in 2008, as an Independent. She was initially allocated the major education ministry as well as women's interests (until February 2009) and tourism (until December 2010). Her qualifications, experience and expertise in education were formidable so her appointment to the education portfolio was a case of Premier Colin Barnett taking into full account a member's credentials in the selection of a Ministry.

Following the death of long-serving Floreat MLA Andrew Mensaros in 1991, it was initially expected that Elizabeth, who had been very active in the Liberal Party's policy, education and women's interests committees, would gain party preselection for the vacant Floreat seat regarded as blue ribbon Liberal. However, as a consequence of internal party frictions, she withdrew her nomination a few days before preselection and then, standing as an Independent, easily won the by-election in July 1991 against the endorsed Liberal, Michael Huston. She was re-elected in the general election held in February 1993 when she was opposed by the Liberal candidate, the well-known Edith Cowan University Vice-Chancellor Dr Doug Jecks.

¹ Edith Cowan was one of three candidates all endorsed by the then Nationalist Party when she won the West Perth seat in 1921.

Elizabeth later reflected ‘that for most women the biggest hurdle is still the preselection process of their parties’.²

Defeating Elizabeth in her district, which from the December 1996 election was redrawn and renamed as Churchlands, could be likened to one of the ‘Labours of Hercules’. In 1996 she received 83.22 per cent of the first preference vote, the highest in the State for that election. Convincing electoral victories followed in 2001, 2005 and 2008. In 2001 the Liberal Party had endorsed Marlene Anderton, the Mayor of Cambridge (within the Churchlands district), in a vain attempt to win the seat—she polled little over half Elizabeth’s primary vote. Then following her sixth successive comfortable electoral win in 2008, Elizabeth had the distinction in September 2011 in the thirty-eighth Parliament of becoming the longest serving woman in Western Australian parliamentary history, exceeding the 20-plus year term of Dame Florence Cardell-Oliver (q.v.) from 1936 to 1956.

An important feature of Elizabeth’s approach as a parliamentarian has been her representational role for her electorate. She has been the patron or vice-patron of some 23 district organisations and since 1978 she has been a member of some additional 20 committees and boards in the wider community, including Chair (and committee member) of the Medical Research Institute, two school boards (Hale and St Hilda’s) and the Sir Francis Burt Law Education Centre. One medium which Elizabeth has employed to keep in touch with her constituents has been the publication of a high-standard quarterly newsletter for distribution to each household. Apart from an editorial, often providing a rationale for stances on certain Bills, there is a ‘community section’ and a ‘Your Parliament’ page, which contains a résumé of Parliament’s program with direct impact on the electorate. Some other parliamentarians, both State and Federal, have adopted this model but few have achieved such regular quality.

Born on 2 December 1943 in Sydney, Elizabeth Constable was the daughter of Leonard Blanton, a manufacturer’s agent and importer, and his wife, Phyllis. She was educated at Presbyterian Ladies College, Pymble, and the University of Sydney, where she studied history and psychology. Her early professional experience in Sydney included vocational counselling and teaching children in inner-city schools. This interest in education has been sustained throughout Elizabeth’s parliamentary career, culminating in 2008 with her appointment as Education Minister, which was in concert with the Tourism and Women’s Interests portfolios. In 1964 she married Ian Constable, later a Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Western Australia, and subsequently, while living in Boston in the early 1970s with her husband and two sons, Ben and Jason, she completed a Master of Education degree at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The family moved to Perth in 1975 where Elizabeth gained a tenured lectureship in education at the University of Western Australia, with particular interest in special education. She held this post for eight years, during which time she was a member of a number of government and community advisory committees and organisations related to education and people with special needs, after which she was appointed Director of Studies and Deputy Principal of St Hilda’s Anglican School for Girls. From 1988 until her election to Parliament, she was also an educational consultant and lecturer at the University of Western Australia. In 1985 Elizabeth had completed her Doctorate of Philosophy in educational psychology with a thesis on cognitive development of gifted children. She has published extensively on educational matters such as training and assessment programs, parent education, child rearing and special education, including gifted

² David Black and Harry Phillips, *Making a Difference: Women in the Western Australian Parliament*, Perth: Parliamentary History Project, 2000, p. 187.

children's and handicapped children's programs. More recently, within her electorate she has maintained membership, often by way of patronage, of a plethora of organisations and on some occasions has been critical of Governments for failing to appoint enough women to public sector boards and for making appointments of women mainly to poorly paid voluntary positions.

In the parliamentary context, Elizabeth's speeches have been invariably well prepared and delivered. In her contributions to the Address-in-Reply debate, she has often adopted the approach of highlighting matters of interest or significance which have been omitted from the Governor's Speech (which has been superseded by the Premier's Statement following the opening of Parliament by the Governor), which broadly contains the Government's program for the next parliamentary session. One of her most consistent themes has been the failure of successive Governments to upgrade Parliament's facilities and rationalise the sitting hours. One of her special interests has been the enhancement of the Parliament's art collection, which she discovered was mainly based on the local government collection created after the 1964 extensions to the building. She also discovered that Parliament had no Indigenous Western Australian collection. This led to a small bipartisan committee comprising herself, Jamie Edwards (Liberal MLA for Greenough) and Carol Martin (q.v.) (ALP MLA for Kimberley) to find avenues for building up the Indigenous art component of the Parliament.³

Elizabeth was strongly supported in terms of better facilities and wider accountability reforms by the Commission on Government (COG) which made its final report in 1996. Indeed, Elizabeth was a strong advocate of many recommendations by the COG but was disappointed by the failure of subsequent Governments to fully embrace its work. Early in her parliamentary career, she became closely involved in the issues of accountability arising from the workings of Australia's federal system. In 1992 she served on the Select Committee on Parliamentary Procedures for Uniform Legislation Agreements and in the next Parliament this led to her being the Deputy Chair of the Standing Committee on Uniform Legislation and Intergovernmental Agreements. It was recognised that avenues had to be found which gave the Western Australian Parliament opportunities to scrutinise, amend or possibly reject template legislation which had been agreed to at the Ministerial Council level. This was historic work in the quest for modern mechanisms in the Federation, but its technical nature meant that it was rarely given publicity.

In her long parliamentary career, Elizabeth has given considerable service to several select and standing committees. She had a long membership of the Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission from 1997 to 2004 and was a member of the House Services Committee from 1998 to 2001. Then in April 2005 she was co-opted to the Legislative Assembly Education and Health Standing Committee to utilise her educational expertise in relation to the controversial question of outcomes education which was a focus of the committee's deliberations. At that stage it was not forecast that Elizabeth, following the next election in September 2008, was to be appointed as the education minister in the Barnett 'Alliance' Government and meant a major change of role for her in the thirty-eighth Parliament when she was immediately thrown into the 'cut and thrust' parliamentary

³ Phillip Pental and David Black, *House to House: The Story of Western Australia's Government and Parliament Houses over 175 Years*, Perth: Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, 2004, p. 203.

engagement of Government versus Opposition, a pattern to which understandably she took some time to adjust.

As education minister, Elizabeth exercised apparent Cabinet influence, for example, by being able to deliver two remuneration rises for school teachers, which made Western Australian teachers the highest paid in Australia. This was without industrial disputation, although improving working conditions for support staff in the education sector, outside her portfolio, was a more difficult hurdle to overcome. Of major significance, too, was Elizabeth presiding over the implementation of the Independent Public Schools initiative, giving principals in selected government schools the autonomy to meet the needs of their individual school communities in vital areas such as recruitment. Such schools are required to comply with all legislation, industrial agreements and national assessments and distribute reports to parents and are subject to financial audits. A Delivery and Performance Agreement is signed by the Principal, Director General and the Chair of the School Board. In keeping with an election commitment, 34 schools started operating on this model in 2010, which grew to 98 the following year. A further 109 schools were selected as independent for 2012 and 2013, indicating the very successful trend of the concept.

During Elizabeth's tenure as Education Minister, the Federal Government's Building the Education Revolution plan to provide new and refurbished infrastructure for schools to help, in part, counter the global financial crisis (GFC) was generally received favourably on its delivery in Western Australia, despite other jurisdictions attracting criticism in the national newspapers. The first report of the Implementation Task Force was cited by Elizabeth in a media release whereby she was able to claim that 'the WA Government had implemented the Program with commercial nous and a sharp focus on value for money'.⁴ However, it was not all plain sailing, as initially the State Government and Education Department policy did not provide for some 300 schools outside 'the air cooling zone' to have air conditioning installed, a situation which was reversed after a policy review.

After long consideration of the educational merit and costs, Elizabeth announced in December 2011 that Year 7 students in Western Australia were to become the first year of high school for children at public schools within three years. About one-third of year 7 students (in private schools) were already in attendance at the high school level. The change was necessary to bring the State into line with most other States and because Year 7s would need specialist maths and science teachers under the new national curriculum. Moreover, Year 7s were six months older on average than they were before the school starting age changed a decade ago, with many now celebrating their thirteenth birthday whilst still in primary school. In an earlier initiative, Elizabeth had announced the implementation from 2013 of compulsory pre-primary schooling.

Another important legislative change in education during Elizabeth's tenure as Education Minister has been the Curriculum Council Amendment Bill 2011. Firstly, it replaced the Curriculum Council with a statutory body known as the School Curriculum and Standards Authority, with a structure and functions that specified its role as a regulatory body with responsibilities for school curriculum standards and assessment. Secondly, it provided the new authority with a board comprising leading individuals with the collective expertise and knowledge of curriculum and educational standards. There were also to be two statutory

⁴ Minister for Education, Media Release, 15 December 2010.

advisory committees known as the Standards Committee and the Curriculum and Assessment Committee. When introducing the Bill, Elizabeth said:

I understand that my predecessor had worked on a bill with similar provisions, and I look forward to hearing contributions of all members regarding this bill, in the context of bipartisan interest in ensuring the highest possible educational standards for our school students.⁵

In November 2011 the Barnett ‘Alliance’ Government–promised Integrity (Lobbyists) Bill was introduced. This was a Bill that again witnessed the hand of Elizabeth, as in both 2003 and 2007, she had introduced to the Western Australian Parliament the Lobbying Disclosure and Accountability Bill to ensure openness and accountability of professional lobbying activities directed at members of Parliament, ministerial staff and other public officials. Until she gained ministerial status, she was probably not optimistic of the passage of such legislation, but she has expressed the view that ‘minority parliaments “get things done”, although it often takes longer’.⁶ Without doubt Elizabeth long tenure in the Parliament has ‘made a difference’. She has broken tenure records and is thought to be the only woman in Australian politics to be a Cabinet member as an Independent. She has certainly placed women on the political map in a unique manner representing and exercising influence outside the mainstream political parties. This is not a viable avenue for all women in politics, but Elizabeth has expanded the horizons for all women and even for men pursuing a path without political party membership.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

First Impressions

On 20 August 1991, just four weeks after the Floreat by-election, I was escorted by Hon Ian Thompson, the member for Darling Range, from the Speaker’s Gallery in the Assembly chamber to stand by the Speaker’s chair to swear the Oath of Allegiance. The usual custom following a by-election, I learned later, is for the new member’s leader to escort him or her into the chamber. Ian Thompson, a former Speaker and now an Independent, had kindly offered to perform this task for me.

I had visited Parliament House some years before and sat in the chamber. Time had played a trick on my memory, as I had remembered it to be a cavernous space. As I sat waiting in the Speaker’s gallery, it now seemed very small, even intimate. Following the swearing in, Ian Thompson guided me to my new seat in the back row of the ‘cross benches’, between himself and Hon Bill Grayden, the member for South Perth. The back row of the cross benches has been my home in the chamber ever since.

In Ian Thompson and Bill Grayden I had two of the most experienced members to tutor me during those first weeks, and I will be forever grateful for their experience and expertise.

⁵ WAPD(LA), 18 May 2011, p. 3584.

⁶ Harry Phillips ‘Hung parliaments—summary of proceedings held by the Western Australia Chapter of the ASPG,’ November 2010, p. 218, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2011, p. 218.

Ian Thompson was a former Speaker and Bill Grayden the then longest serving member who had entered Parliament as an Independent in 1956. Bearing in mind Independent members held the balance of power in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council in 1991, it was imperative I learn the procedures as soon as possible.

Entering Parliament in Opposition, or as I did as an Independent, forces a new member to learn the procedures and participate in the proceedings at all levels. For those beginning their parliamentary careers on the government side of the House, the opportunities to participate in the business of Parliament are limited, especially since the current Government introduced the so-called time management (the ‘guillotine’) sessional order. It is often the case that government members are actively discouraged from contributing to debates. For many this results in lack of interest in the proceedings, with their contribution to the legislation being limited to party room discussion.

Dispelling Some Myths

On many occasions I have been confronted by people with definite ideas about what my life as a member of Parliament must be like. For example:

It must be very lonely in Parliament as an Independent.

It must be difficult to be an Independent without the support of a political party.

You can't do much in Parliament as an Independent.

It's different for women in Parliament.

Members of Parliament behave badly.

These are just a few of the myths often stated by well-meaning people. On many occasions over the past eight years I have been asked to talk to groups about life as an Independent and as a woman in Parliament.

I had few, if any, preconceptions about what to expect in Parliament. What I had not expected was the extraordinary kindness and assistance of other members and staff in all departments of Parliament House. No doubt for some it was a novelty to have the first female Independent in Parliament, but for most, this kindness was simply support for a new member.

Most new members find seeking the call during debates and question time a little daunting at first. To overcome this situation, one longstanding member suggested to me in the first few weeks that if I wanted to seek the call from the Speaker, particularly during question time, I should indicate this to the Speaker ahead of time. Just prior to question time one day, I advised the Speaker, Hon Mike Barnett, that I had a question to ask. About halfway through question time, several members leapt to their feet, while I was far too slow to make it up onto mine. Undeterred the Speaker called out ‘*The member for Floreat*’ and was greeted with howls of derision from the members seeking the call, to which he replied, ‘*I saw the member for Floreat first!*’

Perhaps the only difficulty in being an Independent member of Parliament has been the assumption of many people from outside my electorate that as an Independent member I should be available if they needed representation or assistance. To some extent, this reflects the well-documented dissatisfaction a sizeable proportion of the community have with major parties, but it also reflects the strength of support I have been fortunate to receive from the community.

Independents have an advantage in Parliament that few party members ever exercise. They have the freedom to vote according to their best judgement based on a combination of views gleaned from constituents, knowledge accumulated from a variety of sources and analysis of the issues at hand. It is a naive assumption to believe that being an Independent member inhibits the ability to participate in as much as the member wishes.

In recent years, attention has focused on increasing the number of women entering Parliament. While a few women have now been preselected by their political parties for so-called safe seats, with women filling only 20 per cent of the seats in the Western Australia Legislative Assembly, there is still a long way to go. For most women the biggest hurdle is still the preselection processes of their parties. There are other deterrents, including the adversarial nature of Parliament, the public nature of the position, the difficulties inherent for many women in juggling dual roles of political career and family life, and the fact that women have so many other career choices.

In Parliament itself, I have never noticed any distinction between female and male members. There are, however, noticeable differences in the style of female members compared with their male colleagues. Few women members feel totally comfortable with the traditional adversarial nature of Parliament, especially when they are newly elected, preferring a problem-solving mode. It appears that an increased number of women elected to Parliament in recent years has not influenced the more robust side of parliamentary behaviour. However, some observers assume that when there is ‘a critical mass’ of women in Parliament, they will significantly influence behaviour in the chamber. Time will tell.

Members of the public often decry the behaviour of members of Parliament. These opinions are understandably reached after observing quick grabs of question time shown on television news. However, visitors to Parliament House expecting to be entertained are often disappointed that they do not see this ‘disgraceful’ behaviour during debates and instead describe the scene in the chamber as boring! The fact is that for most of the time, proceedings are conducted in an orderly fashion.

However, it should be said that we have a remarkable parliamentary system. At [a time] when there is so much conflict in other parts of the world, we solve our problems in Parliament by arguing, debating, questioning. In Western Australia we have [95] members of Parliament, representing a range of opinions and points of view and a huge State geographically.⁷ We come together to air differences and try to solve the problems and issues of concern in the community. Instead of taking up arms, as happens in so many other parts of the world, I take the view that to argue and occasionally get passionate about our points of view is healthy and the way it should be.

More Recent Impressions

(These Impressions were written in 2012)

I am often asked how the Parliament has changed in the two decades I have been a member. I have always held the view that the best Parliament is one with people from diverse

⁷ These sentences are updated from the 1999 version.

backgrounds and experience. This was certainly the case 20 years ago, but not so much today. Today's Parliament is more likely to have so-called career politicians—people who have found their way through a political party system, worked as a staffer in a politician's office, or for a union. This, I believe, narrows the base for debates in Parliament and does not represent the vastness or diversity of the whole community. For example, there is not one farmer (and only one former farmer) amongst the current members of the Legislative Assembly.

The other question I am often asked is whether the reporting of Parliament by the media has changed, and, of course, it has changed because of changes in technology and the advent of social media. Parliament is now broadcast live, with television and radio stations having instant access to film and audio for news bulletins. With the internet being a major force in providing almost instant information, the news cycle is shorter and more intense.

People become members of Parliament for a range of reasons, some of which are altruistic, some of which are personal and some of which are related to particular groups, such as a political party or union. Most would enter Parliament hoping to influence important issues, be part of change for the betterment of the community and assist constituents when called upon to do so. Looking back over my 21 years as a member of Parliament, it is my experience that it is the last of these reasons which provides the most satisfaction.

I have invariably found that providing help and support to constituents who have tried to access the system and are not satisfied with the response they have received, who do not know how to access the system or where to go to solve their problem, who have an issue to solve which involves a government department or who simply need a sympathetic person to understand their problem is personally very rewarding. It is often the case that actions on behalf of individual constituents can make a major difference in the life of that person. Many years ago a constituent contacted me because his daughter, who had a severe hearing disability, had to miss the last period of every day in order to meet the timetable of the special school bus. My constituent had tried to get the authorities to change the bus timetable to suit the school timetable, but to no avail. He sought my help to make representations to the then Minister for Education, Hon Kay Hallahan (q.v.). I argued the case and the Minister changed the bus timetable. This example illustrates why the work of a local member is so rewarding.

As my final term as the member for Churchlands is fast approaching its conclusion, I look back over the last two decades very appreciative of the opportunities I have had as a member of Parliament. In particular as a local member, I have valued highly the opportunity to be involved in the community I represent. A local member gets an extraordinary insight into, and involvement in, the needs, desires, aspirations and celebrations of their community, as well as the daily issues and problems facing the constituents. I have come to appreciate that an electorate has its own seasons seen through the eyes of its schools, its sporting clubs and its social organisations.