



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

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

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and
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DIANA MURIEL WARNOCK



MLA Perth 6 February 1993–10 February 2001 (ALP). Opposition Whip 1996–1997. President of the State Parliamentary Labor Party 1997–2001. Shadow Minister 1994–2001. Member Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 1993–1994; Select Committee on Road Safety 1993–1996.

Diana Warnock entered the Western Australian Parliament after many years of involvement in the world of politics through the media and the academic world. In 1993, after a recount she retained the marginal seat of Perth for the ALP by 106 votes following the defection of former Labor member Ian Alexander: in the 1996 election, her majority had increased to nearly 3 000 votes. She had also long been involved in the theatrical and arts world with her husband Bill Warnock, whom she married in London in 1967.

She was born in Perth on 3 October 1940, the daughter of pastoralist Duncan Robinson and his wife Muriel. Brought up in the Kookynie area, she was educated at Helena School in Darlington and then at St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls before graduating from the University of Western Australia in 1960 with a Bachelor of Arts. For the next 12 years, Diana worked as a journalist with the *West Australian*, and also acted as a researcher for Professor Gordon Reid at the University of Western Australia. Subsequently, she was a tutor in Women's Studies at Murdoch University from 1978 to 1982 and then spent nine years as a producer and broadcaster with various Perth radio stations as well as tutoring for a short time in media studies at Edith Cowan University.

Diana has been and still is actively involved with a very extensive array of community and arts organisations including, over the years, the West Australian Symphony Orchestra advisory board, the National Library board, the Transperth board (for five years), the Australian Bicentennial Authority (deputy chair of the Western Australian chapter of the authority), the National Australia Day Council, the Festival of Perth program board, the State Film Centre Committee, the founding committee of the International Film Theatre of Western Australia and the first Women's Advisory Council. Other memberships included the Migrant Women's Interests Committee, the City Safe committee, the board of Kingswood College, the Rod Evans Senior Citizens board, the Evatt

Foundation, the Australian Republican Movement, the Humanist Society and Amnesty International. At various times Diana was president and vice-president of West Australians for Racial Equality, convenor of the Women's Electoral Lobby, president of the Family Planning Association, and a member of the State Government Advisory Committee on Young Offenders and a member of the citizens' advocacy board. She is a member of the Perth Jazz Society and the Jazz Club of WA.

During her eight years in Parliament, Diana was an active constituency representative and a very frequent contributor to parliamentary debates. Widely respected by her colleagues, she moved from deputy to chief opposition whip and, after the 1996 election, to the position of President of the State Parliamentary Labor Party. In her Inaugural Speech, she referred with considerable pride to her role as the member for Perth, the area that embraced the seat of government itself and a capital city with 'the potential to be one of the most successful, most liveable and civilised cities in the world' and 'the nearest window to our complex western culture and unique indigenous culture'. Within this context, one issue which occupied her attention for a great deal of time both inside and outside Parliament was the Northbridge tunnel project and in the Inaugural Speech she referred to a campaign commitment to oppose any:

... road solution that had a deleterious effect on the vitally important and unique character of Northbridge and the residential areas to the immediate north of the city.¹

While constituency issues remained a central preoccupation in the months and years that followed, Diana also delivered a number of thoughtful speeches on issues such as the implications of Australia becoming a republic. This she firmly supported contending that 'an Australia which is totally independent and is not ruled by a citizen of a country which is a long way away is something that I believe all Australians should aspire to' and would be of 'enormous symbolic importance and a tremendous stimulus to our national confidence'.² Again, in 1996 she led for the Opposition on the censorship Bill describing censorship itself as potentially a 'blunt and treacherous instrument' and, given the nature of pluralistic democratic society, one which had to be handled with the utmost care:

We must protect the vulnerable but at the same time preserve the very valuable civil liberties we have developed in this country over a number of years, and we must find the answers to the questions raised by the emergence of new technology.³

It was a fitting tribute to a short but active political career that in 1999 Diana was named the Australian Humanist of the Year. The award was given for a longstanding commitment to humanist values and work on behalf of women and minority groups while the citation referred to 'her contribution to a most enlightened abortion law reform'. If Diana had remained in Parliament, the likelihood is that, following the ALP victory, she would have become the first woman to serve as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. Instead, her parliamentary career came to a premature close influenced in particular by the failing health of her husband who died only a few months after the election.

¹ WAPD(LA), 22 June 1993, p. 115.

² WAPD(LA), 7 July 1993, p. 1291.

³ WAPD(LA), 30 April 1996, p. 1130.

Throughout the 11 years since she left Parliament, Diana has remained extraordinarily active in an extensive array of community and artistic activities. Over the years she has worked on far too long a list of boards and committees to itemise, but includes the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the National Australia Day Committee, the WA Constitutional Centre, the National Library board, the film committee of the Festival Board of Perth, the Board of the Western Australian Ballet, the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, the friends of WA music school and the baroque festival. Her achievements and commitment have been widely acknowledged—as Australian Humanist of the Year in 1999, the award of Chevalier of the Legion of Honour by the French Government and, in 2011, her induction into the WA Women’s Hall of Fame.

Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written by the editors in 1999.)

Early in her Inaugural Speech on 22 June 1993, Diana Warnock made special reference to her colleague, the member for Armadale, Kay Hallahan (q.v.) who stepped down from the Legislative Council to contest an Assembly seat, thereby foregoing her likely choice as Labor leader in the upper House:

I wish there were more like the member for Armadale. Indeed, throwing aside modesty, I wish there were more like us. Politics will truly represent the citizens of this State only when more women are members of this House and the other House. Women comprise 51 per cent of the population and I believe that in the best interests of all Western Australians all parties must strive for more equal representation...When Edith Cowan entered the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1921 representing the seat of West Perth she was the first woman in any Parliament in our nation. However, since that time women have made very slow progress. Indeed, in the first 40 years after women obtained the federal franchise not one woman was elected to Federal Parliament. Having, led the world in granting political rights to women, Australia fell behind, and has stayed behind many other countries in giving them a proper share of power.

The previous Western Australian Labor Government was distinguished in having the most women Ministers in Australian political history. Our leader, Dr Carmen Lawrence, was the first woman Premier in our nation, and no-one could be a better role model for other women. However, we still have a long way to go. If some built-in bias exists in the selection process it must be changed. Reform is called for. Evidence is available that affirmative action strategies in internal party processes can accelerate this much overdue reform ... Of the 841 representatives in all Australian Parliaments, only 122, or 14.5 per cent, are women. In lower Houses where the major decisions are made, the figures are even poorer. Of 504 lower House seats in all Parliaments in all States, only 73 seats or 12.08 per cent of the total are held by women. Various cultural and historical reasons account for this, but in these enlightened and better informed times fewer and fewer excuses can be found for this gross gender imbalance. I do not claim that women are more virtuous than men in politics. I simply believe that since we comprise half of the human race the community will be advantaged when we are able to bring our special perspective to every issue.⁴

Diana then went on to analyse why she had chosen to join the Australian Labor Party:

⁴ WAPD(LA), 22 June 1993, p. 112.

Why am I, who grew up in a politically conservative family, here now, representing the Australian Labor Party? As a result of life experiences and not a little study of political history and political philosophy ... it became my conviction that it was the only political party that had demonstrated a sustained and effective commitment to social justice and to reform...From any reading of Australian political history, it is clear that this remarkable democracy of ours, with its capacity to remain egalitarian and to keep everyone in the boat is, to a great extent, the result of Labor Party policies either in Government or in Opposition. It has been from the Labor side of politics that came pressure for pensions and social benefits, decent wages and conditions, a fair health system, universal education, and the equal status of women—the very things that all thinking Australians value most highly in this great country of ours. It was because of these dreams and ideas, and more importantly, the actions and policies that resulted from them, that I found myself enlisting as a candidate for Australia's oldest party, the Australian Labor Party. Quite simply, as someone who is interested in progressive ideas in reform and social equity, there was no other choice.⁵

In this context, racism was a particular concern:

Tolerance, like compassion, is another virtue we must take care to embrace in our society. In our racially diverse community ... [w]e must use the law to ensure that such people cannot disrupt and poison the lives of others merely because they are different. In Western Australia in the 1980s the Labor Government enacted laws—controversial at the time—which made it illegal to vilify people because of their race. I happen to believe that enshrined in our law should be the right of groups to take action when they are slandered and maligned, just as individuals can. It is not good enough to misuse the freedom of speech argument to deny the right to mount such class action'.⁶

As already indicated Diana played a central role in piloting the 1998 abortion law reform legislation through the Legislative Assembly:

When safe, medically assisted abortion is not available, as it has been in Perth for about the past 25 years despite a restrictive law, desperate women will simply do whatever must be done, even at the risk of their own lives, to end an unwanted pregnancy. If the medical profession cannot help her, a woman will simply go elsewhere and that will usually be at great risk to her life, her comfort and certainly her mental wellbeing. The forces that oppose choice forget that making abortion illegal has never stopped it. It simply makes it unsafe for women ...

In common with more than 80 per cent of the Australian community of every religious affiliation, I believe that safe, legal abortion is essential...I most firmly believe that the moral decision to be made in the case of an unwanted pregnancy must be made by the woman. She is the one who will have to carry an unwanted pregnancy and to bear the moral responsibility for the rest of her life...Where there is a moral choice to be made—and I do not minimise the difficulty of it—I believe that the woman concerned must make that moral choice. That choice should not be made on her behalf by parliamentarians, police officers or the church. We must trust women and not patronise them ...

I turn to abortion as a public health issue ... All the health reports that I have seen make it absolutely clear that, regardless of the law, women in this States will continue to seek abortions. The priority of those in our health system will remain access to high quality and safe health services for their patients. Some have said plainly that if we do not clarify the law on this issue, we will leave health professionals without indemnity and we may preclude the continuation of all medical abortion services in Western Australia. As anybody knows about the real world, this

⁵ Ibid, p. 113.

⁶ Ibid, p. 114.

would take us back to the 1960s or even further when maternal deaths as the result of unsafe terminations were many times what they are now ...

I believe that the majority of people in this country have the view that whatever one's religious beliefs and background, a woman who is facing the terribly difficult moral decision about whether to end an unwanted pregnancy should have the right to make that choice.⁷

In September 1995, Diana took the opportunity to make a 90-second statement on French nuclear testing in the Pacific in which she set the whole issue in the context of Australia's military sacrifices in World War I:

In 1990, I went to a village in northern France to find my grandfather's gravestone. I found it in a tiny village called Ribemont. My grandfather has been lying there, somewhere in those fields, like tens of thousands of other Australians, since he was killed in one of those terrible western front battles on 9 May 1918. I thought of my grandfather ... recently when I heard that French President Jacques Chirac had decided to resume nuclear testing, not in the beautiful rolling fields of the Somme but in the South Pacific, near Australia. It suddenly seemed very ironic to me that the sacrifices of so many Australians who went to France to defend western civilisation were being utterly forgotten and the wishes of their descendants ignored ...

My message to Jacques Chirac is simple: He owes me, and thousands like me and ... he should stop the tests now, and he should pay a visit to a village in northern France called Villers-Bretonneux because there is a sign there that he should read. It is written above the entrance of the village school building, a building that was bought and paid for by Australian school children, and says simply, in French, 'Never Forget Australia'.⁸

Additional Reflections by the Member

(These Reflections were written by the member in 2012.)

Looking back to that brief term in Parliament, I am even more grateful than I was at the time that it gave me the opportunity to help change an outdated abortion law (a passion for 30 years) and to speak on several subjects close to my heart: racism, the republic, homosexual law reform, women's status and rights, the city and support for the arts. It was an honour to be elected twice and I have no regrets.

In the 11 years since I retired from Parliament, I am delighted to observe that attitudes to homosexuality have changed dramatically; that a larger number of women now serve in the State Parliament and that Australia has its first woman Prime Minister. While there are many more opportunities I would like to have had—yes, to be the first woman Speaker—I am very pleased to be out of the public eye.

If I were still there, I would be concerned about the lack of separation between church and state (school chaplains and saying prayers in supposedly secular public schools), but I am content to leave further reforms to enthusiastic younger women and men. Vive la republique!

⁷ WAPD(LA), 17 March 1998, pp. 654–657.

⁸ WAPD(LA), 21 September 1995, p. 8364.