



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

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

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## **KATINA (KATIE) HODSON-THOMAS**



MLA Carine 14 December 1996–6 September 2008 (Lib). Deputy Chairman of Committees 1999. Acting Speaker 1999–2004. Parliamentary Secretary 1999–2001. Shadow Minister 2001–2008. Member several standing and select committees including Select Committee on the Human Reproductive Technology Act 1997–1999; Select Committee on the Misuse of Drugs Act 1998–1999 Procedure and Privileges Committee 2001–2005; Community Development and Justice Standing Committee 2005–2008.

Katina, known as Katie, Hodson-Thomas entered Parliament in 1996 at the second attempt after she won the newly created seat of Carine encompassing much of the former electorate of Marmion, represented by Jim Clarko, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, who had decided to retire after 22 years in the Legislative Assembly. From the outset of her first term in Parliament she displayed the zeal and commitment typical of most younger women MPs of her generation. In her Inaugural Speech on 13 March 1997, Katie indicated to the Parliament that prior to her election she was proud to have broken new ground for women in the boating sector with her appointment as the executive officer of the Boating Industry Association. She suggested that one instance which motivated her to success in this sphere was overhearing a male colleague in the industry saying ‘the best place for a woman on a boat was overboard without a life jacket on’.<sup>1</sup> A minority view this may have been, but such perceptions needed to be overcome. Premier Richard Court, who shared the same enthusiasm for boating, soon recognised Kate’s credentials in the industry when he asked her in January 1997 to chair a special safety group to examine current regulations relating to the carriage of emergency position-indicating radio beacons, commonly known as EPIRBs. Fortunately, the forthcoming changes in regulations soon resulted in several rescues.

Born in Adelaide on 28 April 1957, Katie Hodson-Thomas did not settle in Western Australia until 1987. Her parents, Karl and Elfie Broemer, were immigrants from Europe in the 1950s who had come to Australia in search of a better life. Katie was educated at primary and secondary schools in Adelaide and then Hales Secretarial College, and subsequently she undertook external studies at Deakin University. She travelled widely in the United Kingdom

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 13 March 1997, p. 315.

and Europe, and, from 1981, after marrying Kerry Hodson-Thomas, spent seven years in Sydney. Prior to becoming executive secretary of the Boating Association of Western Australia in 1995, Katie also had some direct political experience as an electorate secretary, first for Diane Airey (q.v.) and then for the Minister for Mines and Lands and future President of the Legislative Council, George Cash. She was an active member of the Liberal Party, holding down posts of president, secretary and treasurer of the Balcatta branch; secretary and vice-president of the Stirling division; as well as her role as a member of the Liberal Party State Council and chairperson of the Marketing and Promotions Committee.

In her Inaugural Speech Katie referred to the fact that during her doorknocking visits ‘the single most important issue raised with me was law and order’.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, during her first year as MLA for Carine, she demonstrated her ongoing interest in the number of women in the Police Service and in emergency service agencies, as when she asked the police minister a question without notice about initiatives and programs being developed to increase such numbers.<sup>3</sup> Other questions were directed to the needs of her constituency, for example when she asked about whether the Government was contemplating constructing an overpass on Marmion Avenue within her electorate. On other occasions in question time she played her role in the party contest on the floor of the Assembly, directing questions on the ‘unsavoury’ practices on building sites to the Minister for Labour Relations, Graham Kierath, after passage of the 1997 ‘third wave’ of contentious industrial relations legislation.

Throughout her political career Katie left ‘no stone unturned’ servicing her electorate making it a safe Liberal seat. She regularly employed doorknocking as a communications strategy in her electorate and her work as a Justice of the Peace was another community link as well as holding several patron and vice patron posts in her constituency. In December 1998, Katie used the scheduled allocation of parliamentary time to make a personal statement to call for ‘support for blanket closure of all pedestrian access ways’. In her view, such access ways had become:

... the breeding ground for anti-social behaviour, attracting graffiti, vandalism, gathering of gangs, distribution of drugs, unobserved access to homes [and were used] as a means of escape by thieves.<sup>4</sup>

It was Katie’s view that the Western Australia Police Service would support such a proposal. Further evidence of the need for such action was her reminder that town planners no longer include pedestrian access ways in the planning of current suburban housing developments. Her concern over electorate issues had been exemplified with her active involvement in community organisations such as Neighbourhood Watch, Safety House Program and Local Drug Action Groups. One matter which she regularly raised related to issues concerning Reid Highway. She became a ‘very squeaky wheel’ when her party was in government and even admitted in her parliamentary response to the Premier’s Statement as late as 2008 that ‘I think I drove the Ministers for Transport, Hon Eric Charlton and then Murray Criddle, crazy about the construction of Reid Highway’.<sup>5</sup> There was still time for the extension of the dual carriage and improvements of the road. By that stage she was also giving focus to the speed limits on

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 7 May 1997, p. 2592.

<sup>4</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 3 December 1998, p. 4875.

<sup>5</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 February 2008, p. 432.

Marmion Avenue and waiting for scheduled upgrades for two schools in her electorate. Indeed this short speech was recorded in *Hansard* as being accompanied by applause.<sup>6</sup>

Early in her parliamentary career Katie was elected to two select committees: on the Human Reproductive Technology Act 1991 and the Misuse of Drugs Act 1981 respectively. The committees were not able fully to depoliticise the controversial matters under consideration but, for the most part, both were able to endorse a unanimous set of recommendations. When the interim report of the latter committee was tabled on 27 November 1997, Katie raised concerns about taking a 'soft approach' to cannabis use, particularly when dealing with adolescents. She spoke of the privilege of being a mother of two sons, and felt compassion for the disturbing number of mothers trapped by drug addiction.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, when the committee's final report was tabled in August 1998, she did indicate that, while not convinced of a soft approach by way of a cautioning system for cannabis use, she would keep an open mind for a trial cautioning system for first time cannabis drug offenders, which had been announced by Rhonda Parker (q.v.) as Minister for Family and Children's Services. Katie also felt it was salutary that such a trial was subject to mandatory educational intervention.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps a further demonstration of an 'open mind' came on 3 December 1998 in the committee stage of the Sentencing Legislation Amendment and Repeal Bill. Much of the debate concerned the sentencing of drug offenders. The MLA for South Perth, Phillip Pental, moved an amendment which in essence stated that when heroin addiction contributed to an offence, the offender might be required to undergo treatment for heroin addiction.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Katie, along with Dr Elizabeth Constable (q.v.) voted with Phillip Pental and the Labor Party in an unsuccessful bid to pass the amendment.<sup>10</sup> Katie's vote had obviously been made on the basis on the wealth of information and deliberations in the Select Committee on the Misuse of Drugs Act 1981.

Women of her generation were making their presence felt in the Legislative Assembly, and in the ministerial reshuffle of December 1999 she was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health. At this time she was also appointed as an Acting Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. Just as an appointment to a ministerial post was apparently looming for Katie, Richard Court's Coalition Government lost office in 2001. What followed for Katie was a host of shadow Ministries for nearly two terms of Parliament. Among the portfolios for which she was responsible were metropolitan transport, road safety, environment, tourism, small business, planning and infrastructure and women's interests. In addition, she continued with her membership of the parliamentary committee system, always carrying the reputation of being thorough and constructive. She was at various times a member of both the Joint House Committee and the Joint Parliamentary Services Committee, the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation, the Procedure and Privileges Committee and the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. Twice she represented the Western Australian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association at regional conferences, once in Melbourne in 1997 and once in Namibia in 2002. In the last year of her parliamentary service, on 12 March she initiated an inquiry into the activities of the Karrinyup

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 November 1997, p. 8873.

<sup>8</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 20 August 1998, p. 643.

<sup>9</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 3 December 1998, p. 4902.

<sup>10</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 3 December 1998, pp. 4893–4894.

Lakes Lifestyle Village.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently the Legislative Assembly Economics and Industry Standing Committee was able to chronicle ‘how not to undertake and manage a retirement village’.<sup>12</sup> It led Katie to urge every member to read the report as the residents ‘deserve far better than this’. As the report stated:

Construction has been plagued by delays, non-compliance, constant variations, changing plans or simply the ignoring of planned constructions, their alignment and a host of other requirements. This has not only affected residents, but properties that abut the development and the wider Gwelup community.<sup>13</sup>

Despite her successful electoral record winning the seat of Carine in 1996, 2001 and 2005, Katie announced in January 2008 that she would not recontest the election due later in the year or early in 2009. A month later she took the opportunity to explain her ‘very tough decision’ during her response to the Premier’s Statement. Having firstly indicated ‘that it was an absolute privilege to serve and represent the electorate of Carine—a jewel in the northern suburbs’, Katie added:

I have a strong commitment to social justice, fairness and equity for all people. However, that is also underpinned by my deep commitment and conviction to the Liberal Party—the party that endorsed me almost 12 years ago for the seat of Carine—and its values and principles. A first it certainly was. I was the first female to be pre-selected for a safe Liberal state seat, so I do thank those preselectors who saw fit to afford me the opportunity to pursue my passion for politics and the Liberal Party.<sup>14</sup>

Katie also made reference to Premier Alan Carpenter’s observation that:

We should seek to lead the nation in respecting the dignity and rights of every citizen—of all women. Here in the Parliament, we should lead the nation. This Parliament should not be cast as a boys club ...<sup>15</sup>

She then gave attention to standards and propriety and said she ‘agreed’ with the sentiments expressed by the Premier but then indicated ‘I did not call this place a boys club’.<sup>16</sup> Of particular significance had been what she considered inappropriate remarks made by Troy Buswell, at that time the Leader of the Opposition. Buswell had later apologised and Katie did admit that of her side of the chamber ‘we are pretty blokeish’.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately the matter was given prominence by the media, which had been particularly hurtful to her sons. Labor MLA Dianne Guise (q.v.), the Deputy Speaker, who was the next to address the Assembly, said:

In rising to reply to the Premier’s Statement, I first wish to commend the member for Carine for her speech. As a woman in this place, I should not have to say that it takes courage to speak out on these issues, but I will do so. I tell the member that it is a pleasure to work with her in this place. All of us in this place need to ensure that we rise to better standards. We all have fun

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<sup>11</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 12 March 2008, pp. 780–785.

<sup>12</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 19 June 2008, p. 4207.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 February 2008, p. 430.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 27 February 2008, p. 431.

in this place from time to time, but we also note where the line is drawn in the sand. I commend the member for Carine for her speech.<sup>18</sup>

After leaving Parliament Katie worked as a special counsel in government relations and policy for WA's Australian Hotels Association and as a corporate affairs manager for the Tourism Council WA. Then, in August 2011, she was appointed as the chief executive officer for the Caravan Industry Association WA. In her own words:

I look forward to representing caravan parks, caravan dealers and manufacturers, dedicated residential life-style villages and service providers at all levels into the future whose chief executive is to preserve the affordability and lifestyle for Western Australians and visitors to our State'.<sup>19</sup>

Katie's background as a parliamentarian and breadth of experience as a shadow Minister helped ensure that she was in demand in the commercial sector. If she had remained in the Legislative Assembly after the September 2008 it is very likely that she would have been appointed as a Minister. She had publicly indicated support for Colin Barnett as the best person to lead the Liberal Party when he was set for retirement and sitting on the backbench in Opposition. Appointment as a Minister may have meant that she would have been the only Liberal Party woman member of the Assembly in the 'Alliance' Cabinet. Nevertheless, Katie's experience in Parliament suggests that some of the hurdles for women that Edith Cowan had encountered as early as 1921 were still evident.

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

*(These reflections were written in 2000.)*

Embarking on a parliamentary career in the footsteps of a seasoned former member and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Hon James George Clarko, is indeed a great privilege. It did, however, raise the expectations of both the electorate and myself and I referred, in part, to this during my Inaugural Speech on Thursday, 13 March 1997:

I have large shoes to fill, and I acknowledge that I cannot begin to fill Jim's shoes. Firstly, there are many differences between Jim and me, not the least being that we are different in stature, different in nature, different in years, different in gender and different in worldly wisdom. Although these are just a few subtle differences, we do share much in common, the least of which might be our interest in rugby and the most important of which is our belief in liberal philosophies and the free enterprise system.<sup>20</sup>

Effective representation should never be about gender, as all individuals have much to offer and should be valued. Each of us can make worthwhile contributions both in the community and in Parliament, given the range of our own personal experience and expertise.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; pp. 432–433.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.caravanningnews.com/thomas.htm> Retrieved 27/02/2012.

<sup>20</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 13 March 1997, pp. 313–314.

In terms of personal achievements in the short time since being elected, I felt a great deal of accomplishment chairing the marine safety committee established to examine the compulsory carriage of emergency position-indicating radio beacons (EPIRBs). EPIRBs are life-saving devices used to take the search out of search and rescue. As outlined in my Inaugural Speech:

...of personal interest to me are issues relating to the marine industry. As the former executive officer of the Boating Industry Association...I have a sound background of the industry in this State. I am currently chairing a special safety group established by the Premier to examine the current regulations relating to the carriage of emergency position indicating radio beacons ... Although we rejoiced in the successful rescues of Tony Bullimore and Thierry Dubois, it was a great sadness to me to lose ... three people off Cape Naturaliste and again three weeks later to lose three more lives off Esperance.<sup>21</sup>

The committee recommended changes to Western Australia's recreational boating regulations and, since their adoption, several people have been rescued as a result of those in distress activating EPIRBs.

Of the two most defined functions of my role as a member of Parliament, I have found my electorate work in sharp contrast to parliamentary work and indeed to be far more gratifying and uplifting. This is not specifically because it keeps me in touch with the community, but more particularly as I am able to work 'hands on' with the community. Outcomes and achievements can be shared and, while some of those achievements are small in the overall 'big picture', to many these are very positive measures in making their quality of life better.

In an endeavour to stay in touch with the community, I have found doorknocking to be one of the most effective forms of communication, as well as the most levelling experience. It is an essential tool and component in staying abreast of the issues affecting the silent majority. As well as doorknocking, I have an 'open door' policy and it is my objective always to maintain this link with the grassroots, for without their contribution I cannot represent them fully.

As I have already indicated it is a great privilege to be elected to represent the seat of Carine, a seat (under whatever name) long considered to be 'safe', although I do not believe that any member of Parliament can afford to take his or her electorate for granted. Electors have an expectation that those elected to represent them will stay in contact with them, and the appearance of One Nation is both significant and indicative of the electorate's frustration. Their frustration cannot be ignored.

My long-term aspiration is to continue to build on the confidence and trust in me of my electorate and to work towards improving their quality of life, albeit big or small.

#### *Addendum: Parliamentary Reflections*

*(These Reflections were written in 2012.)*

As indicated in my 'Reflections' of 2000 the emergence of One Nation was significant at that time. The party was a vehicle for capturing a range of the electorate's frustrations. With their party strategy of directing preferences in most districts away from the incumbent Court-

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<sup>21</sup> WAPD(LA), 13 March 1997, p. 314.

Cowan government candidates they rendered electoral damage which helped to prevent the return to government of my party at the 2001 election. When that loss was repeated in four years' time it meant that my last seven years as an MLA were on the Opposition benches. I do subscribe to the adage that it is better to be in government than opposition. However, I would say that I had many friends from the other side of politics. Indeed on one occasion when I had lunch in the parliamentary dining room, with Labor Premier, Alan Carpenter, it was highlighted in the media as somewhat unusual.

Following the 2005 poll I spoke at a post-election seminar at the Western Australian Constitutional Centre. I can recall expressing my confidence in Colin Barnett as a leader. However, the Liberal Party was then led in turn by Matt Birney, Paul Omodei and Troy Buswell. With the latter at the helm opinion polls were suggesting that Alan Carpenter would lead Labor to victory at the next poll expected in early 2009. Upon reflection it was a factor that contributed to my preparedness to leave Parliament. Early in 2008 I had also been involved in the occasionally inaccurate reporting about the sometimes aggressive nature of parliamentary behaviour, particularly by some men. I won't retell the story as it is briefly covered in my 'biographical sketch'. However, such episodes are very upsetting and have a deleterious impact on your family. This was also true of another episode concerning one of my sons which was reported in the front page of the *West Australian*. Parliamentarians, and sometimes other leading public figures, can experience great strain as many facets of their lives are highlighted in the media.

As we all know Colin Barnett, stepped back into the leadership of the Liberal Party during the caretaker period of the unexpected early 2008 election. When electoral victory for the 'Alliance' was registered, I was back as a private citizen. Many friends were kind enough to suggest that I may have been a Minister in the new Barnett–Brendon Grylls Alliance if I had remained as the member for Carine. I am not certain of that prediction but as far back as December 1999 to January 2001 I had been a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health. My experience as a shadow Minister was extensive with appointments including transport (sometimes metropolitan only), safety, small business, planning and infrastructure, tourism, environment, heritage and women's interests. Each role had its 'ups and downs' as ultimately you only have a limited influence.

An often fulfilling aspect of parliamentary experience, which depended less upon whether you were in government or opposition, was service in the committee system. I served on a host of select and standing committees throughout my 12 years as an MLA. They were invariably less partisan and were serviced by highly professional staff. Moreover, they were often highly educative. One of my most positive memories pertained to the research, findings and recommendations of the Legislative Assembly Economics and Industry Standing Committee, which at my initiation conducted an inquiry into the activities of the Karrinyup Lakes Lifestyle Village.

As I have often commented, it was a great honour to be a member of Parliament. I greatly enjoyed my role as a parliamentary representative for my electorate, where I was greatly supported by my staff. It is very special to remember that I am one of fewer than 80 women who have been elected to the Western Australian Parliament since Edith Cowan was first elected in 1921.