



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

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

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and
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JUDYTH WATSON



MLA Canning 8 February 1986–4 February 1989; Kenwick 4 February 1989–14 December 1996 (ALP). Minister of State 5 February 1991–16 February 1993. Shadow Minister 1993–1996. Member Joint House Committee 1989–1991; Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee 1986–1988. Chairperson Select Committee on the Reproductive Technology Working Party's Report 1988; Select Committee on the National HIV/AIDS Strategy White Paper 1989–1990.

Judyth Watson entered the Legislative Assembly following the 1986 election as member for Canning. During her three terms as an MP and two years as a minister, Judyth won a reputation for serving and furthering the needs of the less privileged in the community. An active parliamentarian who spoke on many issues, her speeches were invariably the product of exemplary research involving a scrutiny of relevant reports and all known literature on each topic, and with the statistical soundness of assertions being carefully evaluated. The range of her ministries provides a brief summary of many of the areas to which she was devoted, including Aboriginal Affairs, Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs, Women's Interests and Seniors. A further depiction of the causes for which she strived was illustrated in her shadow portfolios, which, in addition to Women's Interests, encompassed Disability Services, Children's Policy and Consumer Affairs. Almost immediately upon election to Parliament, she was elected to the important Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee and in the five years until her elevation to the ministry in the Lawrence Government she chaired two select committees. In the process, she made history by becoming the first woman to chair a select committee in the Western Australian Parliament when she was appointed to that role for the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Reproductive Technology Working Party's Report (her other committee inquired into the National HIV/AIDS Strategy White Paper).

She was born on 8 March 1940 at Burton-on-Trent in the United Kingdom, daughter of Cecil Watson, a railway train controller and clerk, and his wife, Hylda. The family arrived in Western Australia on 17 January 1949 and, after attending state primary schools, Judyth went to Perth Modern School, entry to which was by scholarship in that era. After training as a nurse at

Royal Perth Hospital, she obtained further nursing certificates in midwifery, hospital administration and education qualifications outside the state before working from the mid 1970s as a teacher of nurses and with Community Health Services. In 1977, she completed a Bachelor of Science with first class honours in Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, winning the faculty prize along the way. Subsequently, she received a Commonwealth postgraduate research award enabling her to complete a PhD at the same university in 1982 writing her doctoral thesis on workers' compensation in Western Australia. In fact, Judyth shares with Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) the distinction of being the first woman with a doctorate to be elected to the Western Australian Parliament.

Judyth's research with injured workers led to her appointment as the first full-time occupational health and safety officer at the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union before she became an advisor to the Minister for Labour when the Burke Labor Party won government in 1983. At that time, the federal Labor government, with Bob Hawke as the Prime Minister, also appointed her as one of two representatives of the states to the tripartite steering committee to develop a national occupational health and safety policy. Judyth then became a member of the Interim National Occupational Health and Safety Commission, and Acts to establish such commissions were soon passed at both the state and federal tiers of government. It was a clear case of her research and commitment having an impact on Labor's legislation and over the years she has presented papers at numerous conferences and contributed articles to various union, company and professional publications.

In 1976, Judyth first joined the Australian Labor Party following the 'sacking' of the Whitlam Labor Government. The following year she became a delegate to the Curtin Electorate division, first from the University of Western Australia and then from the Cottesloe branch. Although she was at various times a delegate to all party forums with either branch or union status, Judyth's ALP credentials were principally with policy development. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Judyth was an active member of ALP policy committees to write the industrial relations and health platforms preparing Labor for government. Subsequent policy work was for social and community development as well as the status of women. After representing Canning for three years in the Legislative Assembly, she transferred to the new seat of Kenwick in 1989 but when this was abolished in a further redistribution prior to the 1996 election, she failed narrowly to win the new seat of Southern River. Subsequently, she remained in the Southern River branch before transferring before the turn of the century to Fremantle.

Near the completion of her days as a parliamentarian, Judyth expressed disappointment that insufficient awareness and attention was being given to domestic violence, stalking and the safety of women in public places, and she expressed a sense of exasperation with the approach to these issues by the Court-Cowan Coalition governments. Here again, she was able to demonstrate her concerns with evidence from research in Australia and beyond.¹ She always took a keen interest in women's affairs with a special focus on equal opportunity and anti-discrimination and was particularly inspired by an investigation of the record of May Holman (q.v.) who was the Australian delegate at the conference of the League of Nations in 1930.² In similar fashion, Judyth

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 30 March 1995, p. 453

² For bibliographical details of the book Judyth edited including May Holman's letters and articles from her travels in Europe see Footnote 2 in the article on May Holman.

herself became a keen advocate of the work of the United Nations particularly its concern with human rights, including many women's and children's issues, and peace.

In 1995, she attended the United Nations conference on women in Beijing. On returning from the conference, she asked a series of questions on notice about the number of women serving on the various government boards and committees and the number of recent appointments of women in various government departments in Western Australia. Several years earlier, with Labor in government in May 1988, Judyth had devoted one of her Address-in-Reply debate speeches to an attempt to recognise the valuable and usually unrecognised contribution of women fulfilling duties in their households. As she stated:

One way of approaching the issue of housework in order to understand it is to see it as any other kind of work except, of course, it is not paid. If we analyse housework as work, we can say that work has five properties. It requires the expenditure of energy; it permits the contribution to the production of goods or services; it defines patterns of social interaction; it provides social status for the worker; and in all cases except this one, it brings in money. But the dominant value system of our kind of society gives some kind of prestige to masculine rather than to feminine roles and occupations.³

On the theme of discrimination, in recognition of the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Judyth spoke in Parliament in 1995 of the need to consider amending the Australian Flags Act to recognise the Aboriginal flag as 'a most appropriate symbol of the acceptance of Aboriginal people'.⁴ Arising from reports that Aboriginal people increasingly were referring to Australia Day on 26 January as 'Invasion Day', Judyth told the House she considered it 'most insensitive' to celebrate Australia Day on 26 January, while she was also prepared 'as a supporter of affirmative action for women' to support the idea of 'dedicated seats in the Federal Parliament for Aboriginal people'.⁵ On another occasion, she proposed an alteration to Parliament's opening prayers to be more inclusive of other religious beliefs and in the latter stages of her parliamentary career she became closely identified with the Right to Die Bill originally introduced into the Legislative Assembly by former Labor and opposition leader, Ian Taylor (who had then resigned from State Parliament early in 1996 to contest the federal seat of Kalgoorlie). Judyth assumed the leadership role of the 'conscience Bill', which had the support of those who favoured more comprehensive voluntary euthanasia legislation but was not given a third reading and did not proceed to the Legislative Council. Several years previous in an Address-in-Reply debate, Judyth had optimistically predicted that if there was sufficient debate and education, a form of euthanasia Bill would receive bipartisan support.⁶

As indicated in her 'Reflections', Judyth after leaving Parliament remained firmly committed to encouraging more women to be elected to Parliament. In June 1995, paralleling a similar motion moved by Cheryl Davenport (q.v.) in the Legislative Council, she unsuccessfully moved for the establishment of a joint committee to inquire into the extent of and the reasons for the impediments to women standing for Parliaments and potential strategies, including modifying parliamentary procedures, which could be utilised to redress the balance.⁷ The suggested

³ WAPD(LA), 24 May 1988, p. 315.

⁴ WAPD(LA), 28 March 1995, p. 155.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ WAPD(LA), 3 May 1990, p. 169.

⁷ WAPD(LA), 21 June 1995, pp. 5600ff.

presentation of the final report by 12 March 1996 was to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the election of Edith Cowan (q.v.). In Judyth's view, a report of this nature would have been an invaluable contribution to the literature on women in Parliament and, importantly, it would have provided research that was applicable to the Western Australian setting.

Earlier in 1990 she had organised a cross-party women's network for Amnesty International. 'Urgent Action' notices were sent to her from Amnesty about the plight of women killed, tortured, imprisoned and disappeared because of their political beliefs or actions. She distributed the information to every female member with the aim of sending letters from women parliamentarians to heads of government and others in repressive regimes. It was judged as a very gratifying way to work cooperatively with women in other political parties. Indeed, this action was part of Judyth's legacy making a significant contribution as a role model for women in Parliament. It was a role characterised by a thoroughness of scholarship and an outlook concerned with the community good and those less privileged in society.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

As this book is to be part of the suffrage celebrations, and as I am a feminist I have chosen to focus on some of the work I did with and on behalf of women.

I need to start by admitting that sitting in the Parliament was the one aspect of this otherwise fantastic job with which I was never at ease. I thought a lot about this paradox during the time and since. I usually found speaking there daunting. And I always dreaded that call to improvise a speech on things of which I knew nothing. I felt I could only do justice to an issue if I were properly prepared.

Parliaments are not representative of the community, the most glaring deficiency being gender imbalance. My view that the working environment of Parliament is most woman-unfriendly is shared by many men as well as women. Sitting times and hours, as well as traditions, preclude participation in intelligent and rational debate. Styles of adversarial behaviour and confrontation have been developed as an art form. On most days angry outbursts, petty points of order and discourtesies not seen or tolerated elsewhere, are displayed. Dismissive scorn, patronising comment and sexism have been endured by most women members. The structure, traditions and ethos of the WA Parliament remain masculine and resistant to change, or even to review.

There are no issues that cannot be addressed by a woman. As a woman member one does not, and could not, deal exclusively with women's issues. But, in my view, women have a duty to bring our perspective, style and experience to our work; to policy development, to decision making and to working with individuals and communities. This will serve men as well as women and children better. There is no point in allowing ourselves to be seduced by what is an essentially male agenda, nor in adopting masculinised behaviours. The 'feminisation' of politics as described by Rod Cameron in the late 80s found a resonance with many of us. It means much more than increasing the number of women in Parliaments, but more broadly characterises a different approach to politics. Australians, he found, were/are disillusioned and cynical about political process and politicians. They want a different style of leadership, an embrace of, and adherence to, new values

and new styles. According to Cameron, strong leaders, whether men or women, will demonstrate the quiet strength of their convictions and be intelligent, honest and sensible. Masculine aggression and confrontation as leadership styles will have to make way for feminised politics.

In June 1995, I moved in the Assembly that a select committee of both Houses be appointed to identify impediments to women standing for Parliament and to assess how Parliament itself might be a hindrance to women. The intention of the motion was to inquire into Parliament as a working environment for all women who work there. Had the motion been fully debated and the committee established, we would have explored the motivations of women who aspire to a parliamentary career.

My own parliamentary life started by chance with a series of opportunities which unfolded in ways I could capture. During the course of my doctoral research with injured workers, I began advocating within the Labor Party for reforms to occupational health and safety laws. It was one of the causes about which I was passionate. To cut a long story short, I became adviser in this field to the Labor state government in 1983 and had the remarkable experience of translating party platform into government policy, and in turn preparing that policy for legislation. It was suggested that I seek endorsement for the State Parliament. After much thought I sought pre-selection for Canning, a safe Labor seat, won in 1986. The wonderful thing was that I was then able to participate in the debates which delivered the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Amendment Act 1987. It was a privilege to be able to make these contributions to the working lives of WA men and women.

Much of my work with and on behalf of women was about dealing with the consequences of current or past violence. The experiences of women who had been battered and/or raped were told to me time and again. Participation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 brought me into direct contact with women who had survived horrendous violence in war or as refugees. For these reasons and more, I have been committed to using information from stories of violence told in the first person to develop appropriate policy and law. I remain disbelieving when told that the playing of violent video games has no effect on shaping behaviour. As a result of my work against violence, I also heard from men who as children or as prisoners had been subjected to institutionalised rape and humiliations in orphanages and gaols.

Apart from formal announcements of decisions or commitments, or challenging the Coalition, there were opportunities to engage the community about the issues. For instance, spurred on by a spate of murders in 1994, I planned and organised a phone-in to gauge police responses to calls. Working with a team of volunteers we took over 200 calls in one day. The report I wrote saw the government respond with improved policy directions. Then the families and friends of a number of women and children who had been murdered contributed patches to a quilt to remember and honour them. An electorate crafts group sewed the quilt together and it still travels to appropriate meetings, churches and community functions. In the same vein, I organised a very gratifying collection of specified goods and toiletries for women in Bosnia. The response was overwhelming, not only because of the huge amount collected, but also because the donors who were Jewish, Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, blind, unemployed, Muslim, Catholic, Latter Day Saints, old, of primary school age and so on crossed boundaries of difference in the most generously open-hearted way. These were all tremendous ways in which to make a contribution to and with the community.

There are many memories associated with women which constitute high points, including two amazing celebrations. One was at the end of the struggle for the ordination of women priests in the Anglican Church and joining the service of ordination in 1992; and in the same year an invitation to an Aboriginal women's desert meeting where over 700 women transacted secret and sacred business. Each of them was historic for all involved and the importance will stay with me always. The lowest point without doubt was the demise of the Women's Information and Referral Exchange. The circumstances caused a great deal of heartache to many of us.

One of the differences I tried to make over five years or so was to enlarge opportunities for girls in my electorate by encouraging them to study science and math subjects in upper school. I set up a mini scholarship scheme providing money towards books for girls in year 11. There were sadly only about eight girls between the two schools each year. Each year, the girls and their teachers were invited to three or so morning teas at Parliament House for a talk and discussion led by young women in science-related fields. It was wonderful to hear the information and questions fielded between them and such role models as an optometrist, veterinary surgeon, Antarctic researcher, general practitioner, marine biologist and others. It was even better to meet up with a few of them as young women and to learn that these sessions had enhanced education and career opportunities for some of them.

Many of us have had ongoing commitments to causes and think that our experiences should be able to bring a different dimension to debate and decision making. Mary Robinson is often quoted: 'the hand that rocks the cradle can rock the system'. Increasingly, girls and young women see politics as a legitimate career option and are structuring their education and work decisions accordingly. Despite my reservations and my perceptions of the Parliament and its processes, I think women who are prepared to work on issues important to the community are well able to make a difference. Wanting to make a difference is, I believe, the major motivating factor in the decision to go into politics.

I remain committed to encouraging women to be elected and I believe that once the 'critical mass' of 35 per cent is achieved, a parliamentary career will be much easier for individual women. As an active member of Emily's List, a political and financial support network for Labor women candidates who are committed to enhance the status of women and advocate for choice, child care and all matters of equity and participation, I will continue to work towards gender and minority balance in representative politics. In the end, it will benefit the institutions as well as the community.

(These Reflections were written in 2012.)

As I write this addendum it is 15 years since I left the Parliament and I remain madly interested in the politics of the day and the future. Some gives me joy and some makes me despair.

In the 2000 volume, I paid much attention to the status of women especially, and if I were in the House now, domestic violence, the prevalence of which remains a dreadful indictment, would still occupy me. It was heartening to read that the new Victoria Police Chief Commissioner called it a crime that will be a priority for his leadership.

There are thankfully more women and women leaders in Australian Parliaments; however, this has not prevented the widening of the gender pay gap: and while women are abundantly represented on the boards of not-for-profit agencies, there remains ambivalence, if not hostility, to our representation on boards in the business sector—for which members are paid. In this state the number of women public sector chiefs has diminished. Avenues for the promotion of women in the public and private sector are limited by not only choice but also the prohibitive costs of child care. It seems that adversary behaviour has continued and from across Australia the same ‘dismissive scorn, patronising comment and sexism’ towards women that I noted in 2000 continues in Parliaments and would not be tolerated in any other workplace. In my view, it is a good thing too that women in WA now have access to safe and legal abortion. But much remains to do to improve the status of women.

One of the best recent developments that I like to think I had a hand in promoting is the appointment of a children’s commissioner: how refreshing to have children’s rights explained, developed and promoted. In particular, I am quite taken with the appointment of a Thinker in Residence by the commissioner. Imagine how Parliament and the people of WA would profit from the legislature appointing a thinker in residence; for example, a musician, ethicist, scientist, artist or anthropologist, for, say, a three to four-month period each year, and this is an idea that I would promote.

My personal and political motivation has always been to try to advance human rights and social and legal justice through advocacy and that has continued to occupy me. I spoke several times on mental health and illness, so welcomed a five-year term to work in this area heading up the Council of Official Visitors, which has a statutory brief to protect the rights of involuntary patients. Services, resources and conditions for this most vulnerable population leave much to be desired and any advance that can promote the social and legal rights of those with mental illness must be welcomed.

For two years I was Minister for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs and met many individuals and communities of refugees: there were several refugee families in my electorate and I was always impressed by their stories and their fortitude. I wrote of the generous collections we organised from my electorate office for the women refugees of Bosnia, their stories horrifying everyone who listened.

Since 2000, I have volunteered with refugee communities, especially with those who arrived by boat and who are damned by politicians and the media and condemned by part of the community who think border protection more important than the human rights of asylum seekers. It has been hard but we have seen the best as well as the worst in people. The worst behaviours are born in prejudice, racism and Islamophobia: disappointingly these views have not been challenged by political leaders or by facts. The best comes from the commitment and passion of other volunteers and supporters, but most of all from the refugee men, women and children.

I co-founded two local agencies; CARAD (Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees) and, two years later, CASE for Refugees, a community legal service. At the moment, I again sit on the board of CARAD and also on the board of the Refugee Council of Australia.

The client groups of CARAD and CASE are mainly, but not only, individuals and families who arrived here as, in the latest jargon, ‘irregular maritime arrivals’ or ‘IMAs’ and while in

immigration detention centres are referred to by number. Of course, I could say a lot about the journey from leaving their home and family to settlement, but I want here to pay tribute to the resilience of refugees, concern for family and a safe future and making the best of their situation in the midst of unimaginable grief and loss and sometimes the consequences of torture. When I have asked Afghan refugees what the 'best thing' is about Australia, the men say that they are 'safe', whereas the women tell me 'the tap'. Later the 'best thing' is the joy of becoming citizens and being able to vote, usually for the first time in their life. All politicians, state and federal, should respect this serious commitment to citizenship and do what they can to inform their constituencies about the reasons we should offer protection.

I am sure that some would like to know that I—remember I am a feminist—have accepted as a compliment from some of the men I have met that 'you are as good as a man'.