



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

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

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## MARY (MAY) ALICE HOLMAN



MLA Forrest 3 April 1925–20 March 1939 (ALP). Member Royal Commission inquiring into Sanitation, Slum Clearance, Health and Housing Regulations.

In April 1925 May Holman became Australia's first woman Australian Labor Party parliamentarian and only the second woman to sit in any Australian Parliament when she was returned unopposed for the Legislative Assembly seat of Forrest at a by-election consequent upon the death of her father, J.B. Holman: the latter had held the seat since December 1923 and had previously represented Murchison from 1901 to 1921. May was subsequently to become Australia's first woman MP (and the first in the British Commonwealth) to serve more than 10 years in Parliament, and at the time of her tragic death in March 1939 resulting from a car accident she had just been re-elected for a fifth full term in the Legislative Assembly. In the subsequent by-election her brother Edward (Ted) became the third successive member of the family to represent the seat.

May was born on 18 July 1893 in Broken Hill, the eldest of nine surviving children. She migrated to Western Australia with her mother when she was only three years old to join her father at Cue on the Murchison goldfields. May was educated at the Dominican convent in Cue and at Dongara before moving to the Sacred Heart Convent in the metropolitan area in 1905 where she developed further her talents in music achieving licentiates in both singing and pianoforte. Between 1911 and 1914 she worked as a typiste in Trades Hall and as a pianist in cinemas at Kalgoorlie and was then employed with the *Westralian Worker*. After a short-lived marriage to a Labor MLA, May lived on a farm for a time and then toured the state with her musical revue group, giving concerts and raising money for troop comforts and distress charities. In 1916 she had played the piano at Perth Railway station as the troops left for the war and nearly 20 years later she founded and conducted the Labor Choral Union.

From 1918 May worked closely with her father in his capacity as secretary of the Timber Workers Union and was acting secretary of the union at the time of her father's death from complications arising from an appendix operation. As it was, to win ALP preselection for her father's seat she had to win a contest with 11 men, and in the course of her first campaign she

‘travelled between the mill towns on the ‘cow-catcher’ of the timber trains and spoke from fallen logs’<sup>1</sup>.

Although rated a skilful debater by her colleagues, May addressed the House relatively infrequently during her years in Parliament. When she did, sometimes at considerable length, it was often in connection with matters concerning the timber industry and other issues affecting her electorate which also included orchardists, rail workers, potato growers and dairy farmers. On such occasions, as in her Inaugural Speech while moving the Address-in-Reply in July 1925, she offered a genuine insight into the living and working conditions of many of those she represented in Parliament:

The conditions of life on some of the mills, especially at the landings are very dreadful. In many of the centres there are no sanitary arrangements whatever. Sometimes pits are supplied for the convenience of single men, but for the married people they have no conveniences—they have to supply their own. I have slept in a bush hut and counted the holes in the roof. There have not been more than 14 sheets of iron over my head but I have counted 63 holes in them. Fortunately for myself I have not been there in the wet weather.<sup>2</sup>

A few weeks later, while speaking on the Industrial Arbitration Act Amendment Bill, May made more specific reference to her personal background in the industry:

I consider I am qualified to speak on this Bill as I have had a good deal of experience of industrial matters. Nearly all my working life I have been confidential clerk employed by the Timber Workers Union, and most of that time was spent in dealing with arbitration matters, helping my late father, and doing work in the office ... In 1914 I had experience of my first case, and from 1918 onwards have had further experience.<sup>3</sup>

During her parliamentary career May was very active in such organisations as the Young Labor League and the Central Executive of Labor Women and she was also a member of the latter’s interstate executive. Indeed, it can be said that throughout her career her name was virtually synonymous with that of Labor Women, and she travelled interstate on a number of occasions to support other Labor women’s organisations. In 1930 she was an alternate delegate to the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva, acting as an observer at the British Labour Party Conference, and subsequently she served as Australian correspondent to the League’s World Committee on issues concerned with maternal and child welfare. At other times she was a member of the Board of the Perth General Hospital and was prominent in the State Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations. In 1938 at her instigation a royal commission was established of which she was appointed a member to inquire into sanitation, slum clearance and health and housing regulations in Perth.

The name of May Holman is widely revered in the labour movement. In 1935 Holman House was opened at Holyoake in the timber milling area as the first Labor Women’s Club rooms in the Commonwealth and more recently the May Holman Centre in St Georges Terrace stands as a tribute to one whose memory, in the words of future Prime Minister John Curtin, ‘will have a precious place in the annals of our cause’.

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<sup>1</sup> Judyth Watson (ed.), *We Hold Up Half the Sky. The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament*, (Perth, 1994), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 30 July 1925, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 2 September 1925, p. 676.

*Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career*

May's parliamentary speeches were frequently made on the basis of her close familiarity with the issues raised on behalf of unions before industrial tribunals, as was the case in her speech on the Industrial Arbitration Act Amendment Bill in 1925:

I am glad the Bill provides for the retrospective principle. I could quote many instances where this principle would have been a great boon to the workers. In the timber workers' case the claim was lodged in February, 1919, but the verdict was not given until December, 1920, and the award was not finally signed until 1921. In that instance the basic wage was made retrospective. It is true the employers did give two voluntary increases during that time, but these did not amount to what was set out in the award finally delivered by the court. If awards were made retrospective it would do away with the efforts of employers to delay the court and prevent the payment of the rate to the workers, thus doing them out of the wages to which they are justly entitled ... I was in the [Federal Arbitration] Court in 1923 when for weeks on end the employers dealt with technicalities, with the result that there was much delay in bringing the case to finality. First one point and then another was raised. The employers brought up the question of jurisdiction, and kept the argument going while the workers were waiting for the award and were being deprived of the benefits they might otherwise have enjoyed.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1926 May delivered an 'eloquent and able' speech for over two hours in support of the Government's Timber Industry Regulation Bill, for the introduction of which she had worked hard during her short time in politics:

When I say that Western Australia is behind the other States and countries in respect of its timber industry, I am not saying something I have not good reason to believe ... Perhaps in the first instance when the mill is erected an inspector may visit it and give a certificate. Additions may be made to the bill and nothing is done. It is ridiculous to say that machinery is inspected by the boiler inspector. Firstly, the machine inspector sends word that he intends to visit a mill. Before a boiler can be examined, the mill has to be stopped. The inspector has no chance of examining the running of machinery when the mill is not in operation, or saying whether it is dangerous or not to the employees should he arrive, say, on the Saturday afternoon, or during the week when the mill would have to be stopped to permit him to examine the boiler...I understand from men who have had 28 years of experience in the industry that no inspector ever inspects the machinery other than the boiler or the engine. In New Zealand the Factories Act governs the inspection of mills ... They go much further in New Zealand than we are endeavouring to do ...

Surely it is not too much to expect that those who are making big profits out of the industry should do something towards saving the lives of those who work for them ... Any member who considers the terrible percentage of accidents in this industry will, I am sure, not refuse his assistance to get those men a small measure of protection.<sup>5</sup>

During the Depression, in a rare personal reference, May told the House:

I suppose I have been brought up in politics for I have been in politics with my father and my friends ever since I was a little girl.

Hon P. Collier: That is not a long time.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> WAPD(LA) 19 October 1926, pp. 1461 and 1486.

Miss HOLMAN: It is too long to talk about. I suppose I am a freak in my sex, because everybody knows my age and I do not care. But it is amusing to look back and remember that some years ago the I.W.W. was the terrible bogey in this country. Then we had red-ragism, and the Socialists, and the socialist tiger and then the Soviet, and now we have the Communists. There is always somebody or something of that sort to point to ... I say the people of this State, when unemployed and hungry and suffering unjust conditions, should not be characterised as Communists merely because they kick and refuse to be treated as dogs.<sup>6</sup>

May spoke relatively infrequently on gender issues. On one occasion when replying to an interjection suggesting she might need a chaperone while inspecting papers with one of her political opponents she told the assembled members 'In this House I am, as has been said on a previous occasion, no lady, but simply a member'. During the same speech she made passing reference to the question of equal pay for equal work:

One point I will refer to is the statement made by one member sitting on the Government side of the House who said that girls should not be employed to the exclusion of men who desired work. The remedy for that is to give girls equal pay for equal work. There are many girls who are supporting their families and who have hope chance whatever of living on the wages paid to them ... The employers should provide equal pay for equal work, thereby giving the girls an equal chance with the men. If that were done all would be dealt with on their merits.<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion during her last year in Parliament she entered the debate on the Jury Act Amendment Bill, a private member's Bill moved by Florence Cardell-Oliver (q.v.), seeking to provide women with the right to sit on juries but without compulsion. In this connexion, a Labor member had moved an amendment providing that any female would need to make formal application to be excused from jury duty. While Mrs Cardell-Oliver described the amendment as designed to make the bill 'totally unworkable', May contended:

The amendment is quite a good one. I believe in equality of the sexes and that women should have the same citizenship rights as men. As a matter of fact the Labor Party platform includes full citizenship rights for women ... Women are to be given the right to sit on juries if they so desire, but those that do not wish to seek that publicity have the right to refuse to serve ... There is no more inconvenience involved in a woman's signing her name to a form stating that she does not wish to serve on a jury than there is in her casting a compulsory vote at a Federal or State election.<sup>8</sup>

During her terms as proxy delegate to the League of Nations in 1930 May wrote a series of 19 articles under the heading 'Remarks of an Inexperienced Traveller abroad' for publication by the Melbourne Herald group. She also wrote a number of letters to her family and extracts from one of these, written in Florence on 26 August 1930,<sup>9</sup> and relating some of her experiences in Rome, appear below:

Went back home to dinner after having seen the grounds of the Villa Borghese. Villa in Italy does not mean the same as in Australia—it means an estate and the rich people have places called Villa this and Villa that. We also saw the gates of the old Roman walls. It is really

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<sup>6</sup> WAPD(LA) 31 August 1932, p. 321.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 320–321.

<sup>8</sup> WAPD (LA), 19 October 1938, pp. 1478–1479.

<sup>9</sup> This letter is one of a collection of letters and articles which were edited by Judyth Watson (q.v.) and published in August 1995 under the auspices of the Australian Labor Party (WA Branch) with the title *Remarks of an Inexperienced Traveller Abroad*.

marvellous when you come to think of it that these walls, gates and ruins of places have been there since before Christ in many cases.

After dinner we went around the street and had a drink at an open air cafe. The seats are spread right along the street and an orchestra plays classical selections. It is really enjoyable to sit there in the cooler air and listen. The Italians pick out the foreigners at once and not once have I been addressed in Italian—it is usually broken English. And they say sometimes, what part of America do you come from, you speak so softly? Naturally, as Australian born and proud of it, we get a bit annoyed to be mistaken for Americans.

Miss Ohlfsen [Dora Ohlfsen, an Australian artist who had lived in Italy for many years] was very surprised at my being a member of Parliament ... How do you fight elections, you are so soft (Soft meaning gentle)? ...

At a quarter to one of the Saturday some more Australians and myself were to have an audience with the Pope ... If we had been staying longer or been able to give more notice we would have had an absolutely private audience but as it was we had a semi-private one ... We all felt very thrilled and excited to think we were actually going to see His Holiness and finally he came in ... He was a fine looking elderly man dressed in white ... after going right around the room he blessed us all ...

We were able to get the English newspapers of two days before and heard that Australia had won the Ashes and that Mr Scullin [the Australian Prime Minister] was not too well ...

Now a word about dress—dresses are longer and the majority (except us mad foreigners) wear long sleeves. If you do not wear a cape of the same material, you must wear a cape on the dress at the shoulders ... In the Churches women are exhorted (in Italian notices) not to wear indecent dresses to 'the scandal of their fellows and to invoke the wrath of God.'

May concluded the letter with a story about when with the aid of a dictionary she tried to order a drink and a sandwich in Florence. She asked the attendant for:

... 'uno piccolo birra x Italiano ed panino grazido' which being translated into Australian is a small bottle of Italian beer and a sandwich. Well I got the drink alright but for the 'panino gravido' I got pen and ink???????? (sic)