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Women Members of the Western Australian Parliament

When Western Australia gained responsible (self) government in 1890 women could not vote in Legislative Assembly elections or stand as a candidate for a seat.

This was despite the fact that during the period of representative government from 1876 women did have the right to vote in municipal elections, and were permitted to sit on school boards.

During the 1890s a series of motions seeking to grant women the right to vote were debated in the Western Australian Parliament. In 1893 Joseph Cookworthy, MLA put forward a proposal to give women the vote as an amendment to a bill creating voting qualifications for the Legislative Council.

This amendment was restricted to single, widowed, and divorced women. The attempt failed, with Premier Sir John Forrest stating: 'the proper place for a woman was to look after her home and not be running all over the place'.



Parliament House

The formation of the Karrakatta Club and the Women's Temperance Union helped the quest for the vote. In 1894 South Australia not only enfranchised women but also made them eligible to sit in Parliament.

After several unsuccessful attempts in 1896 and 1897 Western Australian women narrowly won the right to vote with changes to the *Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899*. Sir John Forrest finally gave his support, justifying his decision by saying he was responding to the calls for justice for women.

Women in Western Australia were able to vote in the referendum that affirmed their entry into the federation. The first votes in Federal and State Parliamentary elections took place in 1901.

The Federal election was conducted under the electoral provisions for Western Australia before separate Commonwealth electoral statutes were passed.

It was not until 1920, however, that women became eligible to stand for and win Western Australian parliamentary seats. This right was granted with the passage of the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1920*.



Edith Cowan

Within one year, community activist Edith Cowan had won the seat of West Perth in the Legislative Assembly. Her Maiden Speech proclaimed that 'the views of both sides [men and women] are more than ever needed in Parliament today'.

Although she only served one term, Edith Cowan had a broad platform and sought many changes to parliamentary practice. She was able to eliminate the tradition of the Speaker's Gallery being reserved for men.

Cowan also successfully piloted through Parliament two rare Private Members' Bills that enhanced the status of women in Western Australia. The *Women's Legal Status Act (1923)* paved the way for the legal and other professions for women, and her amendment to the *Administration Act Amendment Act (1922)* gave mothers and fathers equal status when their child died without a will.

Edith Cowan, as the first woman to be elected to an Australian Parliament, began a number of historic firsts for the comparatively small Western Australian Parliament.



Florence Cardell-Oliver



May Holman

Florence Cardell-Oliver (1947) became the first woman Cabinet Minister in Australia; May Holman (1925) was Australia's first female Labor MP; Dr Carmen Lawrence (1990) became the first woman to head any Australian Government; and Carol Martin (2001) was the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to an Australian Parliament.



Carmen Lawrence



Carol Martin

Despite the breakthroughs for women in Western Australia, only four had been elected to its Parliament as late as 1970, with Ruby Hutchison (1954) being the first woman to win a seat in the Legislative Council.

The 1983 election marked a partial advancement with Yvonne Henderson later earning a special place in history by becoming the first woman to give birth whilst serving as a Cabinet Minister.

By 2009 the total number of women elected to the Western Australian Parliament stood at 72.

There is some disagreement about whether special measures, such as quotas, would lead to a higher return of female parliamentarians. More female MPs have come from the Labor Party, but there has been a reasonable spread of party affiliation.

There has been a greater concentration of women in the Legislative Council, which has been linked to the adoption of the proportional representation electoral system in that Chamber.

In contemporary Western Australia, with almost 30 per cent of members being female, there is little novelty in women serving in Parliament. Moreover, many of the leading Officers of the Parliament, including its Clerks, *Hansard* staff, librarians, and education staff are women.

Women's Representation in the Western Australian Parliament up to 22 May 2009

(Party Affiliation-First Elected)

| | Legislative Assembly | Legislative Council |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Liberal / Nationalist | 10 | 10 |
| National / Country Party | 1 | 3 |
| Labor | 21 ¹ | 18 |
| Greens (WA) | 1 | 5 |
| Australian Democrats | - | 1 |
| Liberals for Forests | 1 | - |
| Independent Liberals | 1 | - |
| Total | 35 | 37 |

¹ Kay Hallahan and Alannah MacTiernan have been included in the Legislative Council count. Both later moved to the Legislative Assembly. A total of 72 women have been elected to the Parliament of Western Australia.