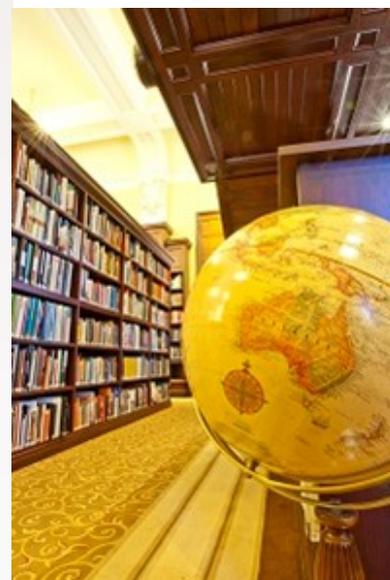


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History Notes: Women's Firsts Portraits—Ruby Hutchison
September 2022

Women's Firsts Portraits: Ruby Hutchison



Ruby Hutchison

Photograph: Parliament of Western Australia

Ruby Hutchison

'Red' Ruby Hutchison was 'rebellious but passionate and tenacious in crusading for the causes in which she believed'. The Hon Ruby Hutchison, tall, bespectacled and well-groomed, was the first woman Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council. Hutchison was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council on 8 May 1954 and began her term on 22 May, representing the Suburban Province. Hutchison had first contested the Suburban Province in 1950 and again in 1953 at a by-election. She later represented the North-East Metropolitan Province from 22 May 1965 to 21 May 1971. She was the first woman elected to an Australian Legislative Council and only the fourth woman elected to WA Parliament. During her seventeen years of service, she was the only woman MP in the chamber. Following her marriage to FRH Lavery on 14 May 1966, she became the first woman to serve with her husband in an Australian parliament. She said she had joined the Australian Labor Party when she was 16 years old.

During Hutchison's political career, she fought for a variety of causes including the right of women to serve on juries, child welfare, education and housing. She argued continuously for the reform or abolition of the Legislative Council. Outraged at the undemocratic property franchise for Council elections, she said in the Council chamber: 'I have grown-up daughters who cannot obtain a vote for this House because they do not own property'. In the same 1962 debate, she became only the second woman suspended from the WA Parliament when she refused to withdraw a statement that she was 'ashamed' to belong to the Legislative Council because of the 'undemocratic' spirit of the House. She did not achieve adult suffrage for Legislative Council elections, but she did eventually see their introduction for the 1965 elections. Hutchison successfully introduced a Private Member's Bill to permit naturalised Australians to enrol for Upper House elections without waiting for the required year. 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 or compulsory voting. She retired on 21 May 1971.

Ruby Florence Herbert was born in Footscray, Victoria on 15 February 1892, the third of ten children to John George Herbert, goldminer and bookmaker, and Florence Louisa Herbert, nee Atherton. When Ruby was four years old, the family moved to the Murchison goldfields in Western Australia. She was educated at the Dominican College, Cue. At 17 years old, she married Daniel Buckley, a miner on 11 March 1909, Meekatharra and they had three sons and four daughters. From the early 1920s, she ran boarding houses and did some dressmaking in the city and inner suburbs to support her family. When her children were adults, she attended Stott's Business College in 1941. She was divorced in 1928. She remarried in 1938, at the District Registry Office, Perth to Alexander Hutchison, labourer but she was widowed in 1961. She married for the last time on 14 May 1966 to WA parliamentarian, Frederick Lavery at Bedford.

Ruby Hutchison was an active member in the community. She was an inaugural member of the Australian Consumers' Association and the founding member and president of the Epilepsy Association of Western Australia, established in 1963. She also volunteered for the Scouts and Girl Guides, including founder and first 'chairman' of the Women's State Auxiliary of the Boy Scouts Association. Ruby died on 17 December 1974 at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Shenton Park, and is buried at Karrakatta Cemetery, Western Australia. FJS Wise, former Premier described her 'as rebellious and as having an overwhelming enthusiasm for her beliefs, she was a fiery speaker and a tenacious crusader for democratic reform, women's rights and social justice'.

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