



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

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

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LISA LORAIN BAKER



MLA Maylands from 6 September 2008 (ALP). Member Parliamentary Services Committee from 2008; Education and Health Standing Committee from 2009.

In September 2008 when Lisa Baker won election to the Legislative Assembly for Maylands she became the fourth in a sequence of Labor members who represented the seat following its return to the ALP camp in 1968 after one term served by Liberal incumbent and former world amateur billiards champion Bob Marshall. All three of Lisa's Labor predecessors had served in Labor Governments while one, Peter Dowding, was Premier for two years, and another, John Harman, was Speaker for three years. However, Lisa and her immediate predecessor Judith Edwards (q.v.) are the only two women ever to have held the seat which was created for the first time in 1930.

Lisa Loraine Baker was born in Perth on 26 August 1958, the daughter of Thomas Bruce Baker, a wartime bomber pilot, and June Loraine James. Prior to undertaking university studies Lisa attended Helena Primary School and then Perth College, Mercedes and Governor Stirling Senior High School. She graduated from the Western Australian Institute of Technology (later Curtin University) with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Graduate Diploma in Development Studies and at the time of her election to Parliament she had been chief executive officer of the Western Australian Council of Social Service since 2002. Previously she had held various positions as director with state government departments and in the 1990s she was Director Business Services with the National Native Title Tribunal. Lisa also had various contracts with United Nations agencies across Asia and the Pacific. In the union movement she was a member of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union and first joined the ALP in 1990, rejoining in 2006. Between 1998 and 2001 she was a Mundaring shire councillor and in 2007 she served on the Human Rights Consultation Committee established by then Attorney General Jim McGinty and chaired by Fred Chaney to investigate the issues involved in legislating for human rights.

Lisa has always been a strong community volunteer. She was a member of Perth Rotary Club and she also founded the non-government organisation the Women's Economic Development Organisation which operated for ten years over 1980 and 1990. Lisa has been a board member of the Midland Business Enterprise Centre, Swan College of TAFE (now Polytechnic) and is currently a member of the Business and Professional Women's Association.

In her recreation time, she continues her strong commitment to the sport of dressage. She is a longstanding member of the Equestrian Federation of Australia (Equestrian WA) and has chaired the dressage sub-committee of that federation. Lisa continues to serve as a national A level dressage judge and hopes to have the time to continue to develop her expertise in the highly technical and beautiful sport.

In her Inaugural Speech to Parliament in November 2008 Lisa paid tribute to her predecessor Judith Edwards, suggesting that she looked to Judy 'as a model of leadership, integrity, excellence and tenacity'.¹ With reference to her electorate Lisa described it as representing 'all the complexities and potential of a diverse city electorate', for example, with a built and cultural environment including:

... everything from traditional architecture and historic sites...to vibrant café and restaurant strips [and] modern commercial developments like Centro Galleria. It is home to many strong and established community, cultural and ethnic groups.²

Her central concern, however, was with the public disillusionment with politicians no matter which party they represented. One of her immediate tasks therefore she considered was to contribute directly to these communities:

We must be involved and engaged, and hold high standards for our own personal behaviour.³

From the commencement of parliamentary sittings Lisa was elected as an Acting Speaker. She became a member of the Parliamentary Services Committee in November 2008 and in May 2009 she was elected to the Standing Committee on Education and Health. Two and half years later speaking to a debate on the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill she suggested that as a new member of Parliament 'one of the great joys has been to understand that committees offer so many opportunities to learn about particular subjects'.⁴ With particular reference to a report completed by her committee into 'Prevention and Treatment Services for Alcohol and Illicit Drug Problems in Western Australia' she said that:

... it was very clear to all committee members that co-morbidity is the biggest issue that must be dealt with—that is the combination of illicit drugs, licit drugs and alcohol. A combination of one, two or three of these factors can be fatal.⁵

In 2010 Lisa was elected as the Chairperson for the Australia Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. In the first year of her three-year term (2011–2013) as chairperson she has introduced 'w.comm'

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 November 2008, p. 104.

² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 8 September 2011, p. 7130.

⁵ *Ibid.*

which is a competition designed to introduce young women to the functions and role of the Commonwealth, arranged a study tour for women parliamentarians from Asia and the Pacific to visit Australian legislatures and is looking at ways to strengthen Australia's partnering arrangements with Pacific Island countries.

In parliamentary debate, while speaking to a report of the Economics and Industry Committee concerning the consequences of alcohol consumption Lisa has pointed to the impact of poverty and homelessness on vulnerable members of her community. She has clearly connected instances of anti-social behaviour with drug and alcohol abuse and poor mental health. This, she says, is a problem being experienced by vulnerable people across Western Australia, and certainly in the Maylands community.⁶

Lisa has continued to raise the concerns of her electorate about the 'failing health of the Swan River'. She has repeatedly called for highly soluble nutrients used in the production of many fertilisers to be banned, for urgent action to protect the banks of the river and the fish and animals living in the river, and for resources to restore water quality, stop further erosion and revegetate the river banks.⁷

Also central to her perspective is community safety and wellbeing. She has spoken on law and order and specific issues affecting the police force, including sentencing provisions arising from assaults on police officers and again on the terms of employment and roles performed by auxiliary police officers.⁸ Soon after entering Parliament she participated in debate on a Bill designed to provide for mandatory sentencing for persons inflicting bodily harm on serving police officers. Both in this debate, and on that pertaining to auxiliary police officers, she referred to the fact that she has members of her immediate family who are serving police officers and as a consequence she was 'completely supportive of making sure that our police force is looked after and its officers are given the right kind of protection on the job'.⁹

Seven months later speaking on the Bill to provide for the appointment of auxiliary police officers she deplored the absence of a 'well-defined job description' for the auxiliary officers leaving as an open question 'what their training or their level of risk will be'.¹⁰

Still on the issue of law and order, Lisa has raised the issue of her support for 'localised and community policing' and raised importance of visible police presence and local knowledge in keeping the police connected to local residents and tackling crime.

Lisa's experience in the community and work with the vulnerable gives weight to her contributions highlighting the integral role of the community sector in meeting the needs of 'the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our neighbourhoods'. More specifically, as outlined on her website 'aged care, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and family violence are issues that concern me most' and she welcomed appointment as the Opposition spokesperson on community mental health services.

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 23 June 2011, pp. 4782ff.

⁷ See, for example, *WAPD(LA)*, 11 November 2008, p. 106; 12 November 2009, p. 8969.

⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 13 October 2009 p. 7885ff.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 17 March 2009, p. 1939.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 13 October 2009. p. 7886.

Related to this was her constant concern with the conditions of employment for those in the public sector. In June 2010 speaking on the Public Sector Reform Bill she took the opportunity at the outset to refer to her career transition from ‘a position with the private sector to one with the community sector and then one with the public sector’.¹¹ The central core of her contribution in the debate centred on her concerns that government policy amounted to the outsourcing of ‘a whole bunch of services’ from the public sector to the community sector’ and by endeavouring to do this on the cheap thus ‘undercutting public services and doing the dirty on the community sector’. In her view:

... if the government intends to outsource a number of human services to the community sector, and also use secondment arrangements or redeployment arrangements to try to encourage people who have perhaps been displaced from their public sector jobs into the community sector, there must be wage parity clauses wrapped up in that arrangement otherwise everybody will be driven down to the bottom level of poverty ... That is just not a situation that should be allowed to happen in our country with its rich economy.¹²

In this regard she considered the contract provisions for the management of Acacia prison the model in that wage parity clauses were written into the contract. Thus she concluded:

I suppose the opposition would aim to develop a public sector that is a preferred employer—the first choice as an employer ... We cannot get that by undermining conditions, by bringing in very punitive measures, by undermining the security of staff in their position, and by not, on balance, rewarding good performance and great outcomes such as I have seen delivered by many public servants who I have been privileged to work alongside.¹³

An emerging area of special interest for Lisa is to improve the welfare of animals, both stock and companion animals in our society. She writes and speaks on this issue and has taken on the role of co-convenor of the Parliamentary Friends of the RSPCA.

Lisa’s range of experience in the voluntary, community and public sectors have made her well equipped to research and debate on a range of issues with particular reference to quality of life issues affecting the community at large.

Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career

Lisa Baker made her decision to enter the Western Australian Parliament after several decades working in the business, community and voluntary sector. Her experience in working as an advocate for the community sector has flavoured many of her parliamentary speeches. She has pointed to issues such as the undercutting of wage levels for staff employed in the community sector linked to outsourcing of services from government departments. She accepted the invitation to seek endorsement for the 2008 election after consultation with outgoing member Judy Edwards and rapidly built on the connections she had formed within the Maylands electorate. It is evident from her inaugural speech that the make-up of the constituency and the particular needs of the electors remain central to her parliamentary career.

¹¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 22 June 2010, p. 4276.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4277.

When she was growing up, Lisa's parents worked hard to ensure that all three of their children would be given the very best educational opportunities available. Her initial choice of academic career, as a psychologist, has contributed to and informed the direction she eventually took in the world of employment. After a few years in the commercial world she made the decision which led her through work with various government departments and then into international work with various United Nations agencies, then to the National Native Title Tribunal, moving to the six years she served as Chief Executive Officer of the Western Australian Council of Social Service immediately prior to her election to Parliament. Equally significant however was a very active life in a range of community volunteer organisations and in her view the range of experience and commitment she brought to the Parliament.

As a woman entering the Legislative Assembly Lisa was confronted with the adversarial style of debate and procedure which she identified strongly as the consequence of Parliament for so long functioning as a man's world. In her view even if one was skilled in public speaking before entering Parliament, taking part in parliamentary debates was a very different, challenging and frequently off-putting process. She feels that while it took some time for her to settle into the environment of the Parliament, she is able to express her views genuinely and persuasively, notwithstanding the adversarial challenges. This is all the more important to her because Lisa sees her parliamentary career, and her membership of the ALP, as providing the opportunity to take part in decision making which really will bring benefits and rectify challenges experienced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community. In recent years her focus of interest has moved to include issues of animal welfare and in the context of her passionate love for equestrian sports she sees much room for improvement in the treatment of performance and sport horses and, indeed, all horses and ensuring their welfare.

Looking ahead Lisa believes that the ALP's quota system for endorsement of female candidates continues to have a positive impact on attracting women into politics. To support this contention she simply points to the still relatively low level of representation in 2011 of women in the ranks of the non-Labor parties in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly. The ALP has done better though even in the ALP women leaders or even deputy leaders (in the lower House at least) have been few and far between.

One area of concern for Lisa has been the effectiveness of her work on standing committees. She welcomed committee membership as a means of enabling her to learn more about topics under review and to establish effective working relationships with members from opposing political parties and this has certainly been her experience. Her main concern is to ensure that each of the roles in committees is clear and well understood by all members. Her long experience in developing effective work teams has underscored the importance of each team member being aware of their roles and responsibilities, especially the role of the chairperson.

Like many a member before her Lisa has discovered that notwithstanding the drawbacks of being in Opposition it is often a distinct advantage for a new member to sit on the non-government benches. The opportunity to take part in debate and to pursue particular interests on the floor of the House are much greater than when the new member is obliged to operate within a much tighter framework. On the government benches there are few opportunities to pursue particular areas of interest.

Lisa's vision for the future is to be able to sit on the government benches. Certainly she believes that as a consequence of her first three years in Parliament she has been able to gain a greatly extended knowledge of the 'new and very unique and privileged environment' which she entered in September 2008. She recognises that her role as the Member for Maylands carries with it significant power and privilege and also great responsibility. Ultimately she believes she 'is employed by and accountable to the people of Maylands'.