



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

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

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## **ROBYN MARY McSWEENEY**



MLC South West Region from 22 May 2001 (Lib). Shadow Minister 2001–2008. Minister of State from 23 September 2008. Chairperson Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Assessment Procedures by the Department for Community Development 2005–2006. Member Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs 2001–2008; Parliamentary Services Committee 2005–2008.

In her Inaugural Speech Robyn McSweeney highlighted that her 2001 election to the Legislative Council was a reminder of the pioneer women of Western Australia in the Centenary of Federation. She ‘acknowledge[d] that without their sacrifices and hardship I would not have found it as easy as it is to be standing here today’.<sup>1</sup> She gave a brief account of some of the attitudes that prevailed when women had gained the franchise in Western Australia at the time of Federation. She also gave special praise to her predecessor, Hon Muriel Patterson (q.v.), who represented the same South West Region seat for the Liberal Party for the previous 12 years. Robyn herself had been born at Bridgetown on 9 October 1957 to parents Richard Cockram and Coralie (nee Brown), who were farmers from the same town. She was very proud of her parents and their heritage, including grandfather Claude Cockram, who together with his wife, Sarah, owned a merino stud near Gnowangerup. Her great grandfather, Albert Edmund Cockram, was one of the most prominent citizens of Western Australian birth at Gingin. Said to be a ‘man far advanced of his time’<sup>2</sup> he had been educated at Bishop Hale’s School. He had bred stud sheep and thoroughbred horses, including horses which had won the Perth and Sydney Cups, Epsom and the Metropolitan, and was thought to be the only man who had judged at agricultural shows in every colony of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. His claim ‘there is no place like [our] native land and no land so full of possibilities’<sup>3</sup> has been reflected in Robyn’s outlook and political career.

Robyn’s schooling had been at Bridgetown Primary School and Bridgetown High School before she completed her secondary schooling at Manjimup Senior High School. She married at 19 years of age to Michael McSweeney in the Bridgetown Anglican Church on 4 June 1977.

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 31 May 2001, p. 788.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 789.

Between the ages of 21 and 26, she had four children, Kristy, Jenny, Jason and Holly, and as Robyn observed ‘I kept my sanity by studying for many years while my children were young’.<sup>4</sup> At Murdoch University she completed a Bachelor of Arts with majors in politics, sociology and philosophy. Apart from these formal political studies, she also gained a background in politics by winning election as a councillor on the Bridgetown-Greenbushes Shire. This has been a well-worn stepping stone to Parliament, particularly for country representatives. During this time, between 1991 and 1997, she served on the Child Health Committee and the Family Centre Committee. Other memberships have included the Western Australian Women’s Advisory Council, the Home and Community Care Board, the Family and Children’s Service Board, the Community Advisory Council, the Juvenile Justice Board, as well as the SouthWest Advisory Committee. Secretary of the Geegeelup Village Aged Care group was another role she has fulfilled as part of an extensive record of community service.

With a keen interest in social policy, Robyn was for some seven years a welfare officer in several south west locations. She said ‘That was my learning curve about human nature and the very sad lives that some children are born into, no matter what their social strata.’<sup>5</sup> This experience was evident when she exercised both her shadow portfolios in Opposition during her first two terms in Parliament and then in her ministerial roles in Government which followed when the Barnett ‘Alliance’ won Government in 2008. Another pre-politics occupational role which was influential was her position as a coordinator and lecturer of courses in New Opportunities for Women at TAFE. As a member of the Family and Children’s Advisory Council, she was significantly involved in interviewing people for the Listening to Families and Children in the New Millennium Project. At one stage she remarked, ‘Although I do not hold radical feminist viewpoints, I believe women have come a long way, and rightly so.’<sup>6</sup> She also observed, ‘Time and again in the family survey it was found that the people of Western Australia are concerned about work, finance, education, safety, alcohol and drug abuse, relationship breakdown and health.’<sup>7</sup>

The extensive reference to family values during the New Millennium Project interviews led Robyn to indicate she had ‘a strong belief in Christian principles and family values’, accompanied by a realisation that society is changing.<sup>8</sup> However, she did not believe that the changes were of such magnitude that Government should be too permissive with its drug legislation by condoning the use of mind-altering chemical substances. Parenting was recognised as a major challenge without the additional ‘pressure’ of the State permitting drugs to be grown in the backyard. She has also made reference to the need for ‘reconnecting the aged with younger people and using the wisdom of our growing aged population’. On this theme she has contended, ‘Our Anzac Day tradition reconnects young and old in the true spirit of what it is to be Australian.’<sup>9</sup> She then added that:

I found it very moving to watch all the Australians who took part in the Anzac march and the services around Western Australia. That is what it is all about: community, belonging and being proud of who and what we are, no matter what our background.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 789.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 788.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 789.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 790.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Very active in the Liberal Party over the years, Robyn's roles have included holding the post of President of the Bridgetown branch, president of the Forrest Women and vice-president of the Forrest division. In addition, she has been vice-president of the State Liberal Party, State Councillor and member of the rural regional policy committee. Her rise in influence in the Liberal Party can be gauged from being the sixth elected in 2001 (from third place on the Liberal Party ticket) to being the third elected in 2005 (from second spot on the Liberal Party ticket) and then in 2008 being first elected from top of the Liberal ticket. She would attest to the intensity of the party frictions over upper House preselections but the outcomes reflect her capacity to manage intra-party machinations and possibly point to electoral appeal. Perhaps reflecting on her earlier political science studies helped her appreciate the significance of electoral laws. As she said in her Inaugural Speech:

Rural areas need and deserve representation, and our community must strive to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in any one vote, one value system, which is an unnecessary proposition.<sup>11</sup>

In fact in 2005, one vote, one value legislation, save a large district allowance, was introduced for the Legislative Assembly but was not 'imposed' upon the Legislative Council. As a member of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, and shadow Minister for Local Government, she was a signatory to the minority report which in part opposed the introduction of the use of the preference (alternative) vote in single member wards and proportional representation (PR) in multi-member wards. The minority report had favoured the retention of plurality (first past the post) introduced in 1995 and favoured by the Local Government Advisory Board. The combined preference vote and PR had been law for the 2007 local government elections throughout the State. However, when the 'Alliance' Government under Colin Barnett gained office in 2008, it soon moved to reinstate plurality for all local government polls in either single or multi-member wards.

In terms of electoral focus, Robyn has lived in her home town of Bridgetown, the 'heart' of the South West, but to help cover the geographic expanse of her region, she established an electorate office in Albany, said to be the 'heart' of the Great Southern, leading to her claim that she is able to 'get the best of both worlds'. Perth is three hours from Bridgetown and Albany is a further three hours from Bridgetown, which means she gets to see a great deal of the electorate, even making the claim 'it is not unusual for me to stop the car, hop over a fence and talk to a farmer working in his paddock'.<sup>12</sup> It was just another strategy helping to fulfil one of her initial roles as the shadow spokesperson for the Great Southern (and Heritage).

Another of Robyn's shadow Ministry portfolios was Child Protection. In 2005 she successfully called for the establishment of a Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Assessment Procedures by the Department for Community Development. As the chairperson of the committee, which produced a comprehensive report including 25 recommendations, she was able to become fully acquainted with the adequacy of foster care arrangements, as well as aspects of the department's 'procedures and practices'.<sup>13</sup> Then as part of her annual Performance Review Booklet, she was able to inform branch members how 'I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 789.

<sup>12</sup> Hon Robyn McSweeney, Performance Review Booklet, January 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Assessment Procedures by the Department for Community Development (Hon Robyn McSweeney Chair), Legislative Council, August 2006.

continue to pursue the State over child protection issues and I am relentless [in the] pursuit of justice for under privileged children'.<sup>14</sup> Also at hand were a 2006 Ombudsman's report and the 2007 review of the Department for Community Development by Prudence Ford.

As anticipated, the portfolios of child protection and community services fell to Robyn, as did seniors and volunteering, when the 'Alliance' came to government in September 2008. In February 2009 women's interests was added, as was youth in December 2010. This was a taxing range of portfolios, with the Minister being consistently reported in the media and speaking frequently in the Legislative Council. An example of a very important item of legislative action was the Children and Community Services Amendment Bill 2010 of which the first part provided for the establishment of a secure-care facility for children and young people at extreme risk for whom it was considered no other option was available to manage that risk. Secondly, in line with policy foreshadowed during the 2008 election campaign, the Bill followed the UK example in providing for the introduction of special guardianship orders for children who, for various reasons, were unable to live permanently in the care of their own families. The Minister had indicated that in broad terms the Bill drew largely on Victoria's model and that some legislative development had taken place under previous Governments.<sup>15</sup> Another campaign intention had been an amendment to the child placement principles, with a requirement that placement decisions be made for Aboriginal children that were in the best interests of the child. The legislation was passed with a feature of the long parliamentary debate revealing the complexity of the issues was the willingness of the Minister to respond positively to the constructive contributions by Labor MLCs Sue Ellery and Linda Savage, Nationals member Wendy Duncan, as well as Greens member Alison Xamon (qqqq.v).<sup>16</sup> This was one debate which to a large extent was conducted and carried by female representatives in the Upper House.

A very challenging matter of government policy for which Minister Robyn McSweeney was a key parliamentary and media spokesperson for the 'Alliance' Government was the so called Redress WA scheme. The latter was supposed to be a powerful symbolic response and apology for the horrendous experiences that were suffered by many young people who were abused and neglected while in State care. Although it was recognised that any amount of compensation was unlikely to be sufficient to cover the anguish and despair of many of the Redress applicants, Robyn was placed in the centre of the media debate to respond to criticism that the Government had decided to nearly halve the maximum payments which had initially been mooted at about \$80 000. This reduction had been justified by the claim that the former Labor Government had not allocated sufficient resources for the scheme. In a public demonstration of hostility to the government decision, a former spokeswoman for the Adult Survivors of Child Abuse, Michelle Stubbs, who was reportedly offered payment far less than the new maximum, handed back the letter of apology Mr Barnett had signed in recognition of her abuse and neglect, and specifically was very critical of Minister McSweeney's actions, including the fact that she had been contacted and informed by the Minister only on the day of the public announcement. The Minister on Fairfax Radio in early September 2011 was empathetic and even emotional in expressing her concern for those who had suffered, but contended in the position of adhering to the principle of defending a Cabinet decision.<sup>17</sup> Some months later when the Labor Opposition Leader in the Council, Sue Ellery, moved a motion

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<sup>14</sup> Hon Robyn McSweeney, Performance Review Booklet, January 2008.

<sup>15</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 23 September 2010, pp. 7219–7221.

<sup>16</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 16 November 2010, pp. 8756–8767; pp. 8775–8798.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/wester-australia/miniter-robyn-msweeney-in-te..30/11/2011>.

seeking the Government ‘to revisit’ its decision of a maximum \$45 000 payout, Robyn responded by saying in part:

Many Redress WA applicants have come up to me when I have been out and given me a hug. They have told me what they have done with the money and the difference it has made to them. But more often than not, they tell me that, finally, they are believed. Redress is a scheme that I am proud of. It is one that our government implemented in the fairest way possible for all applicants. Yes, I acknowledge that some people were not happy with the payment they received, but Redress WA did a brilliant job of delivering and of making everyone who rang up and everyone who was seen feel as though they were a very important person, and they are.<sup>18</sup>

Robyn’s parliamentary contribution has been extensive, including a long tenure on the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, and her record as a Minister has been vital and substantial in a range of challenging portfolios. With four children, external degree studies, a range of employment positions mostly in areas of personal interest and commitment, and an extensive record of community involvement, she has demonstrated on behalf of country women in particular how to ‘make a difference’. There is good reason to believe that Albert Edmund would have been ‘proud to know that his native-born Western Australian great grand-daughter’ was a member of Parliament.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

Every 10 years I write a letter to myself to set down on paper what I would like to achieve within that time span. The first letter was from 1982 to 1992 and spanned from when I was 25 to 35 and this was mostly about family and children. The second letter was from 1992 to 2002 from when I was 35 to 45 and in this letter I had said that by the time I opened this on my birthday, I wanted to be in Parliament as the Liberal member for the South West in the Legislative Council. I was sworn into the thirty-sixth Parliament on 21 May 2001—well before that letter was opened. I have written another letter from 2002 to 2012 when I was 45 to 55. At the time of writing this, that letter will remain unopened until my birthday in October of this year, but I do know that I wrote that I wanted to be the Minister for what is now known as Child Protection and Women’s Interests. For the past three years I have been the Minister for Child Protection, Community Services, and Seniors and Volunteering. The portfolios of Women’s Interests and Youth were given to me during those three years.

I am asked frequently why I wanted to go into politics and what was the passion driving me.

When John F. Kennedy was shot, I was about five years old and I remember when my dad came home from work, I ran up the driveway to tell him that the President of the United States had been shot. I knew that it was such a shocking event even at that age. I would have had no understanding of who he was or what he represented; it was more the actions of those around me and my understanding that this was a very important and sad event.

I was always aware of events that happened in the community and on a worldwide scale.

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<sup>18</sup> WAPD(LC), 27 June 2012, p. 4335.

<sup>19</sup> WAPD(LC), 31 May 2001, p. 791.

In the earlier part of the century one of my uncles was an MLC and then went into the Senate for 10 years where he died whilst being a member<sup>20</sup>. My family has always been interested in Liberal politics and many of us have a social conscience.

It was not until I had my own children that I became very outspoken about social issues and worked hard in the community to make it a better place for them and others. I had four children in five years, Kristy, Jennifer, Jason and Holly, and was kept very busy. My husband, Michael, worked in the Middle East for months at a time so I studied to keep my brain active.

When my youngest was three years old, I went back to school and sat for the TEE, which was a very hard year for me, studying externally and looking after four young children, but I passed and went on to university.

I did a full-time degree in politics, philosophy and sociology and completed it in four years.

I then went into local government and did two terms and within that same period I was asked to go on State Government boards, which I did and in the same period worked for Family and Children's Services doing the contract social work around the South West. When my time in local government had finished, I was still on government boards and in between contract social work, I coordinated the New Opportunities for Women program at TAFE.

This work that I did voluntarily and for pay gave me the many skills that I knew I needed to become an effective politician. I loved helping people and I had a great understanding of disadvantaged people. The children from disadvantaged families always tugged at my heart because they did not ask to be born into that situation and have to cope with some terrible events that no child should ever suffer.

I had a poster made up and on it are the words 'Children need to be loved, seen, encouraged, praised, valued, helped, heard, cherished, nurtured, appreciated, respected, supported, protected, admired, enjoyed, hugged and complimented'.

The women in the Liberal Party have always supported and encouraged me, as have the men. I have held many positions throughout the years in the party and this culminated in my being elected third vice-president of the State Liberal Party. It was the first time in the history of the party that two women were elected vice-presidents of the state party.

When I first entered Parliament in 2001 in the Legislative Council, there was only one other Liberal woman, Hon Barbara Scott (q.v.). I had taken the seat previously held by Muriel Patterson (q.v.) and she was the first female whip in the Western Australian Parliament. Both these women contributed over many years to the betterment of our society.

I am now pleased to report that the Legislative Council has for the first time in history and any Parliament in Australia almost equal numbers of men and women.

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<sup>20</sup> William Carroll, a farmer in Tammin at the time, was elected to the Legislative Council at a by election as a Country Party member for the East Province in August 1923 but was defeated in the biennial election for the seat in May 1924. At the second attempt he was elected to the Senate in November 1925 taking his seat in July 1926 and he remained in the Senate until his death in Sydney in May 1936.

I now find myself to be the longest serving Liberal woman in the current State Parliament and this is only my eleventh year.

When I look back at the women politicians who have gone before me, I am in awe of them. The conditions that they put up with and the male-dominated culture that they had to operate in was terrible, especially in the early part of the century.

These women paved the way for me to be able to take my place in the Parliament with better conditions and a changing culture.

Being a woman in Parliament is never easy, as we have to find a way to be a mother, a wife and a daughter, as well as serving our electorate and being a public figure all at the same time. The hours are not particularly friendly for families and that certainly is the same for my male colleagues.

I have a home in Bridgetown, an electorate office in Albany and Parliament is in Perth, as is my ministerial office, so I have always covered much distance.

My passion is children. I wear my heart on my sleeve at times and I will never change in that respect. Adults who have been hurt as children still carry that hurt inside them and I understand that. Sexual abuse or any abuse against children is abhorrent and yet it continues in alarming numbers.

I have been fortunate enough to have been made a Minister and been given the social portfolios that I have the background for and really love.

All I ever wanted to do was to make society a better place for the people who live in Western Australia.

Now as a Minister, I have put into practice the policies that I wanted and needed to for children in the Government's care. This is a very challenging portfolio but very rewarding when you can change a child's life for the better.

One of the changes that I am most proud of was to enact guardianship laws so that foster parents can apply to the courts to keep a child in their care until that child is 18 or older to give stability to their lives.

We no longer have hostels but four or five-bedroom homes that have space and gardens around them with 24-hour care for our young people who can't live at home. I would love to be able to say that child protection is no longer needed in our society but that is wishful thinking. All around Australia the number of children coming into care is increasing and we now have over 34,000 children in care.

During my nearly 11 years in Parliament, I have tackled many issues too numerous to mention. Being a rural member, one issue I became heavily involved in was the environment amendment legislation that would have had a detrimental effect on all farmers had it gone through. The Labor Party did not want farmers clearing along a fence line or chopping down a dead tree. It was so ludicrous and extreme that I had to become involved. From Opposition, I managed to get a better, but by no means perfect, outcome.

I have been involved in politics from Opposition and now Government and both are very hard work. However, in Government, you get the opportunity to put policy into action and to make a real difference.

I am very proud of the Government that I am a part of, and to be given the opportunity to sit in Cabinet and make executive decisions has been and continues to be an enormous privilege.

I have only been afforded this opportunity by the people of the South West who I am deeply indebted to for preselecting me as their representative.

Women can do anything they want to, and my mother Coralie gave me this saying many years ago—‘The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.’