



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

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

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MIA JANE DAVIES



MLC Agricultural Region from 22 May 2009 (NPA). Member Standing Committee on Legislation from 4 June 2009. Secretary Parliamentary National Party from 22 June 2009.

Not only was Mia Davies one of the youngest women elected to the Legislative Council, having been born in Perth on 3 November 1978, but she is one of the very few to represent the same party (National Party) and region (Agricultural Region) as her former MLC father, Dexter Davies. Youth tempted Mia to recount in her Inaugural Speech her fun times, and extensive work experience in Europe, as well as her preparedness to stand in the rain and watch Jimmy Barnes perform at the Doodlakine pub and to have a strategy for getting tickets to an AC/DC concert.¹ Each stemmed from her interests in travel and music, including playing the guitar and flute music. As her election campaign overlapped with Barack Obama's quest for the White House, she spoke of Obama's message of 'hope, change and progress'.² In fact, Mia likened Obama's message to that of the National Party in Western Australia, as well as making the point 'that people living in regional Western Australia were feeling neglected and forgotten'.³ Mia was confident that the 'Yes we can' National Party campaign, led by party leader, Brendon Grylls, and president, Wendy Duncan, could redress the situation in the country areas with 'royalties for region' as a key in the party platform.

Although 6 September 2008 was the poll date, in the immediate aftermath of which it appeared that Mia was the third National Party candidate (behind Max Trenorden and Philip Gardiner) to be elected on the National Party Agricultural Region ticket, she then had to experience a long nervous wait before her election was confirmed, enabling her to assume her place in the thirty-eighth Parliament on 22 May 2009. Remarkably, it was not until two days prior, on 20 May 2009, that the Court of Disputed Returns finally rejected a bid by former MLC Anthony Fels, and Family First candidate for the Agricultural Region, to prevent Mia from taking her seat. In broad terms, Fels had claimed that 5,405 ballot papers within the

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 23 June 2009, p. 5354.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5353.

³ *Ibid.*

Central Wheatbelt district were delivered in unsealed ballot boxes and packages. A second aspect of the challenge was that Mia's National Party candidature and post-election employment was variously in breach of the Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899, and the Electoral Act 1907, together with its regulations. This was despite the fact Davies had reportedly sought advice on the matter and been informed by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet director, Mal Wauchope, that she was able to hold a particular employment contract in the interregnum between election day and the first day of sitting of the Legislative Council. Significantly, too, on December 2008, the Legislative Assembly had concurred with this ruling that a motion in the Legislative Council that the relevant section 38 of the Constitution 'be disregarded', which had effectively enabled her to be re-instated as the member-elect.⁴ It was a salient factor for her future that this motion had been supported by the Leader of the House, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Greens (WA) in the Legislative Council. It is rare, though not unprecedented, that the celebration of election to Parliament is held in abeyance for a member for nearly six months. However, although only 31 years of age, Mia had already acquired an understanding of some of the 'cut and thrust of politics'. Her professional career had begun in Hon Max Trenorden's office when he was the National Party leader. She was educationally well equipped for the leader's office roles as researcher and receptionist, as she had earlier completed a degree in marketing and media at Murdoch University following her primary school years at Wyalkatchem District High School and secondary education at Methodist Ladies College. She had also served as a senior policy officer for Brendon Grylls when he became party leader. This was followed by a short time as an executive officer for the North West Chamber of Minerals and Energy, as well as director of MJD Consulting.

Significantly, Mia was steeped in a country community cultural fabric with some families in the district recording nearly a century of settlement in which leading Country Party and National Party pioneering names were to the fore. This listing included former prominent MLCs Sir Leslie Diver and Eric Charlton, a close neighbour, who had convinced her father, Dexter Davies, to attend a branch meeting to begin the family's active political involvement. Her father was State President of the Nationals for 10 years and when Eric Charlton resigned in 1998 as an MLC, he filled the casual vacancy until 2001. Mia herself was a very engaged member of the Young Nationals, with her schoolteacher mother, Effie Davies, also strongly supportive of the party in its community activities. Indeed, in her Inaugural Speech, Mia was generous in her praise of the 'privileged' upbringing she had experienced by her parents and grandparents, including sister, Emma, and many friends. Mention, too, was made of the wisdom of Doug Cunningham from the leader's office who had taught her much, as well as Hon Murray Criddle for his advice and counsel on her decision to run as a candidate'.⁵ Appreciation was also expressed to the members 'for backing a young woman to represent this great party'.⁶

With her party having five members and the balance of power, Mia was soon called upon to play a leading part in Legislative Council debates for the National Party. Understandably, an initial focus was cast upon the royalties for regions legislation, which she considered had implications beyond the fact that an amount equal to 25 per cent of the forecast mining and petroleum royalty income for each financial year was to be quarantined in a proposed fund and

⁴ Harry Phillips, 'The 2008 Western Australian Election: The Snap Poll Blunder', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2009, vol. 24 (1), p. 238.

⁵ *WAPD (LC)*, 23 June 2009, p. 5354.

⁶ *Ibid.*

spent only in the ‘regions’. She discussed some of the immediate effects, such as the availability of funds for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Country Age Pension Fuel Card, the development of the Ord River region, boarding away from home allowances and funding encouraging small and mid-size mining companies to continue to invest in greenfield exploration.⁷ More broadly, what Mia sought to emphasise was that in her view, ‘the real story behind royalties for regions is empowerment, communities taking control of their destiny and shaping their future’. In her view, ‘the regional grants scheme, the country local government fund and funding for community resource centres [represent] a first step towards decentralised services decision making’.⁸

Speaking again several months later Mia was prepared to claim that:

Royalties for regions is not about creating a divide between the metropolitan area and the regions; it is about creating equity and making the best of what our beautiful state has to offer. We believe that what is good for the regions is, by virtue, good for the entire state.⁹

The fund was regarded as a prime example ‘of regional people punching above their weight’. It only amounted to four per cent of the entire state budget, but it was subject to the same efficiency and audit measures as every other government program.¹⁰ During the course of the passage of the royalties for regions legislation, Mia made it clear that she sought to be an informed parliamentarian with use of the internet and media coverage. She exercised restraint typical of a very experienced parliamentarian with political skills when she discussed the criticisms levelled at the royalties for region program by Robert Taylor, who at the time was a leading political critic at the *West Australian* newspaper. To paraphrase Taylor’s view, he wrote that while the Barnett Government was raising utility charges, it was ‘showering’ country areas with money for bowling clubs, walking trails, monuments, town halls, plastic cows and golf carts. Money, thought Taylor, was going to continue to flow to the country areas while in the city ‘where all the people live’, the Government has sent audit teams to scour for savings on paper clips.¹¹ Mia praised Taylor’s capacity to write ‘without fear or favour’, but sought to counter his arguments speedily and effectively.¹²

Development of the Ord River Region, where Mia had spent some two years working as an executive officer for the North West Chamber of Minerals and Energy, was another particular priority for Mia. On one contentious matter when prominent Green MLC Giz Watson (q.v.) moved a disallowance motion to prevent GM crops in the Ord, Mia indicated that the National Party did not support the move. As she indicated in the Legislative Council:

the Nationals have clearly, albeit with due cautious consideration, supported giving producers the option to grow GM crops in the Ord and to trial GM canola at selected trials around Western Australia’.¹³

She contended that GM cotton had been trialled in the Ord area for over 10 years, including a period under the previous Labor Government, and that in November 2008 the Minister for

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 25 November 2009, p. 9720.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 25 November 2009, p. 9720.

¹¹ See *West Australian*, 13 November 2009.

¹² See *WAPD(LC)*, 19 November 2009, p. 9395.

¹³ *WAPD(LC)*, 16 September 2009, p. 7102.

Agriculture and Food announced that he had signed the exemption order to allow the production of GM cotton in the Ord River irrigation area. The key was to give producers the choice to access the technology.¹⁴

Another policy of particular significance to regional Western Australia, and about which Mia made a significant contribution to the debate, arose from a motion moved by Labor MLC Kate Doust on the eve of the 2008 federal election, proposing that the Legislative Council call on the Barnett Government 'to endorse the expansion of the national broadband network proposed by the Gillard government to support business, industry and residential users across the state'.¹⁵ In response, Mia accepted that it was 'a very important issue' and that there had been 'a plethora of information' about the published plans and budgeted costings. In her words, 'it is critical infrastructure that will drive the future of a region'.¹⁶ However, she indicated that 'broadband infrastructure in regional Western Australia is sadly underdone at the moment'.¹⁷ In her view, 'it seems to be a bit eastern states heavy'.¹⁸ Moreover, she cited a constituent who asked the broader questions of whether it was going to be financially viable and whether it will be out of date and superseded before this county has paid half of it off.¹⁹

As for nearly all new members of the Legislative Council, who usually don't hold ministerial appointments, Mia immediately assumed a committee role. Her membership of the Standing Committee on Legislation from 4 June 2009 was soon to be particularly significant after the Legislative Council in November 2009 referred to it the Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill 2009. The committee firstly considered how the Bill would change the law in relation to police stop-and-search powers, as well as the policy of the Bill and the justifications for it, drawing from, among other things, the experience of the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Victoria, with similar stop-and-search powers. The controversial nature of the Bill, encompassing tension between maintaining personal liberties and expanding police powers to improve public safety, and the large volume of evidence made it necessary for the committee to seek two extensions of the reporting deadlines before an extensive report was tabled on 21 October 2009. After consideration of the issues, a majority of the committee (comprising Hons Mia Davies—National Party, Dr Sally Talbot (q.v.)—ALP, and Alison Xamon (q.v.)—Greens) could find no justification for the Bill. Against this, a minority of the committee was of the view that there may be circumstances in which the Bill could be justified.²⁰ When it became clear that the Government did not have the support of its National Party 'Alliance' partner, as expressed by Mia, together with Labor and Greens Opposition, it chose to leave the Bill on the notice paper, where in all likelihood it would remain until it lapsed at the end of the parliamentary term. It was also a striking case of the Nationals in the Legislative Council indicating that it would not necessarily rubber-stamp the legislation presented by the Barnett Government.

Committee work, speaking on a range of topics in the Legislative Council and representing a large Agricultural Region requiring regular travel across significant areas of the vast state,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7103.

¹⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 19 August 2010, p. 5783.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 5789.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5791.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Legislative Council (2010), Report 16: Standing Committee on Legislation: Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill, 2009, p. i.

taken together, lead to a demanding schedule for a contemporary member of Parliament. Mia enjoys literature, music and art and her upbringing did involve some social sport, although not to the extent practised by her father, Dexter, who was a league footballer for East Fremantle, an A grade cricketer and top athlete. However, one sporting preference she has shared with her accomplished sportsman father is ‘a love of the Fremantle Dockers’.²¹ And this is a link she can share with a sizeable percentage of her electorate. Contemporary parliamentarians like Mia, particularly in ‘the bush’, have obligations to be patrons of a vast range of local sporting teams and community bodies. Another important avenue of representation for Mia has been the members’ statement procedure conducted near the conclusion of a sitting day in the Legislative Council. On one occasion, for instance, she spoke of the launch of the Wheatbelt museums and heritage brochure, arguing:

I think in the Wheatbelt we have a tendency to play down our cultural and social achievements. There is a sense that perhaps history happens elsewhere.

Then, after recognising the value of the Cunderdin museum, and others, she observed:

Like most aspects of country life, it is heavily reliant on volunteer groups.²²

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

I was elected to the Legislative Council at the 2008 election and at the age of 30 (at the time of the election) became the youngest member in the Legislative Council and the only woman representing the Agricultural Region.

I am often asked why I’m a member of the Nationals WA, and I suppose it is an intriguing question as to why a young woman would choose to be a member of what many may still view as the ‘farmers party’. The answer is multi-layered.

First and foremost it’s because my roots and those of my family are firmly planted in regional WA. I believe the people who choose to live and work in the country, those who contribute significantly to our state and nation’s economy, deserve strong and focused representation in Parliament. Even the most passionate, persuasive and dedicated regional MP will find themselves in a minority as a member of a major political party. Being a member of the Nationals means the party is focused on one thing, and that’s regional WA.

In my short time as a member, I’ve seen representation based on the ideology of the left or right overshadow the practical differences that arise between constituents who live in the Perth metropolitan area and those who live beyond the boundaries of our capital city. So my country heritage, mixed with a pragmatic approach, probably leads me to identify with the words of John F. Kennedy when he was pressed to describe his political leanings, ‘I’m an idealist without illusions.’

There was no one particular policy that drew me to being a member of the Nationals. Having joined as a Young National, my involvement grew as I made a conscious decision to be part of something that existed solely to work on delivering a better outcome for communities like the

²¹ WAPD(LC), 23 June 2009, p. 5351.

²² WAPD(LC), 25 May 2010, p. 3216.

one I grew up in. The influence of my family and their contribution to public service has also informed some of the choices I've made as my career has progressed.

Aside from the practical and the philosophical, another reason to be a member of the Nationals WA is its policy to allow all members a conscience vote on any issue. Of course, responsibility accompanies this privilege. My view on this is that the option to exercise a conscience vote should be balanced with the option of working on consensus amongst your parliamentary colleagues.

I was elected at a turning point in the fortunes of the Nationals in Western Australia. On the eve of the 2008 state election, the party was poised to hold the balance of power in both Houses of Parliament and the prospect of delivering on our key election commitment, royalties for regions, was exhilarating.

Having worked for two previous Leaders of the Nationals, the corridors of Parliament House were not unfamiliar to me. I was accustomed to research, to providing advice to members, and to the processes of the House. Walking onto the floor of the Legislative Council as a member for the first time was an entirely different prospect. To me, it was a marvel that I would be one of so few people who had been given the opportunity to shape legislation, debate issues of importance to my electorate and provide support to my colleagues who were in leadership positions in the new Liberal–National 'Alliance'.

The issue of gender has rarely been of concern to me during my time as a member of the House. The Legislative Council is currently one of the most gender-balanced in the nation. People can draw their own conclusions about the balance in the Legislative Assembly, which I believe has more to do with party preselection processes than the public voting. True, the Nationals do not have a history of gender balance in the parliamentary party, but in the rank-and-file organisation, women have held senior positions at every level. I work on the principle that hard work, competence and a principled stance balanced with pragmatism should earn the respect of my colleagues, regardless of gender.

On reflection, in the short time I've been a member of Parliament, it's probably my age, along with my gender, that has sometimes been the cause for confusion, presumption or questions I suspect wouldn't be asked of a male counterpart. However, these experiences are in the minority and I have found most people to have been generous with their time. Most are genuinely delighted to see a young woman in the Parliament. My reaction to both responses is that I can do as much about my gender as I can about my age—so try to dwell on neither!

Finding a balance in my role as an elected representative between the legislative demands of the House, the demands of the constituency and working proactively on policy ideas is a challenge. Finding a work–life balance is equally challenging and I have the greatest respect for those members with young families—the life of a member of Parliament is not particularly family friendly.

From an electorate perspective, I am the only female representative in the Agricultural Region (this includes the Legislative Assembly electorates that create the electorate). It's possible this has been a political drawcard in some situations, but country people expect substance and commitment from all their elected representatives so there can be no substitute for sheer hard work. This includes extensive travel within the electorate (Kalbarri to Bremer Bay and out to Westonia in the east). A majority of the travel is undertaken by car on my own—it is part and

parcel of being a country member and a necessity regardless of improvements in communication technologies. It's not uncommon for me to travel 600 kilometres in a day to attend a function or meeting.

When Parliament is sitting, the processes of the House are all-consuming. You learn quickly that preparation is essential, the ability to be concise is valuable, and the ability to be verbose is useful, and you can expect to be treated as you treat others. I was given some sound advice by a retiring colleague that my first year in the House would be best spent observing the processes of the House, and making short and concise contributions. Other valuable advice was simply to be myself.

In my parliamentary office, I have the quotation from Edmund Burke (3 November 1774) that states:

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

As a member of the legislation committee, a standing committee of the Legislative Council, I was one of five members called on to inquire into the Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill 2009. This was referred to as the 'stop-and-search' legislation and proposed to increase police powers enabling them to stop and search individuals in certain areas without forming a reasonable suspicion. The committee spent some considerable time inquiring into the Bill and I personally received numerous representations from the public on the matter, from within and beyond the boundaries of my electorate. The stop-and-search bill was divisive in the Parliament and the community. The media had taken a strong stance against the proposed new powers and many in the WA Police assumed that opposition to the Bill meant opposition to the police in general.

It was the first extensive inquiry I'd been involved in as a member of Parliament, so the experience was a steep learning curve. Away from the theatre of Parliament, the committee is essentially a microcosm of the current Parliament (one Labor MP, two Liberal Party MPs, a Green and myself) so the debate was at all times robust and extensive. The process allows members to explore the issue in depth with experts in the appropriate fields and invite comment from stakeholders that would be impacted by the proposed legislation. Of course, this can be done by every member on *every* piece of legislation, but the reality of attempting this with your other parliamentary duties is that you can't possibly find the time.

My motivation was always to ensure that the proposed powers weren't simply a symbolic gesture by Government to demonstrate a 'tough on crime' stance. Symbolism is important in the political sphere—you'd be naive to pretend otherwise—but a departure from a fundamental tenet of our law and order system needed to be well justified.

As a member of the committee who recommended the legislation should not pass without significant amendment, if at all, I would not have voted for the legislation had it been brought back to the Council. To my Nationals colleagues' great credit, and their respect for the committee system, they reached the same conclusion, despite a number of them having passed it through the Legislative Assembly.

Personally, I am wary of legislation that seeks to address public perception rather than deal with a root cause. Perhaps some of my views may change as I get older, but at this point in time I am similarly wary of any legislation that demands a mandatory sentence. As a member

of Parliament, I am exposed to people from all walks of life and make every effort to apply the idiom ‘walk a mile in my shoes’ to assist me in my decision making. It’s a constant balancing act that requires patience, tolerance and practicality—characteristics I sometimes have in abundance and sometimes not at all! I find that rather than being driven by particular issues or beliefs, I am guided by a deep sense of community and respect for those who work hard to make their community a better place to live and work.

In all, the role gives me the opportunity to work across a wide variety of issues and with some fantastic people. You can never be certain of the impact you make, so every note of congratulations or thanks is celebrated with the team in my office; I couldn’t do it without them. To date, the most special to me is a letter from Mrs Joscelyn Bowey, an extraordinary woman in her own right and Life Member of the Nationals, who wrote following on from the ‘stop and search’ debate saying:

... while I deplore the activities of violent villains I see the rights of the innocent to be paramount...[H]istory can teach us a great deal about the danger of giving unrestricted power to any group of people.

It’s due to women like Jos, who have been part of the political fray for many years, and those like Edith Cowan, who braved the Parliament at a time far different from now, that I have entered Parliament at a time when being a woman is no longer an anomaly.