

RUBY FLORENCE HUTCHISON



MLC Suburban Province 22 May 1954–21 May 1965; North-East Metropolitan Province 22 May 1965–21 May 1971 (ALP).

In May 1954 Ruby Hutchison became the first woman member of Western Australia's Legislative Council and only the fourth woman to sit in either House of its Parliament. Twelve years later, and after five years of widowhood, she married Fred Lavery, MLC, to become the first wife to serve with her husband in any House of an Australian Parliament. Throughout her entire 17-year parliamentary career, she was the only woman member of the Legislative Council and a vigorous, if frustrated, campaigner for its substantial electoral reform and/or abolition. In the words of Frank Wise, former Premier and upper House leader in the latter years of her career, Ruby was rebellious but passionate and tenacious in crusading for the causes in which she believed.

Born Ruby Florence Herbert in Melbourne, Victoria, in February 1892, Ruby was the daughter of a goldminer, bookmaker and billiard maker, and she came to Western Australia with the family in 1896 and attended school on the Murchison goldfields, living successively in Cue, Day Dawn and Meekatharra. While still in her teens she married Daniel Buckley, a miner, and after the marriage broke up and dissolved in 1928, she was left to rear seven children (three boys and four girls) in the metropolitan area while taking in boarders and doing dressmaking. It was not until 1941, three years after she married her second husband, Alex Hutchison, that she was able to resume her education, attending a commercial business college and summer schools at the University of Western Australia. By her own account she first joined the ALP at the age of 16, and as her family responsibilities eased, she was able to build on her lifelong interest in politics, to the point where she contested her first election in 1950 at the age of 58. At the third attempt in 1954 she won the marginal Suburban Province seat by a little over 500 votes from Hubert Parker, who had sat in the Legislative Council for twenty years and held a number of ministerial posts in non-Labor Governments. Shortly afterwards, and despite her devout Catholicism, she took a firm stand against the Democratic Labor Party and in support of the official Labor Party during the

1955 split.¹ In the same period she wrestled with her conscience and deep-seated religious beliefs to express the view on ‘indictable childbirth cases’ that:

As we move along the road of progress we should view this matter in a Christian light ... [T]he girl concerned—usually a girl in her teens—cannot by any means be classed as a bad person but yet has to suffer. Cases occur in which the child of such a girl is lost, and sometimes the circumstances are such as to point to what is called a criminal action. I do not feel that in these days it should be classed as criminal. Any woman knows that having a child is not an easy experience in the best of circumstances; and these unmarried mothers have to endure, in addition, a considerable amount of mental anguish, and have to suffer all the misery on their own ... [W]omen of this kind could be normally quite sane but ... in circumstances such as I have outlined they could be under such emotional stress that they would not be culpable for anything they might do, and should not be indicted.²

Re-elected comfortably for the Suburban Province in 1960, Ruby moved in 1965 to the safe North-East Metropolitan Province and retired from politics at the 1971 election aged 79, having been the only woman member of the House for 17 years. She died at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in December 1974. Over the years she had served as president of the West Australian Epilepsy Association, was an inaugural member of the state branch of the Australian Consumers’ Association and was very actively involved in the Girl Guides and the Western Australian auxiliary of the state’s Boy Scouts Association.

Both in her Inaugural Speech in 1954 and in her farewell speech in 1970 Ruby dealt at length with the major theme of her political career—namely, the need for reform or abolition of the Legislative Council. Halfway through her term in 1962, her impatience with her opponents led her to become only the second woman (after Florence Cardell-Oliver [q.v.]) to be suspended from the service of a Western Australian House of Parliament when she refused to withdraw a statement that she was ‘ashamed’ to belong to the Legislative Council because of the ‘undemocratic’ nature of the House (see ‘Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career’). During her years in Parliament she successfully introduced a private member’s Bill to permit naturalised Australians to enrol for upper House elections without the necessity of waiting for the previously required period of 12 months. She also fought successfully for the right of women to sit on juries, but she did not succeed in achieving the introduction of adult suffrage for local government elections. Similarly, she was consistently rebuffed in her attempts to secure compulsory voting and adult suffrage for Legislative Council elections, but she did eventually witness their introduction for the 1965 elections as part of a non-Labor reform package, which, ironically, left the ALP worse off in terms of numbers elected than before under the redistributed boundaries.

Outside Parliament Ruby Hutchison will long be remembered for her work for the WA Epilepsy Association, the establishment of Nulsen Haven to provide accommodation for children then considered ‘mentally incurable’, her many years of work with the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, and her active involvement in campaigns during the 1950s to buy Western Australian goods leading to the foundation of the Australian Consumers’ Association.

¹ Judyth Watson, *We Hold Up Half the Sky. The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament, Perth: ALP (WA Branch), 1994*, p. 40.

² *WAPD(LC)*, 24 August 1955, p. 276.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

Ruby Hutchison delivered her Inaugural Speech when moving the Address-in-Reply in June 1954:

As the first woman to raise her voice in the deliberations of the Legislative Council of Western Australia, I feel keenly my position and my responsibility to the women of this State and those who will, in general, follow my footsteps. I shall endeavour to live up to the standards of truth and integrity that they would expect of me.

For too long has this house been silent for want of a woman's voice but now one might as well, like the historical figure, King Canute, attempt to hold back the rolling waves as try to keep women from their rightful place in the Legislature and public affairs of the State. I hope I shall not be long without female company here ... Science and the recent war have thrust woman forward from the kitchen, where she was supposed to belong, and she has now taken her rightful place in society. A great many women have played a worthy part in history. I hope to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before, and play my part in the future.

After all, government really depends on good housekeeping, and it is women who have the correct views on good economy and good housekeeping, and the way in which to keep the family together in order that men and women may be complementary to each other. I think that applies in the sphere of government also. I hope that we shall have more women's voices in the Parliament of this State in the not far distant future.

One of the planks of the platform on which I was elected to this Chamber was adult suffrage and I want the people of Western Australia to know that I shall fight untiringly to obtain adult suffrage for this Legislative Council. We know that this is practically the most powerful Legislature in the British Commonwealth, yet its suffrage is definitely against women. This House has a very narrow franchise—a property franchise and a householder's franchise—and I hope to see that widened considerably ... I hope that when a Bill is brought down this year to liberalise the franchise for this House, members will take note of the fact that the people have given a decided answer that democracy has reached the stage where we can expect to attain fair and just representation in both the halls of legislature in this State.³

Ruby's strong feelings about the Legislative Council electoral system led her into repeated clashes with Presiding Officers, most notably in 1962 when, during a debate on naturalisation ceremonies, she became only the second woman to be suspended from an Australian Parliament:

I have attended every one of these naturalisation ceremonies conducted by the Perth Shire Council ... I want to make it clear to the House that during the naturalisation ceremony the naturalisation certificate is handed out to each new citizen together with a Commonwealth electoral card and electoral card for the Legislative Assembly. But a card explaining how to vote for the Legislative Council election is never handed out ... Those people are not informed of the unfair and undemocratic franchise of this House.

The PRESIDENT ... I will not allow the honourable member to continue to charge this House with being undemocratic. It is a reflection upon the House.

The Hon. R. F. Hutchison: I do not know what one would call it, Mr. President, when people are not given a vote for this House. It is a loaded franchise and men have fought against it down through the centuries. However, not much progress has been made because it is still undemocratic ... I am not trying to create a situation; I am fighting for the rights of the people—for them to be

³ WAPD(LC), 17 June 1954, p. 5.

able to say what they believe in; and this is the policy of the party to which I belong ... I want to say this: In my conscience and in my opinion I have not said anything that I should not have the right to say to a democratic person ... What I am saying is true; the franchise for this House is an insult to the people ... The Government has been grateful to *The West Australian* for coming to its rescue on many occasions, but it has not done very much to implement adult franchise for this House as advocated by the newspaper ... I have read what has been said in the New South Wales Parliament on this question. It was stated—

There is essentially a democratic spirit which actuates a large mass of the community, and it is with a view to check the development of this spirit that I would suggest the formation of an Upper House.

That utterance was made in 1848 ... We have nothing to live up to, because such comments make one ashamed to belong to this Upper House.⁴

When asked to withdraw, Ruby simply stated:

If I have to say that I withdraw the remark that I consider this House is not democratic, and the franchise is not democratic, I cannot do so, because I believe it is undemocratic.

And her last words on leaving the House were, ‘There is no democracy in this House.’

Earlier in the same speech Ruby had referred to recently announced increases in university fees:

It is a great pity, and a disgrace, for a country such as ours not to be able to provide a university education for the children of our workers. They should be given the opportunity to attend universities; they should not be prohibited from doing so simply because their parents cannot afford to keep them there ... I do think that it behoves a Government to see, particularly in this day and age, that every child who is intelligent enough is given an opportunity to attend the University ... It should be the Government’s duty to provide these children with a university education, and to ensure that full use is made of their powers of intelligence.⁵

In 1963 she made another attempt to secure adult franchise for the upper House:

I have travelled a difficult path since being elected to this Chamber. When I first challenged the Suburban Province seat I did so with the set purpose of fighting the undemocratic franchise for this House, and of doing my best to obtain a vote for every person eligible to vote for the Legislative Assembly of the State. I shall continue in my endeavours until I am successful ... I do not think I need remind members that the abolition of the Legislative Council is a plank of the Labor Party platform, and as a Labor member I subscribe to that policy ... It is the opinion of the Labor Party that the Legislative Council is an anachronism; that it is undemocratic; and that Western Australia could advance more satisfactorily without it.⁶

With adult franchise for the Council finally a fact of life in 1964, Ruby turned her attention to the franchise for local government elections:

⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 October 1962, pp. 2084–2088.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2078.

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 29 August 1963, p. 722.

After many years of earnest endeavour on my part to have the principle of adult franchise apply to parliamentary elections, it was a great step forward to have adult franchise approved last year for both Houses of the Western Australian Parliament ... What is now proposed in this Bill is ... that the principle should be extended to local government elections ... [L]ocal government ... I have often heard described as the 'third arm' of government ... So far as I am concerned it is politics on the kitchen door step ... It touches the lives of women, especially—right at the humble rubbish bin ... and it is just and right that housewives should have a voice in the electing of those whose actions affect their lives so closely. Likewise many men and women who were ready to give even their lives in war service are now denied a vote for local government ... The time is overdue for all these undemocratic strictures to be removed, and when right should prevail for government of all the people for all the people by all the people.⁷

In her last speech at the end of 1970 she reflected on the progress made since 1954:

I read an article today which indicated that 22,000 young women of 18 years of age would be eligible to vote at the next election. That was not possible when I entered Parliament and it gives me great pleasure to know that these young women will be able to vote. I hope some of them will become members of this Chamber so that they may argue against the men. Up till now we have only one lady member of this House. I will do all I can to help women to be elected to this Chamber. A young woman [Lyla Elliott (q.v.)] has already been selected to follow me. I hope she gains election and I will be looking forward to that.

... This House is still a House of privilege and the boundaries still remain undemocratic. The boundaries are still drawn up by the Liberal and Country Parties in such a manner as to make it impossible for Labor to win a majority in this House. That has been a fact ever since I have been here ...

I have in my hands a few of the Bills I was responsible for bringing to Parliament. One of the most important is connected with the jury reform system and I was successful in my efforts to have women recognised as competent to serve on juries. I will never forget the day I approached a certain gentleman about this. He was a lawyer and he was absolutely horrified that I should even suggest that women should serve as jurors. He said it was a dreadful thing. I told him that times were changing and I said I was sorry I had struck such a backward young man, and I moved on ...

I think one of the instances in which a woman's point of view is most valuable is in relation to juries. Only a woman looks at the different sides of nature because she understands her children and as they grow into men and women she understand their problems.⁸

Ruby concluded as she had begun by suggesting that:

... without wishing to strike a discordant note ... I propose to continue to fight for the abolition of the Legislative Council because I feel that Western Australia would be far better off with one House of Parliament ... Our Legislative Council is still the most powerful House in the British Commonwealth. I know what I am talking about because I have gone into this matter very thoroughly.⁹

⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 15 September 1964, pp. 913–915.

⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 November 1970, pp. 2763–2764.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2765.