



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

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

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and
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RHONDA KATHLEEN PARKER



MLA Helena 26 September 1994–14 December 1996; Ballajura 14 December 1996–10 February 2001 (Lib). Parliamentary Secretary 1995–1997. Minister of State 9 January 1997–21 December 1999. Member Select Committee on Recycling and Waste Management 1994–1995.

It is well known that the Chartists in the nineteenth century had advocated frequent, even annual, elections to ensure that members of Parliament were responsive to the needs of their constituents. Rhonda Parker's electoral history gives her the authority to comment on the demands of regular elections and the related circumstance, the holding of a marginal seat. At the February 1993 state election Rhonda contested the seat of Helena but lost by only 78 votes to the sitting member, Gordon Hill, the incumbent Minister for Small Business, Mines and Fisheries. When Gordon Hill resigned his seat some 18 months later, Rhonda won the consequential by-election by 741 votes. However, in the interim the seat of Helena was abolished in the redistribution of electoral boundaries and in the December 1996 general election she contested the new seat of Ballajura, which was also in the East Metropolitan Region but had no common boundary with her former 'hills' district. Opposed by the Mayor of Bayswater, John D'Orazio, and five other candidates, Rhonda's margin was only 44 votes, thus ensuring that electoral considerations would continue to be at the forefront of her political career and would in fact lead to the premature end of her ministerial career.

Despite the uncertainties of the political process it appears that from the outset Rhonda was destined for high public office. As early as February 1995, after only a few months in Parliament, she was appointed as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education and later had Parliamentary Secretary experience in the tourism portfolio. After the Coalition again won government in December 1996, Rhonda was elevated to the Cabinet, being made the Minister for Family and Children's Services; Seniors; and Women's Interests. It was rapid promotion that had rarely been afforded women in the past, especially from the non-Labor ranks. Ironically, public criticism that more women needed to be the Cabinet facilitated her appointment for at the time Cheryl Edwardes (q.v.) was the only woman serving in the 17-member Coalition Ministry.

Rhonda Parker was born in Warragul, Victoria, on 7 September 1954, daughter of farmer Reg Davey and mother Mavis, a nurse by occupation. She was educated at Gowanford Primary School and Swan Hill Senior High School in Victoria before arriving in Western Australia in 1967 where she attended Jerramungup Junior High School and John Curtin Senior High School before graduating with a Diploma of Teaching from Edith Cowan University. Prior to the commencement of her teaching career she married Neville Parker on 22 December 1973 and the responsibilities of bringing up five children (two sons and three daughters) meant that some of Rhonda's teaching appointments in primary and secondary schools were on a part-time basis. She also lectured part-time in English at Canning College. Later she pursued business interests and became a director of Insulfibre Insulation and a member of the Australian Institute of Management and Kalamunda Chamber of Commerce. This change in career path was also marked by membership of the Willetton branch of the Liberal Party, followed by the Kalamunda branch, and then the Forrestfield–High Wycombe branch, of which she became president. She was also president of the Pearce women's division of the Liberal Party, a member of the state council, and standing committee on marketing and promotions of the Liberal Party. With such a range of commitments it is surprising that Rhonda's record also features a range of coaching and playing roles in netball, tennis and basketball.

In her first opportunity to speak in an Address-in-Reply debate, Rhonda gave some focus to a sporting matter, notably the attempt to relocate the highly successful junior gymnastics program from Perth to Canberra away from the Western Australian Institute of Sport, where the participants had the ready support of family and peers. In a display of bipartisan politics Rhonda was able to speak in concert with the Opposition to oppose the plan. Not surprisingly, this topic was addressed in the context of federalism in Australia, in which she contended that the states were 'losing part of their responsibility they have under the Constitution, as intended'.¹ The states, she argued, should have some involvement in the ratification of international treaties. In particular, she was extremely critical of the part played in the process by the High Court, citing the constitutional authority Geoffrey de Q. Walker who had asserted that 'the function of courts is to settle the disputes that arise in a society, not to exacerbate them'.² The Mabo judgement, for instance, she depicted as representing a serious challenge to industry: not just a social issue but with critical ramifications for employment. Nevertheless, it should be noted that when the Legislative Assembly unanimously approved a motion apologising for the past policies under which Aboriginal children were removed from their families, Rhonda described such practices as 'fundamentally flawed'. As the first woman who spoke in the debate she said:

Members who are parents, particularly those who are mothers, cannot imagine how they would cope with having their child taken from them by law.³

After her elevation to Cabinet with responsibility for 'Women's Interests', Rhonda had to respond to questions from the Opposition, and Independent Elizabeth Constable, concerning the ongoing shortfall in the numbers of women appointed to government boards and agencies. However, perhaps the biggest crisis she faced in this portfolio came when as Minister for Women's Interests she was placed in a difficult position personally during the so-called abortion debate which occupied a large proportion of parliamentary sittings in the first half of 1998. Initially, she adopted a very low profile on the matter, but eventually she felt compelled to declare her firm opposition to

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 12 April 1995, p. 1333.

² *Ibid.*

³ *WAPD(LA)*, 28 May 1997, p. 3340.

the legislation. Some women's groups called for her resignation, while others supported her position. Another contentious policy area arose through her responsibility to promulgate the state's drug abuse strategy. Her general stance was to beware of what was called 'The Trojan Horse Effect'. As she told the Legislative Assembly:

If we allow normalisation to occur through some [drug] programs, it will result in a broad acceptance of drug use in our community. Instead of it being a marginal activity that can be limited, it will become mainstream.⁴

Her need to take stances on such divisive issues in the community inevitably raised the question of potential electoral consequences in a marginal seat. One of the adages of parliamentary politics is the need for Ministers to be cushioned from the loss of their seats. As only the fourth woman from the so-termed conservative spectrum in politics to hold a Cabinet post in Western Australia Rhonda's career path raised the hopes of those seeking a much higher percentage of women in senior political posts. As it was, however, Rhonda made the decision to stand down from the Ministry in December 1999 in order to prepare for what would be a difficult election contest in Ballajura against a strong opponent whom she had defeated by only 44 votes in 1996. In the event, there was a strong swing against the Government in February 2001 and after preferences she was defeated by more than 2 000 votes.

Given the enforced circumstances which led to the end of Rhonda's parliamentary career she did not have the opportunity to make a valedictory speech but she did speak at length in the Address-in-Reply debate in August 2000, focusing in her speech on 'the current views, the priorities and the aspirations' of her constituents so that she 'could help in the development of government policies in the lead-up to the election'. In this context she contended that the five main issues of concern for those in her electorate were 'more jobs, job security and career opportunities for their children; safer neighbourhoods; high quality health care; a world class education system, focused on academic as well as social skills ... [and] underpinned by a strong economy and good financial management by the Government'.⁵

In the decade and more since leaving Parliament Rhonda has pursued an active and varied career, suggesting that her parliamentary career was but one stage along a road of community service in various forms. After various consultancies in the early years of the twenty-first century she became the chief executive officer of the Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia and then an Associate Professor with the Curtin University Centre for Research on Ageing before her appointment as Australia's first independent Aged Care Commissioner in 2007. Most recently she has been chief executive officer of Employment Covenant Ltd, which is concerned with placing Indigenous people in meaningful employment.

⁴ WAPD(LA), 18 June 1997, p. 4289.

⁵ WAPD(LA), 15 August 2000, pp. 315ff.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(The following is a short summary of the ‘Reflections’ written by Rhonda in 1999.)

Rhonda Parker described the role of the member of Parliament as ‘one of great responsibility and privilege ... [with] responsibility to the Past, the present and the future ... as part of that continuum of time and responsibility’. While ‘those functions of task and responsibility are without gender’, for the MP who is a woman she argued the task is more challenging. In her view ‘The environment clearly suits the male ... Men are more likely to prioritise power over success; women vice-versa’.

Looking ahead at the time she indicated that while she did not believe in ‘quotas for women’ she did consider that ‘the increasing numbers of women will necessarily influence the culture of the Parliament ... [and that] ‘as in any other area of activity, women bring an important balance and perspective’. Her hope accordingly was that ‘women remain determined as the suffragettes of 1899 to ... make their contribution ... to the democratic process and the quality of life outcomes for members of our society’.

(The following Reflections were written in 2012.)

More than a decade on from my departure from the Western Australian Parliament, I’ve been asked for a second time to write my reflections on being a woman in the Parliament. On this occasion I feel I have little to say on this subject for two reasons. I’ll explain those two reasons and then make some broader, indirect comments on this subject.

The first reason I have little to say is that I have refreshed myself on my contribution to the first edition of *Making a Difference* and my views remain essentially the same as I wrote over a decade ago. The second reason I have little to say directly on this subject is that I’ve never and still don’t consider gender as I operate in the workplace. I don’t feel female in the workplace. Outside of the workplace there are times I certainly feel female, and inadequate for it—the maintenance tasks around the home, understanding my car, arranging repairs for the reticulation. (I recently had a repairman attempt to charge me three times the cost of a new controller box. I doubt he would have quoted that to a man.)

However, at work, while I recognise my style is different, we know that diversity in staff composition is a strength, and I experience and embrace that principle in the teams I work with and have built over the years. I encourage my senior management team to think differently from me, and to bring those differences to our decision-making processes. Diversity is strength, and being female is only one of the ways in which I may be different. It is not problematic, nor is it a disadvantage.

Perhaps my lack of self-consciousness at being female in the workplace dates back to my childhood. I was born in the 50s and raised in a conservative, patriarchal farming family. However, my mother is a strong, spirited, resilient woman. Adding to that influence is the fact that my sister and I were expected to work hard inside and outside the home. While we were excused from some heavy tasks assigned to our brothers, we were expected to learn to drive when our feet reached the pedals, take the occasional shift on the tractor during seeding, and alternate as roustabouts during shearing. As a student at Jerramungup Junior High School, I knew the boys

were stronger and mostly faster than me, but I competed against them over 100 yards anyway and occasionally filled in for them on the football field. And I was smarter than them in class. When I arrived at John Curtin High School to finish my schooling, and was told by the formidable maths master on my first day that ‘girls don’t do two maths’, I calmly explained that that must not be right. After some negotiation with my timetable, I studied two maths to matriculation level. Gender was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to me. It was not an issue.

Yet, gender is an issue in the Parliament of Western Australia. In the Legislative Assembly, where government is formed, Western Australia has the lowest representation of women of any Parliament in the nation. As I’ve written previously, I maintain that it operates in a male paradigm of winning by the exercise of power and dominion over opponents. The WA Parliament, like other Australian Parliaments, has a history of a two-party system based on conflict rather than the cooperative coalitions of, say, the European Parliaments. This combative model suits the male instinct to do battle rather than the female instinct to nurture. It is often a foreign paradigm for a woman. But why is the representation of women in Western Australia, at least in one of the two Houses, now the poorest in the nation? Are the conservative parties in Western Australia more ‘blokey’ than their eastern states counterparts? Do they genuinely not value the strength that diversity in a team or organisation brings? Perhaps the question should be broader: with the dominance of the resources boom, is WA becoming a more ‘blokey’ place, operating in a more male paradigm than in other parts of Australia?

In Western Australia, in conservative politics, women are not being elected into the Legislative Assembly, and they are not being endorsed in safe Assembly seat preselections. The opportunity for a parliamentary career is available, but is it being discouraged by the organisational culture or are women choosing to exercise their leadership and talent in other domains, and if so, why?

It is not for me to answer these questions. However, contemporary, evidence-based management theory establishes that team diversity is essential for robust, effective organisational decision-making. At the decision-making table, women bring a different viewpoint, as do people who are young, or older, or from the regions, Indigenous, immigrants, or self-employed. I believe women are more likely to humanise an issue, tap into community sentiment, or identify the policy impact on the human condition, whether in a corporate boardroom, a senior management meeting, in the party room, or in cabinet. If political parties and leaders think that the contributions of women are non-essential to successful performance, then we are the poorer for it, as will their time on the government benches be the shorter for it.

I don’t consider my contribution as a parliamentarian exceptional, but it was a privilege and an exceptional opportunity. Life in the Parliament, especially as a member of the Legislative Assembly, is a tough, challenging professional role for anyone, and more so for women. But women are tough and up to the challenge. The strength of our democracy lies in the active participation of the largest number of citizens with the greatest diversity possible. Our democratic process is the stronger for the contribution of women, and the weaker for the lack of it.

The suffragettes fought hard for the opportunities we now enjoy. I encourage a new generation of Western Australian women to seize the opportunity to make a difference by serving in a system people have given their lives to defend—our great democracy, and the institution of the Parliament. Like the suffragettes before us, as women, we should be sure of ourselves, and certain that our contribution is essential.