



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

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

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and
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DIANE (DEE) ELIZABETH MARGETTS



Senator 1 July 1993–30 June 1999 (GWA). MLC Agricultural Region 22 May 2001–21 May 2005 (GWA). Member numerous senate standing and select committees. Member Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance 2001–2005.

Dee Margetts served one full term as a Greens (WA) member of the Federal Senate from 1993 to 1999 and completed a Master's thesis ('Competition Policy, State Agreement Acts and the Public Interest') at Murdoch University by mid-2001. In the same year she was elected to the WA state upper House (Agricultural Region) in February 2001, taking her seat in May of that year. Since the mid-1990s, Dee had worked actively to promote knowledge and awareness of the major economic policy changes which occurred while she was in the Senate. From 2001 she served one term in the state's Legislative Council but lost her seat in the 2005 election and was unable to gain re-election in 2008.

Diane (Dee) Elizabeth Margetts was born in East Fremantle on 5 March 1955, daughter of Ernest Joseph Margetts and June Elaine Margetts (nee Stearne). She attended Palmyra Primary School and John Curtin Senior High School and commenced a double major (English and anthropology) arts degree at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 1973. Being uncertain as to her life direction, she gained employment with Qantas Airways as a passenger sales agent in 1974 but recommenced university at UWA part time after work. She had become interested in development studies while undertaking study in anthropology at UWA and spent a considerable amount of time reading a range of books concerning developments in the world economy while working as a volunteer librarian in the Department of Anthropology. In 1979 she travelled to the UK to attend the first year of an undergraduate course in development studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich and subsequently took up an invitation to complete an honours degree with economics and anthropology as her main course subjects for researching development studies. In late 1981 she travelled to Nigeria to conduct research for her honours dissertation, a move resulting from her concern that a range of international automobile corporations were using developing countries in a manner which often provided minimal, or even negative, economic benefits for the developing

countries they occupied. Dee was awarded her Honours Degree in Development Studies in mid-1982.

Back in WA, after working for a few months for Qantas to fill its staff shortage at the time, Dee completed a Diploma of Education at the University of Western Australia in late 1983 and became a high school teacher–librarian at Bridgetown High School from 1984 and subsequently at Armadale Senior High School from 1986. While at these schools, the subjects she taught included English, social studies and economics.

In 1988 Dee became WA State Coordinator of People for Nuclear Disarmament and in 1989 as an Alternative Coalition candidate she contested the Fremantle Legislative Assembly seat as one of six candidates, polling just under five per cent of the primary vote. Subsequently, the Alternative Coalition merged into the Greens (WA) party which had been formed in 1990, and in the March 1990 House of Representatives election, she contested Swan as a Greens candidate against Defence Minister Kim Beazley. As one of seven candidates, she polled about seven per cent of the primary vote. In the following year, 1991, Dee was asked to stand for Mayor of Perth on behalf of the Greens.

In the aftermath of the 1990 federal election, the Greens (WA)'s major electoral focus, along with its ambition of winning seats in the WA Legislative Council, was on the Senate. Jo Vallentine, who had been elected as a Senator for the Nuclear Disarmament Party in 1984, had joined with the Greens (WA) in 1990 but left the Senate in 1992 as a consequence of health issues and was replaced by Christabel Chamarette. Although Dee had already been preselected to stand for the Greens (WA) for a South Metropolitan seat in the Legislative Council in the state election due in 1993, she subsequently withdrew when she was also preselected to stand for the Senate. As it eventuated, Jim Scott, who had been placed second on the Greens (WA) Legislative Council preselection list for south metro, was then elevated to the number one party position and was elected to the Council in February, taking his seat in May. In the meantime, Dee was elected to the Senate in March 1993, taking her seat on 1 July.¹

From 1993 to 1996 the two Greens (WA) Senators, Dee and Christabel, held and shared the balance of power in the Senate and their workload was substantial and significant politically; statistically, the two Greens Senators made more speeches than most other Senators over the next three years. They served on numerous committees, asked a wide range of budget questions and participated extensively in debates on the floor of the House. Dee herself was the Greens spokesperson for a wide range of topics, including economic policy, uranium mining and weapons, peace and antinuclear war and nuclear weapons, education and industrial relations. Despite the balance of power situation, too, some major changes they opposed strongly passed through Parliament, including the introduction of national competition policy which both the major parties supported, in Dee's view, without adequate debate.

Christabel's term ended at the end of June following her defeat in the March 1996 election, the same election at which Tasmanian Bob Brown was first elected to the Senate. During the following term of Parliament, Dee consistently urged the establishment of a Senate inquiry into the impacts of national competition policy, which concept was only accepted by the Labor Party when it was in opposition for a couple of years, but the inquiry was not completed by the

¹ For Dee's account of these events see *WAPD(LC)*, 23 May 2001, pp. 340–341.

time Dee's Senate term expired in mid-1999, consequent upon her defeat in the October 1998 election.

During her six years in the Senate, Dee served on a very large number of committees, both select and standing. Thus, the Senate select committees of which she was a member between 1995 and 1997 inquired into issues ranging from the dangers of radioactive waste to aircraft noise in Sydney and uranium mining and milling, while the standing committees focused on foreign affairs, defence, trade and Australian security. Subsequently, within two weeks of the completion of her Senate term on 30 June 1999, Dee enrolled for a Master's degree, with her thesis focused on aspects of national competition policy. During that period, Dee also became involved in assisting the Greens state parliamentarians, with a particular interest in assessing how the WA state Government was undertaking the 'public interest' assessments of national competition policy. During her Senate term, she often visited and worked in regional areas such as Geraldton, Lancelin, Toodyay, York, Narrogin, Esperance et cetera. In the February 2001 election, at which the Gallop Labor Government won power, she was elected to the sixth seat in the Agricultural Region in the Western Australian Legislative Council, taking her seat on 22 May. She was then and is still the only candidate for the Greens to have been elected from the Agricultural Region.

As a consequence of the 2001 election, there were five Greens (WA) members in the Legislative Council and they held the balance of power, with Dee undertaking the duties of party spokesperson for economics and industrial relations, as well as water policy and related issues et cetera. In dealing with the scattered nature of her electoral region which extended as far north as Kalbarri and south to Esperance, Dee shared an office close to Parliament House with Greens (WA) Mining and Pastoral Region MLC Robin Chapple, but also leased a house/office in Geraldton and spent considerable time travelling throughout the region and attending many meetings and local events.

In her Inaugural Speech in May 2001, Dee referred to her attempts in the Senate to focus debate on the impacts of globalisation and, hence, her hope that in the Legislative Council she would be able to 'try to bring this debate about in a real way' and delineate not only what 'are the problems of globalisation' but also 'how we can address them as a State legislature'. She also asserted that:

Perhaps the most important part of the work of a parliamentary representative is to reach those people who would otherwise find it difficult to have a voice within the parliamentary system, to represent their issues and values and to bring forward their concerns in the parliamentary process.²

In the four years which followed, Dee was one of the most active members on the floor of the House to the extent that the *Hansard* index of speeches, questions, petitions and the like for her encompassed 12 pages of type. One particularly controversial issue which arose during her term in the Legislative Council was the move initiated by Premier Gallop to deregulate shopping hours, an issue he said was strongly favoured by his wife. In the public debate which followed, Dee was a major participant because of her concern over the impacts of corporate market dominance due to national competition policy. The Labor Government offered a trading hours referendum as part of its 2005 election and the Greens agreed, while also influencing the wording of the question to incorporate the words 'Do you believe that the

² WAPD(LC), 23 May 2001, p. 341.

Western Australian community would benefit if ...' As it eventuated, the majority of the WA electorate voted 'No' (58.66 per cent and 62.39 per cent respectively) against retail trading hours deregulation on either weeknights or Sundays.

Dee and her fellow Greens also played a major role in influencing the electoral reform legislation passed in the hiatus period between the February 2005 election and the date when the newly elected members of the Legislative Council took their seats. Their intervention had particular significance for the representation in the Legislative Council, which was adjusted to form three metropolitan regions and three non-metropolitan regions each returning six members per region. With reference to the inclusion in the legislation of provision for some vote weighting when an electorate exceeded 100,000 square kilometres in size, she asserted that:

It was my idea to introduce a system in this legislation that was similar to that used in Queensland ... The concern for many people is that the size of their electorates would blow out beyond what is reasonable. The largest electorates, such as those with Aboriginals, contain real people, not just trees and rocks ... We believe that, in terms of representation, it is fair to have a system ... that once an electorate reaches a certain size it should be subject to checks and balances instead of blowing out into something that is ridiculous and does not represent some community of interest.³

While Dee played a prominent part in the inter-party negotiations preceding this legislation, her state political career had already been set a terminal date with her defeat in the 2005 election when she was the second last candidate eliminated. In her valedictory speech (her second as she reminded the House; the other being in the Senate), Dee contended that serving in the state upper House was not 'a consolation prize' and that it was very important to bring to the state legislature if she could 'some sense of where we all fit into the national and international sphere'. In her own words:

When I left the Senate I made a statement that I felt I had failed in many of my prime goals. I feel a lot more sanguine at the end of my four years in the Legislative Council.⁴

The regional work had a special appeal even if some of the battles she had fought were still to be won; for instance, achieving a moratorium on genetically modified organisms, and the other the battle over shopping hours for, although the referendum had been defeated, Dee did not think (correctly as it eventuated) that it was 'the end of the battle at all'.

After leaving politics, as promised in her final speech,⁵ Dee worked on a PhD at UWA on the impacts of national competition policy and participated in a range of federal inquiries on the retail and dairy industries. Her first major case study was on the impacts of national competition policy on the dairy industry and led to an article in the *Journal of Australian Political Economy*. In addition, the full dairy case study was published by UWA's Global Studies Research Centre and was launched in Harvey by Greens Senator Rachel Siewert, federal Liberal member Nola Marino, the newly elected MHR for Forrest, and the Labor state Minister for Agriculture, Kim Chance, as well as Dee's supervisors. Subsequently, in 2011 her retail case study article was published in the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* and in the same year she was invited to publish another article on national competition policy's impact on the 'Power of Big Retailers' in the 'Australian Options'. In the meantime, Dee in

³ WAPD(LC), 3 May 2005, p. 1056–1057.

⁴ WAPD(LC), 19 May 2005, p. 1952.

⁵ Ibid.

2008 had taken a year off from her PhD, as again she sought election to the Legislative Council but, as in 2005, she was the second last candidate eliminated. Viewed in retrospect, the vagaries of political life were well demonstrated in Dee's political career. Certainly it can be said that while at times she was in the right place at the right time, electorally on other occasions the reverse applied.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

For Dee Margetts the process leading to her election to the Senate in March 1993, taking her seat on 1 July, consisted of a number of interrelated steps driven by both chance circumstance and a deep commitment to the causes which motivated her decisions along the way. After initial university studies in Perth and a number of years in the commercial workforce, she made the first decisive step along the road by undertaking and completing an honours degree in development studies in the UK focused on what might best be termed exploitation of developing countries by international corporations. Having returned to Australia, it was while she was teaching at Bridgetown in the state's south west that she was first motivated at the suggestion of others to consider entering the political arena, and in 1988 she took up the role of State Coordinator for the People for Nuclear Disarmament. With a particular concern at the time for the issue of mining uranium, she had her first electoral forays as an Alternative Coalition candidate against David Parker in Fremantle in 1989 and then standing for the Greens (WA) against Kim Beazley in the federal seat of Brand. In the normal course of events in 1993, she would have contested the South Metropolitan Region seat in the WA Legislative Council, subsequently won by Jim Scott, but circumstances arising from the decision of Jo Vallentine to leave the Senate to be replaced by Christabel Chamarette meant that Dee made the decision to forgo the state nomination and won a place alongside Christabel in the Senate.

Looking back in hindsight, Dee can recall both positive and negative elements in each of the three phases of her parliamentary career between July 1993 and May 2005 when her term expired as member for the Agricultural Region in the WA Legislative Council, leaving her then and now as the only candidate from the Greens to win election in the predominantly farming region. From the outset in her own words uttered during her valedictory speech in the Senate, 'I was in a hurry and I wanted to get going'⁶ and her interests were centred on such phenomena as globalisation and ecological sustainability, though always as integrated with the economy. Referring to phase one of her career, the so-called balance of power era from 1993 to 1996, Dee considers that both she and Christabel were subject in succession to what she describes as ignorance of their presence, then derision and finally anger, especially as what they were saying then gradually became 'mainstream'.

Phase one was followed by phase two from 1996 when Dee remained in the Senate but without Christabel, and despite the election of Bob Brown, the Greens were no longer in a balance of power position. For Dee these were frustrating years, though in retrospect she considers during this period there was a surprising degree of acceptance of amendments to legislation she proposed during debate or behind the scenes, and at the personal level, she had developed a good relationship with, for example, Queensland ALP Senator Margaret Reynolds, who left Parliament at the same time. At the broader level, however, Dee expressed

⁶ CPD(*Senate*), 24 June 1999, p. 6399.

disappointment, indeed anger, that the vision to deal with acid rains, global warming, ozone depletion, inappropriate farming and mining practices and extinction of species was simply not to be seen among the members of the Senate—those who, in her words, should be considered as representing the people of Australia. These had been busy years, and also years during the course of which Dee had visited and worked in the regional areas of the state and this experience was to flow through naturally to the third and final phase of her parliamentary career as a member for the Agricultural Region in the WA Legislative Council.

In many respects Dee considers this third and final parliamentary term the most satisfying, notwithstanding the disappointment of losing the seat after only one term and the failure of the Greens subsequently to regain the opportunity to represent Agricultural Region constituents. Ironically, while many of these constituents, in Dee's own words, were not 'Greens people', she believes that the impact of the issues of major concern to her and her party were most clearly felt in these rural regions and while this could be very frustrating, it also meant that she found the process of assisting her constituents, while getting her message across, was particularly satisfying.

Throughout almost all of her parliamentary career, Dee's particular focus on the negative effects of national competition policy underpinned many of her political stances. This was perhaps most obvious in the battle over shopping hours, which she and her supporters apparently won with the success of the 'No' campaign at the referendum in 2005 only to see the electors' verdict progressively undermined in the period following the 2008 election. Similarly, Dee fought the battle both politically, where she was able, and certainly at the academic level, with her crusade concerning the impact of national competition policy on the dairy and retail industries and the water supply sector. In this regard, she gained great satisfaction that her published dairy case study had the support of representatives from the Liberals, Labor and the Greens. In 2012 Dee remains as strongly committed as ever to the causes for which she laboured long and hard both politically and academically. Her parliamentary career had been full of frustrations and disappointments but she still contends that she enjoyed enormously the parliamentary process and in the process devoted herself to the task in a manner which led the President of the Senate to describe her as one of the best legislators in the chamber. In this regard, too, Dee can only pay the highest possible tribute to those dedicated colleagues and associates who worked alongside her at the various stages of her career.