



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

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

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and
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MARGARET-ANNE BERNADETTE ROWE



MLC Agricultural Region 22 May 2005–22 June 2007 (Lib). Member Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission 2005-2007; Shadow Spokesperson 2005–2007.

Margaret-Anne Bernadette Rowe (nee Trahair) was born on 11 April 1949 in Kalgoorlie and was subsequently educated in the same regional city at Saint Mary's Convent School. At the 22 February 2005 election for the thirty-seventh Parliament she was the fifth and only woman candidate elected for the Agricultural Region in which the party, aided by dedicated campaigning from Margaret, had notably gained a much higher region vote in the Legislative Council than in the constituent Legislative Assembly districts. Between Margaret's election date and assumption of her seat on 22 May 2005 the Parliament passed the one vote, one value legislation for the Legislative Assembly and increased the number of seats in the Legislative Council Agricultural Region from five to six seats, with vote weighting being exacerbated. However, Margaret did not seek a seat for the next election as she resigned due to ill health on 22 June 2007.

Historically, it has often been observed that experience in local government can be a valuable preparation for Parliament. Margaret, with over a decade as a councillor including two of them as deputy president at the Shire of Greenough, fitted this category. To this background could be added 10 years as an electorate officer which in contemporary times regularly fulfils a preparatory role for parliamentarians. As Margaret said in her inaugural parliamentary address:

... the electorate office is the grassroots ear to the world. That is why I have chosen to locate my electorate office in the country in Geraldton'.¹

Prior to her electorate office experience for two Liberal MLAs, Minister Kevin Minson (from 1996 to 2001) and Jamie Edwards (from 2001 to 2005), Margaret had been a public service

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 May 2005, p. 2359.

administrative officer at Chapman Valley followed by over a decade of employment as a personal assistant at the Mid West Development Commission.

In 2003 Margaret was a nominee for the Telstra Small Business Awards. She was also an active sportsperson. In terms of sporting links, her son Brad Rowe played 72 AFL games for Brisbane, Collingwood and the Fremantle Dockers. Her daughter, Donna, did not pursue professional sport, but obtained two university degrees.

Margaret did not have higher degree qualifications but it seems from her *Hansard* parliamentary record that she had an excellent command of language with a literature bent. In her Inaugural Speech² she concluded her speech with the words of poet Robert Frost who wrote:

Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the least traveled by less
And that has made all the difference.

Again in her Inaugural Speech, when highlighting how Geraldton, like many regional centres had a proud history, Margaret chose to mention how former member of the Legislative Council Derrick Tomlinson had taught her literature at Geraldton Senior High School, and that award winning author Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton and how he immortalised the town in his book *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. In addition, Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* had its origin in Geraldton. In her display of historical knowledge of her Geraldton electoral base Margaret also mentioned how she was following in the footsteps of Edith Cowan, the first women elected to the Parliament in Australia, and that Geoff Gallop, the Premier at the time, was also a Geraldton boy.³

Throughout Margaret's two years as an MLC she took opportunities to represent regional interests. As she said in her first speech, 'I will make no apology for the fact that I will speak for the bush'.⁴ In her contribution to the 'Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure' debate she forcefully indicated how:

The 2006–07 state budget continues the Labor tradition of profligacy in recurrent expenditure, the accumulation of debt and failure to invest in the wealth-generating regions of this state.⁵

Given focus was 'the state Labor government's city-centric focus for infrastructure expenditure'.⁶ Two months later in debate on a motion 'that this house condemns the state government for its failure to provide adequate funding for vital infrastructure and development in rural and regional Western Australia' Margaret spoke at length.⁷ Included in her address was a claim that 'the re-emergence of mining in the Mid West has created a well recognised need for a new port at Oakajee'.⁸ Reference to the lack of investment in roads was accompanied by examples of regional road needs, particularly those which enhance tourism.

² Ibid., p. 2361.

³ Ibid., p. 2359.

⁴ Ibid., p. 2361.

⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 27 June 2006, p. 4253.

⁶ Ibid., p. 4254.

⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 August 2006, pp. 5389 and 5401.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5401.

Of far greater economic importance to the state than the cost overrun Perth to Mandurah rail link was the need to upgrade existing railway lines in the Mid West and to build new ones.⁹ Another need was to address the infill sewerage program which had been started by the Court government in 1994.¹⁰ Then with an expression of her ideological perspective Margaret said, 'I draw my contribution to a close by reiterating the key points' summarised as:

First, Labor slashed funding on infrastructure that is critical to the regions, despite enjoying what may well be the biggest revenue bonanza in the state's history. It would be interesting to know whether our state's public coffers have ever enjoyed a five-year period such as this. Second, cuts to regional infrastructure spending come at a time of unprecedented demand ... driven by tourism and population changes. Third, Labor already has an infrastructure backlog, and it will grow. We are already at least \$1 billion behind the infrastructure needs that should have been met with better financial management and priorities. Fourth, Labor is mismanaging the good times and blowing opportunities to progress the state by failing to deliver public infrastructure to the regions, which is a fundamental government role. Fifth, Labor is again showing why the rural majority is right to reject Labor. Hopefully, Perth people will see it more clearly at the next election.¹¹

In fact, the rural electorate broadly speaking rejected Labor at the next 2008 election partly because the National Party, particularly for the Agricultural Region, adopted a more specific 'royalties for regions' policy which identified the infrastructure needs of the country districts and a formula which provided the revenue base. A related interest pursued by Margaret were parliamentary questions on government spending on research and development which she was able to indicate had fallen from 1.62 per cent in 1996–97 to 1.31 per cent in 2002–2003, a fall representing a decline of about \$265 million per annum.¹² Although agriculture Minister Kim Chance procedurally thanked Margaret for providing some notice on this subject, he went on to say:

I just want to add that I think this is a very good question. It is one that I fear we will have some difficulty answering. The member has done well to pick up on the whole research and development issue, because it is a very serious matter that threatens where our industry is going in the future. Australian dedication to research and development generally is probably a weak link in our structure. However, the difficulty in providing an answer is in obtaining that information, because much of the research and development effort comes from the private sector, and sometimes private sector involvement is hard to divulge.¹³

Another area of questioning that Margaret pursued was dry season assistance. When the Government in August 2006 announced a package of up to \$5.3 million to help farm businesses worst affected by the dry seasons in several Agricultural Region shires her mathematical analysis suggested the aid was closer to some \$3 million.¹⁴ Then when not satisfied with the Minister's response Margaret pursued the matter seeking further clarification.¹⁵

⁹ Ibid., p. 5403.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 5402.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5403.

¹² *WAPD(LC)*, 22 August 2006, p.4961.

¹³ *WAPD(LC)*, 22 March 2006, p. 682.

¹⁴ *WAPD(LC)*, 22 August 2006, p. 4879.

¹⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 31 August 2006, p. 5553.

Water resources in regional towns, including the cost of transporting water by road, Waterwise rebates from the Water Corporation and feasibility studies to determine additional sources of water for Northampton, were policy areas of interest to Margaret. She spoke at length with support in principle for legislation in the Residential Parks (Long-stay Tenants) Bill 2005 which attempted to provide some 20 000 Western Australians who live permanently for extended periods in caravan parks and lifestyle villages with a greater security of tenure while renting their sites.¹⁶ In one of her early speeches Margaret had spoken supportively of the wind farm project approximately 30 kilometres south of Geraldton to provide cleaner and cheaper energy.¹⁷

Although Margaret had only joined the Liberal Party in 2000, with her electorate office experience and more than a decade as a local government councillor and in community service, she had very good credentials for a political career. In the Legislative Council she served on the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission and was the shadow spokesperson for heritage and briefly the shadow spokesperson for science. In these capacities her parliamentary record indicates that she asked a number of parliamentary questions of the relevant Ministers. Nevertheless, her main focus was the representation and improvement of rural matters for the Agricultural Region. If ill health had not intervened she was very well credentialed for a parliamentary career in this direction.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

In her Inaugural Speech Margaret Rowe said she would make no apology for speaking for the bush. Unfortunately, due to ill health, her time in the Legislative Council was limited. Nevertheless, when she did speak her views were sometimes cast in strong partisan terms. When addressing a motion by Hon Nigel Hallett 'that this house condemns the state government for its failure to provide adequate funding for vital infrastructure and development in rural and regional Western Australia',¹⁸ Margaret opened with a quote from a discussion paper from the Committee for Economic Development for Australia. It had concluded 'there is strong evidence that investment in infrastructure has a positive and permanent effect on economic output...[and] generates higher returns than investment in other sectors of the economy'.¹⁹ At one stage Margaret stated:

Growth in our mining sector is creating pressure on our ports. Despite the investment over the past decade, the economy is demanding even more port capacity. Geraldton is a prime example. The re-emergence of mining in the mid-west has created a well recognised need for a new port at Oakajee. It is interesting to recall the persistent criticism from Labor when the last Liberal government was planning and progressing the development of the Oakajee port and industrial area. Today, development of Oakajee is recognised by Labor as a necessity to meet the needs of the new iron ore producers and other miners and serve the broader community. I would like to hear why the government does not offer to put up \$200 million to help finance the Oakajee port development on a commercial basis, as it has done for other government ports, and allow it to be run privately without public sector and union control.²⁰

¹⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 4 May 2006, 2159.

¹⁷ *WAPD(LC)*, 25 August 2005, pp. 4567-4568.

¹⁸ *WAPD(LC)* 30 August 2006, p. 5401.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

... There is one unmistakable complaint common to regional Western Australia; that is, the lack of investment in roads. One of the key infrastructure projects that should be well underway by now, if not completed, is Indian Ocean Drive—the Lancelin–Cervantes road ... The benefits of the road are so widely recognised and so obvious that the Western Australian Tourism Commission regards the building of Indian Ocean Drive as the number one tourist priority for Western Australia. Those of us familiar with the area know that there will be a tourism explosion once that road is built. It will stimulate more tourism along the central coast by decreasing travelling times from Perth and making the region more accessible to tourists. The road will open up a range of job-creating investment opportunities in the regional areas. Places such as Lancelin, Cervantes, Jurien Bay and other coastal towns are waiting to explore opportunities that have been retarded by inadequate infrastructure.²¹

... I refer now to the infill sewerage program. Sadly, the infill sewerage program started by the Court government in 1994 continues to suffer due to Labor's irresponsible and incomprehensible funding cutbacks...Had Labor kept the program on track, the metropolitan area infill sewerage program would be nearing completion, as would the program in a number of country towns ... Although the program in many metropolitan suburbs suffers from delays due to Labor's unnecessary funding cuts, it is the lack of progress in rural areas that is particularly noticeable. Perth does not face the reality of effluent pouring down the streets due to the effects of heavy rain, nor does it endure, worse yet, open sewage ponds. The house was recently reminded that such experiences are a reality even for substantial towns such as Derby and Hyden ... The government's decisions are contemptuous of the needs of the community in Western Australia, especially in the regions.²²

I refer now to railway lines in the mid-west. The pin-up project of the government's capital works program is of course the Perth to Mandurah rail link. According to the government's latest cost estimate, but almost certainly not its last, this project is now some \$500 million above the cost of the former Liberal government's budget for the Perth to Mandurah rail link. What is arguably of far greater economic importance to the state is the need to upgrade existing railway lines in the mid-west region and to build new ones ... This is where the government should have been making its railway investments for the future.²³

... I draw my contribution to a close by reiterating the key points. First, Labor slashed funding on infrastructure that is critical to the regions, despite enjoying what may well be the biggest revenue bonanza in the state's history. It would be interesting to know whether our state's public coffers have ever enjoyed a five-year period such as this. Second, cuts to regional infrastructure spending come at a time of unprecedented demand from the resources sector for infrastructure in regional areas as well as demand driven by tourism and population changes. Third, Labor already has an infrastructure backlog, and it will grow. We are already at least \$1 billion behind the infrastructure needs that should have been met with better financial management and priorities. Fourth, Labor is mismanaging the good times and blowing opportunities to progress the state by failing to deliver public infrastructure to the regions, which is a fundamental government role. Fifth, Labor is again showing why the rural majority is right to reject Labor. Hopefully, Perth people will see it more clearly at the next election.²⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 5402.

²³ Ibid., p. 5403.

²⁴ Ibid.