



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

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

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and
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MURIEL GRACE PATTERSON



MLC South West Region 22 May 1989–21 May 2001 (Lib). Shadow Minister 1992–1993. Government Whip 1993–2001. Member four standing committees. Chairman Select Committee on Achievements of Indigenous Peoples of Australia 1991–1992. Member Select Committee on De Facto Relationships 1989–1990; and Select Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination Rates in Children 1997–1999.

Muriel Patterson entered the Legislative Council in 1989 as one of the Liberal members for the South West Region and in the ensuing twelve years played a very active role in parliamentary committee work, and as government whip from 1993. In this respect, her political life was a continuation of her active and extensive involvement in the world of business and community service. Right from the outset she set the tone for her approach to politics describing the ‘thrust of my remarks’ in her Inaugural Speech in 1989 as being ‘about people’:

Australia...is still a land of opportunity for those people with enterprise and energy—all Australians, one people. We are not two, or three, or four, or five, or a dozen individual communities, each living our own lives and just happening by chance to share the same country. We are all Australians and I am proud to say so. We all live in the one country, we all have our futures in the one country—and we should all have the same opportunities to shape our own lives; our own destinies.¹

Her ‘people’ orientation was, similarly, reflected in the emphasis she gave to the problems of the aged in the 1989 speech and by her involvement in a three-person Select Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination Rates in Children initiated in 1997 by her colleague Barbara Scott (q.v.) and in the Select Committee on De Facto Relationships in her first year in Parliament.

Muriel was born in Katanning on 20 September 1931, daughter of farmer Charles Quartermaine and his wife Grace. She was educated at Woodanilling State School and later undertook external studies at Perth Technical College and internal classes at Albany Technical College.

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 6 September 1989, p. 1806.

On 7 April 1951, at the Katanning Baptist Church, she married Rolstun William Patterson by whom she had four adopted children, two daughters and two sons, and in 1964 she and her husband commenced farming in virgin country at Tambellup. From 1969 to 1977 she taught dressmaking, design and craft at Albany Technical College and in 1976 she opened Boolah craft supplies, a craft supplies retail shop in Albany. After joining the Albany Chamber of Commerce in 1976 she became an executive member from 1978 to 1988 and was vice-president from 1983 to 1984 and the first woman president of the chamber from 1984 to 1986. From 1984 to 1988 she was a member of the State Council of the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry and was the first woman to serve on the state executive in 1987–88.

Over the years Muriel taught classes in an adult Aboriginal education program, and was a member of the Albany Technical College Advisory Board, secretary–treasurer of the Albany Voluntary Community Group, district chairman for the Albany Red Shield appeal in 1985 and treasurer of the Albany Crippled Children’s Committee from 1978 to 1979. Another area of involvement occurred with her participation between 1969 and 1980 in the Country Voluntary Homemakers program in the welfare department working in state housing flats and with migrants, widows and widowers and single-parent families.

A major emphasis in her contributions on the floor of the House concerned the place of Aboriginal people in Australian society. During her Inaugural Speech she hearkened back to the era of Aboriginal reserves, an era when ‘it was illegal for white people to enter a reserve, and...when those people who lived on the reserves had to be out of town by six o’clock’. She made it clear that:

... [t]his separation of old and new Australians always appalled me and I was pleased to participate in that transition from huts and tents on reserves to houses in the towns; to encourage the education of the Aboriginal children; to influence their medical treatment and generally assist towards their well-being ...

Twenty years on many of those people now participate in the day-to-day community life in Albany and the town is richer for their contribution. Yet there are still those people working to return to the past, to reinstate the days of separatism, to keep apart those people who advocate the so-called land rights—vast tracts of land set aside where once again it would be illegal for other Australians to enter. Mr President, it has all been tried and it has failed.²

Two years later, she successfully moved for the appointment of a select committee to inquire into and report upon all steps that ‘can and might be taken...to identify and publicise the endeavours and achievements of the indigenous peoples of Australia’. Speaking to the motion she referred to the:

dastardly, cruel actions taken by people of past generations. It was a cruel era. We only have to recall the British penal system which forcibly transported men and women to America and Australia. I will not wear the guilt of the past. Guilt is such a useless emotion. This generation is responsible for today. Every day in which Aborigines brood over negative images of themselves and their friends is another day in which all Australians have lost something of incalculable value.³

² Ibid.

³ *WAPD(LC)*, 5 June 1991, p. 2669.

In her Inaugural Speech she also paid tribute to the migrants from Europe and Asia who had assimilated into Australian society and at the same time ‘enriched our communities and our society’.⁴

One issue on which Muriel felt especially strongly was the question of abortion law reform as demonstrated in her ‘Member’s Reflections’ contribution to the first volume of this publication. She also participated vigorously in the debate on the Adoption Bill in 1994 expressing caution over what she described as attempts at retrospective provision for disclosure of the past. Instead, she strongly supported ‘a veto system for those not wishing to be identified’, a veto of no contact ‘which stands without renewal, until or if it is lifted’. Having herself adopted a child she described adoption as ‘the total care and responsibility for a child, and speaking from experience, it is deeply satisfying’.⁵

Much of her parliamentary time was also devoted to the concerns of her rural constituents and the rural community generally. Thus, in her Inaugural Speech she described the farming community as ‘under siege from a vocal minority more intent on biting the hand that feeds them than on understanding their contribution to the community’ to the point where one ‘gentleman in a prominent managerial position’ said that:

... if he had his way, every farmer would be forced to plant trees on all of his cleared land ... He suddenly went silent when attention was drawn to his dinner plate and how all of the food on it had come from ground cleared in Western Australia.⁶

When confronted with concerns about the relative lack of women in Parliament she conceded she had a ‘slightly different view’ from some other women MPs. In her view ‘perhaps there is a problem with the community attitude rather than here in this Parliament’; ‘in adversity is opportunity’ and these words ‘have been the measure of distance between winners and losers, of women with careers and those without’.⁷

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These reflections were written in 1999)

The privilege of being a member of Parliament is not for me the member, but for the people of my electorate, and is bestowed by them on me, whom they are prepared to trust.

This has given me a deep sense of responsibility at being a member of this great institution. However, the privilege and the responsibility do not occur in isolation; they come in tandem.

Living in a democracy, it is very hard to exaggerate the importance of our Westminster system; it certainly is the best this world has to offer. The integrity of Parliament depends not on law

⁴ WAPD(LC), 6 September 1989, p. 1807.

⁵ WAPD(LC), 6 April 1994, pp. 11465–11467.

⁶ WAPD(LC), 6 September 1989, p. 1808.

⁷ WAPD(LC), 7 December 1995, p. 12636.

enforcement agencies, but on the personal choice and direction of members. Only then can the people be heard by representation.

Looking retrospectively at my time since 1989, I have a great sense of personal achievement as Chairman of the Ministerial Taskforce on Families in Western Australia, 1995. I believe my foreword in the report explains my commitments to families:

As you are aware, the deceptively simple word ‘family’ covers a multitude of lifestyles and individual or collective preferences, and yet ‘family’ (however one cares to define it), remains the one common denominator that unites most if not all Western Australians.

The report provides a picture of what families look like today; how well off they are; how parents raise their children; how violence impedes family functioning; and how the various government and community structures support and strengthen families. It also identifies gaps in current services and knowledge and recommends new policy directions for government. As far as possible recommendations are formed around the available local evidence and research.

These recommendations have not been made lightly or without due consideration of all the known facts. We have not shirked the difficult and sensitive issues involved in carrying out the task we were charged to do.

The work of the Taskforce has been greatly enhanced by the expertise, goodwill and experience of the Taskforce members. Their willingness to cooperate and give freely of their time and energy has been greatly appreciated. The support received from the Department for Community Development has also been invaluable. I warmly thank all who have shared their knowledge and experience with us.

Finally, I am reminded of two timeless truths. Firstly, families, founded upon the great love St Paul described as ‘patient, and kind, not jealous, conceited or proud, nor keeping a record of wrong, rejoices with truth, protects, trusts and perseveres’ will continue to grow in strength and number despite the many social pressures in these modern times.

Secondly, Members of Parliament do not have a monopoly of wisdom. Much can be learned by listening to and then acting upon what the public have to tell us.

On behalf of the Taskforce, I thank you for this opportunity to provide advice on a plan of Government action to strengthen families.

As a Liberal member, I uphold the philosophy of the Liberal Party and usually vote along party lines. However, I consider the Abortion debate in 1998 as one of the outstanding debates of my time. This was a conscience vote and most members spoke with deep feeling. In part, I said:

I contradict a point made in yesterday’s debate that adoption was not a good alternative. In some cases adoption would be the answer for an unwanted child. I have been critical of my own and past governments—I continue to be—for the great obstacles that are placed in the way of the adoption of a child. Something is wrong when last year Western Australia had over 9 000 abortions of unwanted babies and only 13 adoptions. Why is adoption not promoted as an alternative option? Hundreds of couples in this State alone would be willing and dearly love to offer their homes and lifestyle to a child and would consider themselves honoured by the privilege, yet repeatedly we are told that so few babies are available for adoption.⁸

and

⁸ WAPD(LC), 18 March 1998, p. 744.

It is inconceivable to me that many people fight vehemently to save flowers, natural bush, insects, birds and animals, go into freezing cold water to try to push whales back into the sea to save them, and work with seals, because they say they are beautiful creatures, and with so many other things in nature that we all admire and have great affection for. I cannot help but wonder that people feel like this and yet they believe in abortion on demand. Is it because the child is faceless, silent and hidden from view?⁹

As the debate drew to a close in May I said in part:

One of the common arguments of pro-abortionists is that we will be condemning women to backyard abortions, which involve a major risk factor. That has been the catchcry. It is opportune for me to interest members in some statistics for abortion complications when the procedure is performed earlier than 13 weeks. In England and Wales the statistics are recorded and published yearly. United Kingdom doctors are obliged to notify the Health Department of annual statistics within seven days...The figures for 1996 [the latest available] are: Haemorrhage, 150; sepsis, 389; perforation, 115; and others, 96. Abortion is legal in the United Kingdom. So much for safe legal abortions!

The law as it now stands complies with the laws set down by our creator and recognises the sanctity of life over all else, albeit our stewardship in enforcing the law has been sadly neglected. Several hundred years ago Alfred the Great said, 'For a law to be righteous it must comply with God's law'. That was the case at our country's birth enshrining the Westminster system of Government. To go against such laws denies the existence and authority of God, paving the way for laws based on situations, ethics and moral relativism. Where will it end if laws are made on that basis? There must be absolutes and accountability to someone other than self. Therefore, enforcing the law is not the real answer. The real answer is a change in attitude.

Let us be mindful that Parliament is constituted to protect the wellbeing of every citizen. It has no legitimate power to exclude one person from lawful protection. No governing body can legitimately authorise the committing of crimes against its own or any people. The unborn child does have rights.

I recall a few years ago hearing about the various United Nations covenants and treaties signed by the Australian Government. I felt indignant about that because we in Australia care for our children and do not require outside influence. Today I am having serious doubts and second thoughts about that as without a doubt those covenants recognise an unborn child as having a complete identity with its own individual rights ...

During my initial speech on this issue...I referred to the valid arguments used by the pro-abortionists that a foetus cannot survive without the mother's body. However, I omitted to add that even when the baby is born, it is still unable to survive without the mother's assistance for a period of months or even years.

Over the past couple of months I have been enormously encouraged by the quality and number of letters sent to me by the medical fraternity. I commend the vast number of doctors who remain true to their professional oath, and committed to the wellbeing and health of their patients. I will read in part one such letter:

⁹ Ibid., p. 745.

The unborn child at 11 weeks has the ability to sense pain, as well as to breathe (fluid), swallow, sleep, dream, awaken, taste, learn things and react to light and touch. What more does it need to do to deserve our respect and protection?¹⁰

Serving as a member of Parliament has given me an insight into the many needs of the community—the necessity of government to create the climate for business and always an opportunity to assist people to be independent to enjoy a quality of life. For this I am grateful.

(Addendum—these Reflections were written in 2012)

In 1951 I knew I would be unable to bear children. My husband, Rolstun, and I decided to adopt our family. During the next 10 years, by the grace of God, our family consisted of four children. The children came from diverse backgrounds and were available for adoption for various reasons. We never indicated a preference of sex or nationality. Our daughters were welcomed to our family—one 11 days the youngest seven days. In one year, our two sons came to us—one four years and the other 11 days. Through our faith, we are assured that they were all a gift. This did not make us immune from human frailties; however, love and forgiveness became a way of life.

Today my family comprises two daughters and two sons, with ages ranging from 50 to 60 years, and we enjoy eight grandchildren and twelve great grandchildren. Seeing a united family and the love we have for each other has been the greatest experience of my life.

I give glory to our Christian faith.

If I knew then what I know now, there is nothing I would add or change.

¹⁰ WAPD(LC), 20 May 1998, p. 2827.