



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

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

David Black  
and  
Harry Phillips

**Parliamentary History Project  
Parliament of Western Australia  
2012**

## SALLY ELIZABETH TALBOT



MLC South West Region from 22 May 2005 (ALP). Parliamentary Secretary 2007–2008. Shadow Minister from 26 September 2008. Member Standing Committee on Legislation from 2005; Parliamentary Services Committee from 2005; Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation from 2011; Select Committee into Public Obstetric Services 2006–2007.

Few, if any, of the many hundred of members, and more especially of women members, who have secured election to one House or other of the Western Australian Parliament since 1890 would have entered the legislature with the varied and broad academically based background which Sally Talbot brought to the Legislative Council when she began her first four-year term as an ALP member for the South West Region on 22 May 2005. Sally has been a classical musician and teacher, primarily of the cello, and a lecturer and tutor in philosophy for university students; she has completed a PhD in the seemingly rarefied area of epistemology (a work subsequently published with the title *Partial Reason: Critical and Constructive Transformation of Ethics and Epistemology*); and, she has also been a research officer with and assistant state secretary of a major political party. Sally has been a member of both the British and Australian Labor Parties since her mid teens. Given her background, it is hardly surprising that she was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary within two years of entering Parliament and from September 2008 served as a shadow Minister in the ALP Opposition.

Sally Elizabeth Talbot was born in London, United Kingdom, on 22 March 1953, the daughter of chartered secretary Derek Talbot and his wife, Hazel Joan (nee Hanson), a cartographer and magistrate. In her Inaugural Speech on 24 May 2005 Sally described herself as ‘born into a Labour Party family’<sup>1</sup> with two grandfathers who served as shop stewards (a tool maker and print industry union official respectively) and parents who were members of the British Labour Party even as they moved house to live in an ultra safe conservative area near London. She describes the family kitchen as ‘campaign headquarters at every national and local

---

<sup>1</sup> WAPD(LC), 24 May 2005, p. 2081.

election' with her mother as the candidate and father as campaign manager.<sup>2</sup> During these campaigns Sally and her three brothers worked assiduously both at packing material into envelopes and then tramping round the district letter boxes. In such safe conservative surroundings, for her mother even to avoid losing her deposit was a major achievement.

After attending primary schools and Bexhill Grammar School in the area, in 1969 at the age of 16, with the help of a study grant, and part-time work from and the aid of the Musicians Union, Sally went to the Royal College of Music in London. After graduating as an Associate of the Royal College of Music (ARCM), she worked as a musician and teacher, first in the UK and then from 1978 in Western Australia. In 1983, while studying at Murdoch University, she was offered employment in the office of Labor federal members of Parliament, the party having just won government in Canberra after eight years in the wilderness. Working for Wendy Fatin in first the electorate of Canning and then in Brand from 1983 to 1990, Sally recalled how she became involved in the communities in the south west, the area which she was later to represent in Parliament. As her 'next venture' she worked as a lecturer and tutor in philosophy at Murdoch University from 1995 to 1998 and in 2000 published the fruits of her PhD research, under the title referred to above, which she describes as a 'great conversation killer'.<sup>3</sup>

In July 2001, in perhaps the most decisive move in bringing about her parliamentary career, she became assistant state secretary of the WA Branch of the ALP, following in the footsteps of one of her mentors, John Cowdell, who had served in the same role for eight years before entering the Parliament in 1993 (and who later went on to become the first ALP President of the Legislative Council). Sally's entry to State Parliament came with the re-election of the Gallop Labor Government for a second term in 2005, when at number two on the ALP ticket she was elected as one of three ALP members in the seven-member South West Region; three and a half years later, as number one on the ALP ticket, she was one of two ALP candidates elected in the six-member region.

In April 2007, less than two years after entering Parliament, Sally was appointed a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment; Climate Change; Peel, which position she occupied until the defeat of the Carpenter Government in September 2008. Subsequently she was appointed Shadow Minister for Environment, Lands and Youth and from March 2010 was given the additional portfolios of Planning and Climate Change. In a reshuffle announced in February 2011 she was again given responsibility for Environment, Climate Change and Lands and Youth while also taking over Indigenous Affairs, which she retained until January 2012, when, in Mark McGowan's first shadow Ministry, she became responsible for the Peel Region. Since her initial election she has served continuously on both the Legislation Committee (as deputy chair from June 2009) and the Parliamentary Services Committee, and in 2006–2007 was deputy chair of the Select Committee into Public Obstetric Services. In 2011 she became a member and deputy chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.

In her life before and outside Parliament Sally had been chair of the Pioneer Village School from 1996 to 1998 and a member of the Board of Coastal Family Health Services from 1998 to 2001. She first joined the British Labour Party as early as 1969 and the ALP in 1982 and served in numerous party branch and electorate council roles, and was for many years a

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 2082.

delegate to State Executive and to national conferences (in 2002, 2004, 2007 and 2009). From 2007 to 2010 she was State President of the ALP in WA and secretary of the State Parliamentary Labor Party from 2005 to 2007. In 2006 she was a delegate to the 52<sup>nd</sup> General Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in Nigeria.

When addressing Parliament for the first time in May 2005 (an occasion on which both her parents were present), Sally admitted readily that her personal professional background and experiences do not ‘translate directly into a set of legislative priorities’. In this context the theme of the remainder of her Inaugural Speech centred around ‘uncertainty’ and the difficulty of finding effective responses to ‘help people make sense of our world’.<sup>4</sup> Her three answers related to the need to measure progress ‘with regard to the people whose lives that progress will affect’, the need to turn ‘threats into opportunities’, and above all to the need for ‘sustained collective action’ especially to ‘help people without power’. Thus she contended that:

... it is possible to make a difference to people’s lives by our work in this place, and my commitment to make that happen is as strong now as it ever was to play the Elgar Cello Concerto or deconstruct the categorical imperative.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly a high proportion of her contributions in debates and questions in the House concerned environmental issues across a broad range of perspectives. Thus, for instance in April 2010 she introduced a private member’s Bill, the Plastic Shopping Bags (Waste Avoidance) Bill, which reflected a strong interest in the area of recycling and resource recovery. While speaking to her Bill she quoted one of her colleagues in suggesting that such words as ‘reduce’, ‘reuse’, ‘recycle’ and ‘recover’ have replaced the long familiar three Rs ‘that many of us grew up with’.<sup>6</sup> In the following year, in reviewing the third anniversary of the Barnett Government, she suggested that:

... the five obvious things that must be staring the Minister for Environment in the face every morning when he sits down at his desk headed “To do urgently” are one: finalise the state waste strategy; two, finalise the state climate change plan; three, save the Swan River; four, create more marine parks; and, five, protect remaining urban bushland.<sup>7</sup>

Another area of ongoing interest to her, and about which she asked a long series of questions relating to virtually every government department, was information concerning the setting of employee achievement targets for such areas as ‘women in management’, ‘people from culturally diverse backgrounds’, ‘Indigenous Australians’, ‘people with disabilities’ and ‘youth’.

The opportunities to use her background in philosophy in parliamentary debate were obviously somewhat limited, but during her speech on Greens (WA) member Robin Chapple’s Voluntary Euthanasia Bill 2010 she referred to ‘a couple of the ways that we have historically’ made decisions—i.e. made a choice. One she suggested might be described as a ‘global imperative ... or more fancily called the categorical imperative, which can be expressed as acting in such a way that all one’s actions can be universalised’.<sup>8</sup> Sally contended that one

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 2083ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 2084.

<sup>6</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 1 April 2010, p. 1212.

<sup>7</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 8 September 2011, p. 7056.

<sup>8</sup> *WAPD(LC)*, 22 September 2010, p. 7047.

cannot make decisions on euthanasia based on the simple imperative that ‘killing people is wrong or that taking a life is wrong, including our own’ any more than one can base all decisions on the simple imperative that it is morally wrong to lie. To answer such questions depends on how the question is phrased, and one might get a very different answer if the question was, for example, “should helping someone who is dying choose how he dies be a criminal offence?” Having explored various alternatives, she suggested that the approach to the euthanasia issue that she preferred was built around an ‘ethic of care’ and came up with a straightforward question based on the realities of life: namely, ‘are there people with terminal illnesses who want to choose how they die?’ and is this ‘a choice that we might want, one day, to make’. In this context we will ‘respect the decisions of those who decide that a gentle and peaceful death at a time that they choose is the way they want to end their lives’.<sup>9</sup>

With her varied and substantial background Sally has been at the centre of parliamentary proceedings in the Legislative Council from both the government and opposition benches and, given her considerable involvement also in the affairs and management of the state party, she is likely to remain prominent in the ALP ranks in the years ahead.

#### *Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career*

The preselections were done and dusted, the general election was behind us, those strange limbo-like weeks between the election and 22 May when the new Legislative Council is sworn into office were over, the new name was painted on the office door and the Inaugural Speech had been delivered. I didn’t expect that changing careers would present any particular challenges. After all, I had already made the switch from professional musician to political staffer by the time I turned 30, and had spent the next 15 years studying, teaching and writing philosophy before becoming an elected party official in 2001. Somehow, however, this transition was not going as smoothly as the others. Until May 2005, everything I had done in politics, from letter-boxing with my mother during one of her tilts at local government to managing Kim Beazley’s local member profile and running the marginal seat campaign in the 2005 state election, had been about getting other people elected. Suddenly here I was with an office, staff, 24/7 demands on my time and a curious sense of being cast adrift. What was I supposed to contribute to the local high school graduation ceremony? Why did the hospital volunteers want to invite me to their Christmas lunch? How could I add anything of value to Anzac Day parades or Long Tan services?

I stumbled over an answer quite by chance when I came across an essay written some years ago by Geoff Gallop.<sup>10</sup> As well as making the reassuring observation that being an MP is a job without a job description, Geoff talks about the responsibility MPs have for being full and active participants in their communities. He says:

[B]ecause the community is the foundation stone of an active, participatory democracy it needs to be supported by those with responsibility. That support is exhibited in a range of ways but most notably by attendance at functions, celebrations and other gatherings, including political

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 7047–7049.

<sup>10</sup> Geoff Gallop, ‘The Role of a Member of Parliament’ in Geoff Gallop, *A State of Reform: Essays for a Better Future*, Wembley: Helm Wood Publishers, 1998, pp. 104–108. This reference is actually from a speech which drew on that essay and was reprinted in *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2009, Vol. 24(2), 2–8, p 6.

meetings to raise issues, educate the public or protest at government policy. Each time a member does this he or she is confirming their commitment to pluralism and the free society.

As I read that I began to understand that we miss the significance of the roles MPs play in our society if we look only at the skills and experience of particular individuals elected to that role. Quite suddenly I saw my role differently: rather than being a cellist and a philosopher who had become a member of Parliament, I was the member for South West, the Parliamentary Secretary or the Shadow Minister, invited to play a part in the community of Western Australia because I was a representative of part of the very glue that holds that community together, a system of governance that people in many parts of the world would give their eyeteeth to be part of.

That realisation led directly to another: as an MP you have a responsibility to accept invitations from both individuals and groups in our community to share their best and their worst moments with them. At a high school graduation, you celebrate the achievements of young people and their families at a defining moment in their lives. At a community meeting about the collapse of a local employer, you share the anger and fears of workers about the security of their future. And you do so, again, as a representative of a system that works to maintain the freedoms that ground the tolerant, pluralistic, egalitarian society we value.

Now this is not to suggest that I have not tried to use some of the skills and experience I acquired before coming into Parliament to help me do the job better. As a former philosophy teacher, I fear that the loss of direct engagement with ideas in the political settings of the Parliament does not bode well for the robustness of our democracy. While I'm not naive enough to suggest that a return to the eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions of great speech making and inspirational debate would solve all the problems that have led to a widespread public distrust in the political process, I do think that it does not help when, instead of a contest of ideas, we have stale, formulaic posturing that would fail to gain a pass mark in any high school debating contest. In a lighter vein, as a member of the Parliamentary Services Committee I was able to mount a pretty spirited defence of the musicians who play in the Parliamentary Dining Room once a month on buffet nights when they were accused of playing too loudly and being threatened with removal to the corridor. I'm proud to say that at the time of writing they are still ensconced in the centre of the diners.

On a more personal note, one of the first things I learned about myself when I started this job was that while your 'to do' list is constantly set for exponential growth, you can surround yourself with people who can execute at least parts of that list with as much, if not more, efficiency than you can. It took me some months to share my list and thereby ease a few of the pressures that threaten to engulf anyone with a demanding and stressful job. In fact, the first time it occurred to me that I did not have to be sole keeper of the list, I actually rang my office after hours and left a tentative message asking for help with a few of the more pressing tasks. My recollection is of getting a call back at about 9.30 am the following day telling me that everything had been done and very gently reminding me that the people who work with you are there to keep the list down to manageable proportions.

The other big lesson I have learned in the six years I have been an MP is that the old adage that there are no friends in politics is not true. The key to any friendship is trust, and there are certainly some politicians who show by their practice that they trust nobody but themselves. These people, in my observation, are the careerists who see the political world as a cut-throat corporate jungle where the only way to secure a career path is to keep one finger permanently

whetted in the wind. They are the perpetrators of the potentially corrupting political belief that the end justifies the means and that the community is bored by talk about values and interested only in the hip pocket effect of policies.

My view of political life is different. I belong to the party whose fundamental beliefs are grounded in the collective. We are, as a party, only as strong as the relationships that hold the party together, and without trust those relationships never endure. Of course trust can be, and frequently is, betrayed. Of course we occasionally test that trust, and of course we are super cautious about where we place that trust in the first place. But having said that, it is my experience that the political realm can be a place where true friendships are crafted—friendships which are often lifelong, loyal and loving, enduring the sorts of ructions that would sunder friendships in other professional worlds.

Finally, I want to reflect briefly on the subject matter of this book and the specific question about what women bring to and take from the Parliaments of this nation. I am frequently shocked by the undisguised male chauvinism still manifest at every turn in the political world in Australia. Even though my party has had affirmative action policies in place at every level of its organisation for several decades, I still find myself frequently to be the only woman around the table, especially in the higher echelons of the party machine. The fact that is brought home to every woman parliamentarian daily is that many of the men she works with have limited experience of interacting with women in positions of power and authority. It may sound harsh, and there are obviously a significant number of men who are notably exempt from the observation, but my experience is that many men assume their female colleagues will behave towards them like their mothers, wives and daughters and have a long way to go before they can accept being treated as colleagues. My somewhat bleak conclusion is that this particular inequality will not be overcome before my term in Parliament comes to an end. That will not, however, be because I or many of the other women who have contributed their reflections to this book have given up our commitment to the belief that, as more women enter the political world, that world will change for the better.