



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

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

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and
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**Parliamentary History Project
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WINIFRED MARGARET PIESSE



MLC Lower Central Province 22 May 1977–21 May 1983 (NCP).
Member Select Committee on National Parks 1980–1981.
First woman National (Country) Party member elected to the Legislative Council.

When Winifred Piesse was elected to the Legislative Council for the Lower Central Province for a six year term commencing in May 1977 she became the first woman ever to represent the Country Party (or National Country Party) in either House of the Western Australian Parliament. She won the seat comfortably on Liberal preferences in 1977 but six years later her preferences helped to elect the Liberal candidate after she had failed by less than 400 votes to avoid elimination after the first count.

Winifred was born on 12 June 1923 at Narre Warren in Victoria, 25 miles east of Melbourne, daughter of Frederick Aumann, an orchardist, and his wife, Marguerite, and was educated at the Narre Warren State School before going to Dandenong High School.¹ Through ill health she left school at fifteen but subsequently completed her nursing general certificate and certificates in midwifery and child health and worked as a nurse at Warragul and in Melbourne from 1944 until the end of 1946, when she moved to Western Australia. There she worked in hospitals, first in Busselton and then in Narrogin, in order to be nearer her future husband Mervyn Piesse, a farmer in Wagin (and son of Charles Austin Piesse, who had sat in the Western Australian Legislative Council from 1894 to 1914), whom she had met in Busselton.² The couple were married on 3 September 1947 at the Christ Church in South Yarra and Winifred subsequently had three children, two boys and one girl. On the death of her husband in March 1966 she returned to nursing at Narrogin, Wagin and Dumbleyung and as a child health nurse at the Wagin clinic as well as managing farms in the Wagin area until she entered Parliament in 1977.³

¹ Winifred Piesse, Interview by Gail O'Hanlon (1996), Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pp 30ff.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 47ff.

Winifred first joined the Country Party in 1948 and was soon an active member serving as both branch and divisional secretary. In August 1971 she became the first woman elected to the Wagin Shire Council and remained a councillor until winning her parliamentary seat. Over the years she had been active in a variety of local organisations and she continued in this vein after leaving politics. At various times she was a nursing officer with the St John's Ambulance brigade, a member of the Farmers Union and Royal Australian Nursing Federation, and president of the Wagin branch of the Country Women's Association and of the Red Cross. Golf and lawn bowls were her main sporting interests and she was for a time president of the Wagin Golf Association. In 1971 she became a JP.

Winifred made her Inaugural Speech when seconding the motion to adopt the Address-in-Reply in August 1977. She took the opportunity then, and at greater length in the following year, to focus on the position of youth in Western Australian society.

We have a great responsibility in preparing our children for life. We must give them the incentive to progress. We must encourage them to work on the traditions of their forebears; and to lift their thoughts beyond the immediate future. We must give them the vision splendid.⁴

Our Government, social workers, and others are to be commended for their efforts to assist people, but the ultimate mandate for laying the guidelines for basic law and order rests with the community in general and with parents in particular. Parental responsibility is a moral obligation and not an option. There can be no doubt that our children are—and always will be—our most valuable asset and our greatest investment. But our younger generation are finding it increasingly difficult to accept their responsibilities and thus retain their independence in this complex and competitive environment ... one thing that we must do at this critical stage is to reinstate a sense of real values ... If we do not, we run the risk of further aggravating the situation which has slowly evolved—a system where someone else takes over the problem, thus diminishing personal responsibility and taking away self-respect.⁵

She returned to the theme in 1979 expressing considerable concern at the type of literature to which children were being exposed in schools:

Literature paints a picture which remains in one's mind. It is a picture which, when one is upset or alone, comes back to one's mind. It seems to me what is happening is that the minds of children are being filled with pictures of sordidness, degradation and hopelessness and we do not want this.⁶

Time and time again we have heard, in this place and outside, about the apathy of young people and we are told this is because there are no jobs and they are unemployed. In the 1930s people had no jobs and no money, but I am certain there was not the degradation, violence and filth proliferated as it is now.⁷

Given her nursing background it was only to be expected that health issues would be one of Winifred's central concerns, and in this instance she addressed the problem of breast cancer:

[W]hat I want the Government to fund is the appointment in Western Australia of a research fellow to do substantial research into cancer, and more specifically, into breast cancer in young women. It is true that all cancers are very serious; and the disease is very wide ranging. If we

⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 16 August 1977, p. 446.

⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 9 March 1978, p. 7.

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 15 November 1979, p. 4793.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4794.

tried to research the whole topic, we would not have the necessary funds and we would perhaps spread our effort too thinly; therefore I suggest that we consolidate the work in order to obtain results in the area in which we are particularly concerned. The research would be spread over the range of cancers that we have to fight, but with the accent on breast cancer.

The reason I have selected breast cancer for this proposal is that it is a known fact that young mothers are affected particularly by it. We are losing our young mothers and they are leaving small children motherless. That is a dreadful situation.

... [T]he subject is so important that we must be able to acquire the funds to make this appointment. I do not expect it to be made tomorrow; but I do expect and hope that it will be made within 12 months of the first collated figures from the cancer register coming to hand.⁸

She was also very concerned about ‘the increasing number of children who engage in the habit of smoking’:

With all the evidence available to us, it is rather foolish to dispute the fact that smoking is a health hazard ... In the case of adults, it is up to them to decide whether or not they will smoke; but where juveniles are involved it is a different matter ... It is well known that for many generations, the idea of having a secret puff behind the shelter shed was regarded as a bit of a lark and I am sure most members of the House would have indulged in that practice. However, the juvenile smoking we see today has gone a long way beyond that ...⁹

Unlike many other country members, Winifred has remained a country resident throughout her post-parliamentary years and at all times the problem of avoiding the drift to the cities was ever present in her mind:

If the people are to stay in the country areas—and I am not only speaking of the farming people, but all the other people in the country—in order to produce and develop our natural resources, then they must have the ordinary facilities we have come to expect as our right in this fairly affluent State at the present time ...¹⁰

Smaller towns must retain their essential services for the people within them ... Each time a government employee is removed from the town of Wagin or the smaller country towns, the businesses in the town face decreasing trade.¹¹

After losing her parliamentary seat in 1983 Winifred briefly contemplated seeking to return to politics but decided against making any further attempt, nor did she remain involved with the extra-parliamentary activities of the newly integrated National Party. In the years that followed she served a three-year term on the local hospital board and maintained links with the CWA and the Waratah old people’s hostel as well as the church vestry council, plus an active participation in golf and bowls.

⁸ WAPD(LC), 18 November 1981, p. 5785.

⁹ WAPD(LC), 3 September 1980, p. 904.

¹⁰ WAPD(LC), 2 November 1977, p. 2932.

¹¹ WAPD(LC), 3 September 1980, pp. 902–903.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Prior to 1977, entering politics and Parliament were never on my list of ‘things I must do before I die!’

The women’s liberation movement was gathering momentum in the 1970s. I was far too busy in those days to pay much attention to it. Besides, no one with my vital statistics could ever afford to burn her bra!

My husband died in 1966, so I took over management of a fairly large farming enterprise until my sons were old enough to leave school and take charge.

In 1971 I was the first (and until then the only) woman elected to the Wagin Shire Council. Because of this, I was invited to attend the ‘Women in Politics’ conference in Canberra in 1975. That was an educational experience for me, but I must admit that I was horrified at much that I heard and saw at that conference. It became clear to me that what many of the advocates at that conference were proposing was not **equality for women** but **domination by women**. Had they obtained that, I believe they would have been even more unhappy than they already were. No doubt there are flaws in our legislation concerning women, which should be adjusted, but I do not think domination is the way to go.

On my return from Canberra, I was interviewed regarding my impressions and experience of the conference. Having voiced my disappointment at the attitudes displayed, I was asked what I intended to do about it. Glibly I answered that I would do anything in my power to help promote necessary changes, but without the radical aggression as displayed at the conference.

It was following this that the then Country Party invited me to nominate for a seat in the State Parliament. On 24 May 1977, I was sworn in to the Legislative Council.

I am a trained nurse of some years experience, and starting in State Parliament was something like starting in a new hospital except that in a new hospital someone ‘looks out’ for you for the first few days. Here I must pay tribute to each member of the then House staff. They were always most helpful to me. A member of the staff showed me where the main rooms were, for example, chambers, library and dining room.

A member of my own party told me that there would be a meeting of our party at 10.00 am in the Country Party room and a meeting of the joint party (Country Party and Liberals) in the joint party room at 2.00 pm. I arrived at the joint party room at 1.55 pm just as the door opened and a man emerged, closing the door firmly behind him, he looked at me and said, ‘YOU can’t go in there!’, I replied, ‘I thought this was the joint party meeting.’ He said it was, ‘but YOU can’t go in there’. I told him I was the new member for Lower Central and he replied ‘Oh well, I suppose you CAN go in then.’ There were no other women in the room, but a number of the men whom I did not know.

For some years I had run our farms, attended sheep and cattle sales, and arranged my own bidding if I was buying. I had inspected our wool on the showroom floor and attended the wool auctions—all places run by men—and I had always felt at ease in those situations.

Parliament was a different environment. There was a sort of defensive attitude among some of the members. As time passed, I realised this defence was not actually directed at me, but also at each other. I came to the conclusion that some Ministers, in cabinet, felt a need constantly to defend their right to be there, and some members, not in cabinet, felt a need to defend their place on the 'ladder' in the hope that someday they would make it to the top. As I had no aspirations to enter Cabinet, it was a worry I did not have to carry.

Those first few months were hard. Looking back, I realise the festering of the division within the Country Party did not help.

The seat allocated to me in the chamber was in the back row between Norm Baxter (Country Party) and George Berry (Liberal). Both had had long experience as MLCs and both were tremendously helpful to me during my time in Parliament.

One evening, shortly after my admission to the hallowed chamber, the Leader of the House, Graham MacKinnon, was moving around the chamber having a brief chat with the Members. When he came to us he said, 'You're a lucky fellow, George, you always were.' George said, 'Why am I lucky?' To which Graham replied, 'We get one new woman member and you get to sit next to her!' George turned in his seat and looked me up and down and said, 'Well—I don't know if I am lucky yet, I don't know what she is going to be like!' I must have passed assessment, for we became good friends.

On one occasion I was given the honour of opening the debate on the Address-in-Reply to the Governor at the opening of Parliament. This is one of those occasions when one is permitted to read one's speech. For the opening of Parliament the House was packed with VIPs and other visitors, and as I entered the chamber George asked, 'Are you nervous, girl?' I replied, 'A little bit.' George said, 'Don't be nervous, girl, if you start to sit down, Norm and I will stand you up again!'

While the House is sitting, it is usual for the members to have a pre-dinner drink in the bar. I was somewhat reticent about this, as the other women members had husbands to go home to for dinner, so the bar would be all male. I did not want to intrude on their yarn swapping, but my Country Party members urged me to join them saying, 'There is no division of the sexes here—all are members, so you must come. Besides the money from the bar subsidises the cost of the meals!' With an invitation like that, who could refuse?

Incidentally, some of the yarns were quite funny, but others reminded me of the little boys behind the shelter shed when I was in fourth grade primary!

I did not enter Parliament believing that I could move mountains, rather that I might be able to bring attention to matters of concern to people living in the country, and to the needs of women, (particularly in health matters) and of children (particularly in education).

The worst thing during my time in Parliament, was the long distances to travel throughout Lower Central Province. Sometimes I had to change my dress in a parking place on the roadside, when going from a school sports presentation on to a formal dinner over 160 kilometres away. There are no freeways in the 'bush' and most roads are narrow, winding and hilly. I had no spouse to share the driving, and often I would be too tired to eat. I did find that a bit of cheese and a spoonful of honey helped one survive all day.

One of the best memories of my time in Parliament happened the morning after I had made a plea for finance and strategy to combat breast cancer in women—a problem becoming ever more prevalent among our young women. Quite a number of men—members of both sides of the House and staff—came quietly to my office and thanked me for raising that issue. Among them was Hon John Tonkin, ex-Labor Premier, retired. All of these men had lost family members or close friends to this dreadful disease, but had hesitated to raise the issue in Parliament.

Perhaps the best memory from outside the Parliament was when a lady shire councillor proposing a toast to MPs in her area said, ‘Win Piesse has shown us that a woman can retain her femininity and still be very successful in public life. She does not have to adopt a masculine manner.’ I treasure that remark.