



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

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

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and
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HILDA MARGARET TURNBULL



MLA Collie 4 February 1989–10 February 2001 (NP). Shadow Minister 1989–1993. Chairman Select Committee on Intervention in Childbirth 1994–1995. Member Select Committees on National HIV/AIDS Strategy White Paper; Country Hospitals and Nursing Posts; Science and Technology; and Heavy Transport. Member Library Committee 1993–1998. First woman National (Country) Party member elected to the Legislative Assembly.

In 1989, Hilda Turnbull became the first woman to become a National Party (Country Party) member of the Legislative Assembly when she won the seat of Collie from the ALP. In so doing she broke what had been an uninterrupted sequence of Labor Party representation for that seat since 1908. Her predecessor Tom Jones had been the Labor member since 1968 and, before him, Harry May (from 1947) and Arthur Wilson (from 1908 to 1947) had long periods as the sitting Labor members for the coalmining centre. By 1989, however, the electorate had changed significantly in composition becoming less dominated by the mining township of Collie. Subsequently it encompassed Boddington, Boyup Brook, Balingup, Donnybrook, Greenbushes (until 1996) and, from 1996, Boyanup, Dardanup and Burekup. Hilda had first contested Collie in 1974 on behalf of the National Alliance (Country Party and Democratic Labor Party) and again in 1986 she contested the seat for the National Party. Residual support from those campaigns probably assisted her election in 1989, and this despite gaining only 30.90 per cent of the first preference vote. Her share of the primary vote increased to 39.94 per cent in 1993 and then to 59.27 per cent in 1996, the latter in a straight contest with a Labor candidate: by contrast, in 1989 and 1993 there had been five and six contestants respectively. Further success in 1996 was followed by a very narrow loss in 2001, which in some circles was attributed to the ‘donkey vote’ due to her unfavourable ballot position.

On entering Parliament, Hilda was immediately assigned shadow responsibilities and relied upon to give a woman’s rural perspective. In addition, her experience as a medical practitioner meant that her expertise was a valuable resource to the Parliament and the numerous select committees of which she was a member. The list of select committees included the inquiry into the National HIV/AIDS Strategy White Paper 1989–1990, Country Hospitals and Nursing Posts, Science and Technology, and Heavy Transport. She was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Intervention in Childbirth. For five years, from 1993 to 1998, she was a

member of the Library Committee. From the time the Coalition came to government in 1993, Hilda was chair of the coalition parliamentary committee on community affairs.

Hilda has had a long association with rural Western Australia. Although she was born in Perth on 15 January 1942, her parents, Tom and Betty Morcombe, were farmers in the wheatbelt. Sadly, her father died when she was only 12 years of age. She attended Coorow Primary School and then Methodist Ladies' College, before graduating from the University of Western Australia in 1965 with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. From 1967, she was a general practitioner in Collie in partnership for 25 years with her husband, James Turnbull, whom she had married in Nedlands in 1965. Despite the responsibility of raising two sons and a daughter, Hilda's record of community service was formidable, including 11 years on the Collie shire council. For 25 years she was the chairperson of the Collie Welfare Council, which was responsible for the establishment of facilities such as a childcare centre. Some of her other memberships included the Collie Business and Professional Women, Apex Kindergarten Committee, Collie day care support group, Tidy Towns committee and Riverview Residence committee. She was vice patron of Collie St John Ambulance and a member of the Collie Parish All Saints Anglican Church as well as the Collie arts advisory council and the advisory committee of the South West Development Authority. For many seasons she was a member and honorary doctor for the Mines Rovers Football Club.

Given her rural links, one National Party plank which Hilda has frequently and strongly supported has been the rural weighting of electorates in Western Australia. Her argument has been that the Westminster system, upon which the Parliament of Western Australia is founded, is a democratic one based on communities of interest, historical circumstances and remoteness from government. For the economic good of Western Australia it is necessary, she believed, to base the drawing of boundaries upon considerations such as travel, the geography of the area and the socioeconomic interests of the region. Although she concedes there are grounds for discussion in some areas, in her view the National Party's 'vision and support for the weighted rural vote must continue'. She also believed that voluntary voting should be introduced as compulsory voting leads to much 'pork-barrelling' in marginal seats, whereas voluntary voting would make it more difficult for parties to identify marginal seats.¹

Another important matter for Hilda during her tenure as the member for Collie was the eventual decision of the Coalition Government to sign a contract for a coal-fired, government-owned power station at Collie. Prior to the 1993 election, there was a proposal for a 600 megawatt station. Within a month of gaining government, the coalition energy minister, Colin Barnett, announced a \$575 million government-owned construction contract for a 300 megawatt coal-fired station at Collie. Hilda supported the Coalition's decision despite misgivings about the reduced scale of the plant. Earlier, too, whilst in government, the Labor Party had rejected the so-called Harman power option committee recommendation for the initial use of gas for a power station. Hilda recognised the potency of the gas option but argued for the reliability of coal and gave voice to the expertise in the energy industry that was present in the Collie area.

In analysing her arguments for coal rather than gas, it should be recalled that Hilda made some prophetic observations about the need to preserve the state's jarrah forests. As she told the Legislative Assembly in her Inaugural Speech:

¹ AM Archive ABC, Interview with David Weber, 19 January 2001.

We cannot afford to damage our jarrah forest when it is vital for water, for fuel, for domestic supplies, for tourism, for recreation and salinity control. There is a definite incongruity, a contorted logic, in allowing the rape of our jarrah forests at the same time as Western Australia is being advised to plant more trees to counter the salinity problem and the greenhouse effect.²

In 1997, Hilda was the only Western Australian to be an accredited observer at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Kyoto. During that time she visited the Ohio nuclear power station and studied emerging hydrogen fuel cell technology.

Hilda was particularly pleased that in 1999 a large area of forest surrounding Wellington Dam was purchased by the Government with Wellington National Park to be created as part of the 1999 Regional Forest Agreement 1999. This, she believed, would greatly enhance the development of tourism in the surrounding towns and the South West. Indeed, during her decade in Parliament she has shown a strong commitment to the responsible sustainable management of the forest areas which cover almost one half of the area of the Collie electorate.

For the future she had a vision for the Collie coalfields as the Collie Lakes District with water in the final mine voids being rehabilitated and used for recreational fishing and agriculture. With this objective, she had been active in sourcing funding for research and trials in the management of the acidic water resulting from coalmining.

Interestingly, in an Address-in-Reply debate speech in July 1993, Hilda paid a special tribute to Bill Grayden, a longstanding member of the Legislative Assembly, who had given her active encouragement to pursue her commitment to ban tobacco products, or at least a ban on the advertising of such products. Later she was able to play a part in securing higher funding, autonomy and scope for research for Healthway. This agency had been established as an independent statutory authority in 1991 under a section of the Tobacco Control Act. In these connections she cited Bill Grayden as having once said:

The test of any member of Parliament would firstly be his sincerity, his judgement, his character and his desire to improve the quality of life of the community; such a test does not come along very often in this place but it does so occasionally and I suggest this issue is such a test.³

Hilda was clearly of the opinion that Bill Grayden had abided by this test for some 40 years and at the same time she was indicating some of her thoughts on the role of a Member of Parliament. In her 'Reflections' in this volume, she espoused admiration for the rare qualities of leadership which her National Party leader, Henny Cowan, had exhibited. However, despite the respect she has exhibited for these two long-serving male members, she considered that it is a characteristic of women that they more often prefer consensus to confrontation. Reflecting on her own political career 'as a parliamentarian, not a politician' she claimed that 'this desire for consensus may be women's great contribution to political life'.

Given her medical training and practice and long marriage to a doctor, it is not surprising that Hilda has frequently given public focus to health concerns and the need for continued medical research. It is imperative, in her view, that equalisation principles be applied for metropolitan

² *WAPD(LA)*, 4 April 1989, p. 154.

³ *WAPD(LA)*, 1 July 1993, p. 961.

and country hospitals and medical services, whereby equivalent levels are accessible for all citizens. Indeed, her commitment to adequate country services in areas such as health, education, transport, police, mining and agriculture have been constant. A corollary of this outlook is the need to provide opportunities to keep people and industries in the country areas of Western Australia.

Another area of special interest for Hilda is revealed in the strong stand she has taken in defence of families in the state's rural and urban communities. In total, she spent more than 20 years in the community, National Party and Parliament championing the cause of a taxation benefit for single income families who have dependent children. At one stage she voiced concern that 'families must be considered an endangered species'⁴ and many of her stances in the Parliament have been linked to the upholding of traditional values of the family, the church and the value of civic service. She followed this model in her career as a parliamentarian committed to a consensus model and in the process enhanced the standing of rural women in the Parliament of Western Australia.

After leaving Parliament, Hilda between 2001 and 2009 became a special projects officer for the Wheatbelt GP Network supporting general practitioners and nurses providing after-hours emergency care. Another venture, mostly at the same time, was Well Women's Clinics in country towns with no woman doctor. For five years, from 2004 to 2009, Hilda was also a board member of the Asthma Foundation. She retained her strong environmental commitment and between 2001 and 2007 was chairperson of the Centre for Sustainable Mine Lakes. Following her parliamentary service, she moved with husband Jim to live in Subiaco with a right to believe that before, during and after Parliament, she had 'made a difference'. However, the desire to remain politically active was still prevalent with a decision in early 2012 to become one of the founding 30 members of a lobby group to rally against the Barnett Government's Perth waterfront redevelopment plans. As her 'Reflections' indicate, this was only one of a number of matters to which she devoted attention, with a consensus style, as part of valuing 'our hard won freedoms to actively participate in our democratic society'.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

Hilda Turnbull—a parliamentarian, not a politician.

I was catapulted into politics in 1974 when I accepted the challenge to stand for the Country Party and the Democratic Labor Party Alliance in the state elections. At that time, I was the mother of three young children, working as a general practitioner and married to a country doctor in the Collie community.

In 1989, at my third attempt in 15 years, I was elected to the Parliament. I see this long involvement as an apprenticeship. During this time I developed my philosophy that being a parliamentarian means 'representing the people'. I have never called myself a politician—I am a parliamentarian.

⁴ WAPD(LA), 16 May 1990, p. 977.

My election was part of forcing along the decision to build a coal-fired power station for the benefit of jobs in Collie, cheaper, competitive electricity prices and stricter environmental standards.

I see representation as being on three levels—the individual within the electorate, the districts within the electorate and the electorate within the state. A prime example is the fight to develop legislation for an equitable sharing of water. This issue encapsulates all the issues with which I have to deal. I need to consider the rights of the individual landholders; the needs of different interest groups within the electorate; and the future water needs of the state.

There are four reasons why I chose to belong to the National Party:

- the National Party is the only party which allows a conscience vote on any issue;
- National Party policy is determined locally by party members;
- the National Party has a family focus and this corresponds with my beliefs; and
- I believe in maintaining the weighted rural vote—a National Party principle.

Country people know the difficulties of living in the country and how hard it is for rural areas to get services, which are often taken for granted by city people. It will be worse if we do not keep the advantage of this weighted rural vote for country. Some people believe in having electorates with equal number of voters; however, in Western Australia, country people still have some equity of representation with 23 country and 34 city electorates. With one vote, one value there would be 16 country and 41 city electorates. All country people should treasure the weighted rural vote, otherwise how could the interests of all the people in large rural electorates be served?

My very strong belief is that all country people, whether they be in towns, on farms or in mines, are a severely disadvantaged group. The only place they have equality of access is the Parliament. To try to achieve this is the role of a parliamentarian.

I believe passionately that Western Australia must support our inland country towns. How will Western Australia survive if we only have fly-in fly-out, drive-in drive-out raiders who plunder and rape our mines, farms, waterways and forests? How will we survive if people do not live in the areas, if they do not have a strong commitment to a sustainable management of our land?

People who live in inland areas must have equality of opportunity and amenities with people in cities and coastal towns. The fight to maintain living standards in the country is never-ending. While there are always critics, I know my efforts have helped to keep people and industries in the country, in particular services such as schools, health services transport, police, mining, CALM (Conservation and Land Management) and agriculture personnel.

To me, an amazing fact of politics is that no two politicians are the same. Everyone is different. Everyone would like to achieve their own agenda, and so Parliament is where you become a politician.

Being a woman in Parliament has been an interesting experience. There have been times when I know my ideas would have been more readily accepted had I been a man. Back in the electorate I find no disadvantages in being female, but Parliament still has some way to go in accepting women as equals in every respect, particularly in the leadership role.

It has been very interesting to learn how to interact with all these different personalities to achieve the results I want. My tactics have certainly been different from those of men. Instead of confrontation, I keep quiet, reassess the situation, design a way around it—a flank alternative, if you like—and work to mould a team approach. The desire for consensus may be women's great contribution to political life.

True leadership is a very rare ability and is far more than charisma. There must be commonsense, dedication, sheer hard work and a solid track record. I have been privileged to work with Henny Cowan as the Leader of the National Party and Deputy Premier of the state. To me he epitomises leadership.

My husband and my electorate officer are essential members of my team. My husband is my backstop and the voice of reason when everything else is in chaos. His advice throughout my professional life, whether as a doctor, a speech maker, policy designer, community worker or parliamentarian, has been invaluable.

My electorate officer, Valerie Hawks, was priceless. We were a harmonious, and I believe very effective, partnership for over 10 years. It is very much a team effort based on mutual respect and a close friendship which developed over the years.

My good fortune was to represent the best electorate in the world. It is widely diverse and includes the mining and agricultural sectors. I've been privileged to be part of vital issues such as the fight to build the new power station and the negotiations over the availability and sharing of the water and the balance between forest in reserves and sustainably managed production forests.

Over the years I've tried many methods of meeting the demands on a parliamentarian. Of course, being a member in a marginal seat presents its own unique challenges. I work hard to ensure that all are well represented. I try to work closely with Ministers, directly with officers of government departments, and actively with community groups.

At times the enormous avalanche of paperwork, constituents' needs, conflicting demands and the impact of constant change threaten to engulf me. I cling to my life raft of prayer—prayer for calm and the capacity to get my priorities right. I have a strong belief that all things work together for good for those who trust in God.

Diligent, hard work and constant attempts to communicate with all constituents leaves little time planning for the future. Yet I have a strong conviction that I must play a very active part in planning for the future of my electorate. This is the parliamentarian's challenge—to build for the future—and as a woman, mother and parliamentarian, this has been my constant, though admittedly sometimes elusive, mission.

Addendum to Member's Reflections (written in 2012)

Looking back in 2012 it is a reminder that in the twentieth year of Healthway I can reflect with great satisfaction on the effectiveness of the health promotion foundation which I helped to bring into existence.

In 1988, the Donnybrook branch of the National Party presented a very controversial motion to ban tobacco advertising in all media under state law to the state conference. The passage of this by a very small majority resulted in large financial losses to the party as tobacco companies ceased donations.

Within weeks of my election, the Labor Government brought on the Tobacco Control Bill and legislation to increase the tobacco tax with a designated fund to compensate organisations for lost tobacco company sponsorship. During the passage of the Bills I was able to negotiate much higher funding, scope of activity in research and autonomy for Healthway.

Twenty years on, it is fantastic to see the anti-smoking message has been so successful. This is due to excellent research resulting in well targeted health promotion campaigns. A lot of the lessons learnt and implemented can be adapted to other health promotion programs.

In 2001 I lost the election by 34 votes. I had expected a larger loss due to the Pauline Hanson party activity following the deregulation of the white milk quotas. I believe things happen in 'God's time'. It was time for my retired husband Jim and me to leave the Collie electorate with the Labor Party in government.

As chairperson of the Centre for Sustainable Mine Lakes, in 2002 I continued with my commitment to sustainable water management in the Collie coalmine basin and lobbied the Labor Government to continue funding the CSML. The research into remediation of acidic water trials of its usage continued under the direction of the CEO, Curtin Professor, Louis Evans.

Since 2007, a full-scale marron aquaculture project using remediated mine void water has been established with funding from Wesfarmers Coal, State and Federal Governments and royalties for regions. The Ngalang Boodja Council Aboriginal Corporation manages and staffs the aquafarm with the continued assistance of Louis Evans.

So, in 2012 Collie is slowly progressing towards my vision of claiming the title of the Collie Lakes District of Western Australia.

I continue to be passionate about the rights of all people to equity in all spheres of government activities and services. For eight years I worked for the Wheatbelt GP Network supporting general practitioners and nurses providing after-hours emergency care in the wheatbelt. I also participated as a GP in Well Women's Clinics for country towns with no woman doctor.

In 2007, following the passage of the Labor Party's One Vote One Value Bill, there was a redistribution which moved six country seats to the metropolitan area. This was tipped to be the end of the country-based National Party. I was asked to join the very committed group who designed the National Party submission to the Electoral Commission. The submission focused on the requirement for five Legislative Assembly seats in the Legislative Council Mining and Pastoral Region and the necessity to maintain community of interest in the

Agricultural Region versus the South West Region. We were very pleased when the Electoral Commission incorporated almost all the details of the submission into the electoral boundaries.

My husband Jim and I were thrilled with the party's 2008 election results. Since then we have watched with great interest the effectiveness of the National Party's alliance with the Liberal Party in government and the royalties for regions programs.

In 2011 I was honoured to receive a Life Membership of the National Party.

Now we are lobbying for the allocation of more funding for emergency and low-cost housing and against the waste of our taxes on digging up the heritage-listed Esplanade Reserve to make an enclave with an inlet surrounded by nine towers of 26 to 36 storeys high.

In retirement I greatly enjoy all my roles as daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. I know I have been one of the most privileged women to have lived. I continue to urge young people and the 'Grumpies' to value our hard won freedoms and to actively participate in our democratic society.