



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

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

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ADELE SIMONE CARLES



MLA Fremantle from 16 May 2009 (by-election) (GWA; Ind from 6 May 2010).

Adele Carles made history in Western Australia as the first Greens (WA) candidate to be elected to the Legislative Assembly, winning the seat of Fremantle in a by-election on 16 May 2009 occasioned by the resignation of longstanding Labor MLA Jim McGinty. The by-election victory over Labor candidate Peter Tagliaferri, who had just stepped down as Fremantle mayor, did not come as a major surprise because Adele received 27.6 per cent of the primary vote in the September 2008 general election against sitting member Jim McGinty, who was the Minister for Health and Attorney General. She had previously contested the 2005 general election as a Coastal Independent and had become a prominent activist for environmental and social causes. She had established a high profile in Fremantle and when the Liberal Party did not nominate a candidate for the by-election, she was able to gain 53.96 per cent of the two-party preferred vote for victory. This was the highest recorded vote of any Greens candidate in Australia.

Born in Kalgoorlie on 19 February 1968, her New Zealand-born parents were in the goldfields during the nickel boom, her father working as a geologist. Adele's mother, a nurse at Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital, was minding a tiny Wongi baby, who had been abandoned for complex tribal reasons.¹ Adele's parents adopted this baby, when he was only five weeks old. Adele's parents divorced and she spent most of her school years in Auckland, being raised by her mother, alongside her adopted Aboriginal brother. During a decade in New Zealand, Adele was educated at Birkdale College in Auckland. Then in the company of her mother and brother she returned to Perth and later gained a Bachelor of Commerce and a LLB (Hons) from Murdoch University. Adele was married for 15 years to solicitor Francois Carles and they had three daughters.

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 9 June 2009, p. 1.

Before entering Parliament, Adele had been employed as a Federal Government auditor, a trustee in bankruptcy and a solicitor. She became very active in a range of interest groups including those with an environmental focus. She was the convener for the Save South Beach campaign, and supported the Save Freo Beaches and Coogee Coastal campaigns. In 2005, Adele as solicitor, on behalf of Fremantle residents, won a case in the Supreme Court against the State Government. The case centered on the 2005 clean-up of contaminated land at the former lead smelter site at South Beach. Despite the fact that there is no WA legislation securing residents' rights, this South Beach case created new common law in WA. It established that local residents affected by decisions of the State Government have a legal right to be heard and to be afforded procedural fairness and natural justice by those State Government agencies.

Adele continues to support groups including Deckchair Theatre, the Fremantle Society, Sea Shepherd, Forest Rescue, the Sustainable Energy Association, the Conservation Council, the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, Amnesty International and World Vision. One role, very close to the political scene, was as the political researcher for Paul Llewellyn who was the Greens (WA) South West Region member between 2005 and 2009.

In her Inaugural Address on 9 June 2009, Adele acknowledged the Nyoongah people 'as the traditional owners of this land' and acknowledged their 'sovereignty to the land'. She also spoke with feeling about the 'race issues' faced by her brother. She judged that 'until we all fully acknowledge the reality of our history, we cannot move forward as a reconciled society'.² She also spoke of a Nyoongah man who had come to her office who had recently attempted suicide and who needed to get on the priority list for a Homeswest house. The following year, Adele spoke during debate on the Aboriginal Housing Legislation Amendment Bill 2009. Seeking support for more funds and the need for Aboriginal involvement 'in every step', she cited her brother's comment that 'We are the most studied people. We are sick and tired of being studied. Please, we just need support and help for our people. We need help with housing our people'.³

When a parliamentary apology was moved in the Legislative Assembly for the 'removal of children from unmarried mothers' under the legal, health and welfare system operating in Western Australia from the 1940s to the 1980s, Adele fully supported the action.⁴ She spoke with a keen understanding of her family situation which related to not only her brother but also the situation whereby her mother was 53 years old before she found out that she was adopted.⁵ Two months earlier, she supported the motion urging the Government to 'support the original Redress WA scheme and ensure the benefits available to victims not be reduced'. The scheme was aimed at compensating victims for their childhood of abuse and neglect in the care of the state.⁶ In her view, the apparent halving of the originally promised \$80 000 payment showed 'blatant disrespect for the victims—children who were the most vulnerable in our society'.⁷

² *WAPD(LA)*, 9 June 2009, p. 2.

³ *WAPD(LA)*, 10 March 2010, p. 542.

⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 19 October 2010, p. 7886.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 August 2009, p. 5648.

⁷ *Ibid.*

One piece of legislation that Adele firmly opposed, partly on the basis of equity principles, was the Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill 2009, widely known as the ‘stop-and-search Bill’. As she said:

There are major issues that go with this bill, such as how it affects minors. There is nothing in the legislation requiring a parent or guardian to be present when children are to be searched. There are major issues for Indigenous people ... We all know they will bear the brunt of this search power. There are major issues also for people from different ethnic backgrounds, mentally ill people and women out at night.⁸

From 6 May 2010, Adele became a ‘Green Independent’ following her association with Liberal Party Minister Troy Buswell, which had become public in April. Although she remained as the Member for Fremantle, there were tensions within the Greens over the matter. The outcome was Adele’s resignation from Greens (WA). A report by Public Sector Commissioner Mal Wauchope in May 2010 cleared both Buswell and Carles of any misuse of entitlements⁹ arising from their association. The question of resources available to Adele as an Independent Green arose when in October 2010 she had discussions on the matter with Premier Barnett.¹⁰ Indeed, Opposition Leader Eric Ripper lodged an allegation of serious misconduct with the Corruption and Crime Commission (CCC) as he believed the resources were in return for Adele supporting the Government on supply and no-confidence motions. In response, Corruption and Crime Commissioner Roberts-Smith noted that ‘as Ms Carles did not stand to gain personal benefit from the alleged arrangement, her actions could not be described as improper ... [and that] the possible benefit Mr Barnett received from the alleged arrangement could not be said to have been obtained corruptly’.¹¹ Adele remains as the only Independent MP in the Legislative Assembly without an additional staff member to assist with parliamentary duties.

Whether as an Independent Green or as a Greens (WA) MLA, Adele consistently advocates environmental causes. One government decision that she rallied against was the approval granted to Magellan Metals to export lead carbonate through the port of Fremantle. Her close monitoring helped reveal that there were instances of Magellan Metals failing to comply with the implementation conditions.¹² She also successfully advocated against an iron ore company attempting to export through Fremantle. Another constant concern was the impact of dredging in the port of Fremantle.¹³ In her view:

... climate change is on our doorstep. There will be sea level rises, species extinction and the dislocation of millions of people around the world.

Indeed, as elected representatives:

... it is up to us to take responsibility for this in Western Australia’.¹⁴

⁸ WAPD (LA), 11 November 2009, p. 8844.

⁹ Harry Phillips and Liz Kerr, ‘Political Chronicle: Western Australia, January to June 2010’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 56, No. 4, December 2010, p. 656.

¹⁰ Joe Spagnolo, ‘Barnett vote “deal”’, *Sunday Times*, 7 November 2010, p. 3.

¹¹ CCC Media Release, 6 December 2010.

¹² WAPD(LA), 16 February 2011, p. 489.

¹³ WAPD(LA), 15 February 2011, p. 197.

¹⁴ WAPD(LA), 9 June 2009, p. 4694.

In this direction, one action that Adele enthusiastically endorsed was the City of Fremantle's decision on 1 October 2009 to become the first local government area in Western Australia to achieve carbon neutral status. She noted that there are now photovoltaic panels on the roof of the Fremantle Leisure Centre and said that she 'would love to see solar panels grace the roof of ... Parliament House'.¹⁵

Another issue she raised has been the failure by either side of politics to allocate funds for a new Fremantle Traffic Bridge.¹⁶ When speaking to the 2011 budget she indicated, 'I have said a lot about the dangerous state of the Fremantle traffic bridge. An engineers' report commissioned in 2004 said that it is at risk of collapse'.¹⁷ In her speech in the budget debate speech a year earlier, Adele said:

The arts sector in Fremantle needs a major funding boost. In recent times we have lost the Fremantle History Museum, the Fremantle Light and Sound Discovery Centre, the Fremantle Motor Museum and the World of Energy Museum. Port cities like Liverpool have paved their way to success and revitalisation through a heavy emphasis on the arts and culture and in particular on museums. Our local Fremantle theatre companies like Deckchair Theatre and Harbour Theatre struggle to find rehearsal and performance space despite their ever increasing potential audience from domestic and overseas tourists.¹⁸

At another juncture, Adele sought the retention of the culturally significant CY O'Connor building on Victoria Quay in Fremantle.¹⁹ In her Inaugural Speech, she had given praise to Dr Ian Alexander, a former MLA, who held the post of president of the Fremantle Society. Many other Fremantle residents were recognised for their countless hours in committees and community meetings. She also observed that 'global citizens are often labelled activists to marginalise them, to create a sense of them being outsiders'.²⁰

In September 2009, underscoring her commitment to gender equality, she voted to end legal discrimination against women breastfeeding in public. During the debate, Adele stated:

I speak as a woman and as a mother who has breastfed three children ... I know what it is like to sit in a restaurant very discreetly breastfeeding a baby and then be asked to go to the public toilet. A woman should not have to do that. We should have protection in legislation ... This is why we need women in Parliament.²¹

Adele used parliamentary debates on the Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery Amendment Bill 2009 to introduce a container deposit scheme for Western Australia. She moved an amendment:

... to implement a comprehensive Container Deposit Scheme for Western Australia; and the purpose of my amendment is to allow the waste avoidance and resource recovery account to be used to establish a container deposit scheme in Western Australia. This is a waste reduction strategy that has been hugely successful in South Australia, and such a scheme has immense community support in this state. South Australia recycles more than twice as much glass, three

¹⁵ WAPD(LA), 15 October 2009, p. 8187.

¹⁶ See Brendan Foster, 'MP has bridge collapse fears', *Fremantle Herald*, 5 July 2010, p. 2.

¹⁷ WAPD(LA), 26 May 2011, p. 4124.

¹⁸ WAPD(LA), 27 May 2010, p. 3621.

¹⁹ WAPD(LA), 16 March 2010, p. 677.

²⁰ WAPD(LA), 9 June 2009, p. 4693.

²¹ WAPD(LA), 9 September 2009, p. 6662.

times as many aluminium cans, and four times the number of plastic containers as Western Australia does, due to its container deposit scheme. This amendment will have no budgetary impact, but it will send a message to the Western Australian community about the importance of recycling containers and reducing landfill.²²

The Labor Opposition and Independent Janet Woollard (q.v.) supported her amendment. The vote was tied at 28 ayes and 28 noes, but the Speaker's casting vote defeated the container deposit scheme initiative.²³

Adele has gained a reputation for speaking out in Parliament against development proposals that threaten environmental and indigenous cultural values. Forest activists and environmental campaigners seek her support to raise their issues in Parliament and she often speaks at their rallies on the steps of Parliament. Margaret River campaigners sought her support in their quest to stop coalmining and she hosted them in Parliament during her grievance motion on the matter to the environment minister.²⁴ Adele was also outspoken on the treatment of Indigenous elders in the Government's handling of Indigenous native title on the site of the proposed James Price Point gas hub, after she visited the various stakeholders in Broome. The multibillion-dollar development had divided the Indigenous traditional native title holders around James Price Point—some of whom stood to receive significant funds from an agreement to allow the site to be developed. Others felt it was a betrayal of their culture and songlines to allow the development and opposed it. Adele spoke in Parliament about a key opponent of the proposal, Goolarabooloo elder and law boss Joseph Roe, who had been labelled a 'spoiler' by Premier Colin Barnett. She spoke of his support in the community and his credentials to speak for country:

... he was the youngest male to have gone through the traditional law, and he was the only male to have gone through the traditional law twice—through the law of both the northern and southern divisions. This marks him as a special law boss in the Kimberley.²⁵

Adele met with Joseph Roe in Broome and later quoted his words to the Assembly:

"It's a big responsibility, a very, very big responsibility. I'm not doing it because I hate development I'm doing it because I want to save my culture, my law; that's the only thing we've got that belongs to us. That's the thing I want to keep."²⁶

In 2012, Adele again showed the important role Independent MPs can play when she entered into negotiations with the Government over the Prostitution Bill. Ms Carles had visited Scandinavia to meet with policymakers about the Swedish model, which had been successful in reducing prostitution in Sweden. With her vote being crucial to the successful passage of the Bill in Western Australia, Adele used the information she obtained in Scandinavia to propose three key amendments to achieve something for women harmed by the industry, which would allow them to exit it. She proposed removing the criminal focus from women in prostitution, ensuring brothel owners do not employ underage girls, and funding to establish a women's shelter, with support services including treatment programs for drug and alcohol addictions. Adele's amendments were described by Premier Colin Barnett as 'sensible,

²² *WAPD(LA)*, 17 September 2009, p. 5.

²³ *WAPD(LA)*, 15 September 2009, p. 6961. See also *WAPD(LA)*, 22 September 2009, p. 7404.

²⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 9 September 2010, pp. 6284–6285.

²⁵ *WAPD(LA)*, 17 February 2011, p. 668.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

positive suggestions'.²⁷ Throughout her membership of the 'minority' thirty-eighth Parliament, Adele's opinions and votes were widely reported as they were often significant to the fate of motions and legislation. She had not consistently supported the Government in her voting like other Independents, although from the time she entered the Legislative Assembly she sat on the government side of the chamber, partly because of the animosity directed at her by some Labor members discomfited at losing the seat of Fremantle for the first time in 85 years. She was the beneficiary of Standing Orders that were adopted to provide Independent MLAs with debating time in the chamber. She developed a high profile in the Parliament as she was not treading the path of a major political party backbencher.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Politics is not a profession for the faint hearted or the thin skinned. Taking a position on a controversial matter means that there will be many people who disagree with you and who will do so loudly in the media and on blog sites. Soon after being elected, I spoke out on radio about police conduct, noting that while police in the main do a good job, there are some that are racist. The police union boss unleashed an unprecedented media attack on me for these comments, accusing me of being a 'two-bob politician' and threatening legal action against me. He said 'this woman who doesn't go out at night has no idea' and said that I 'had absolutely demeaned every police officer in Australia'. Clearly, he saw me as an easy target, being a female MP.

I am constantly amazed at the level of personal vitriol hurled across the chamber in Parliament and the dysfunctional way that MPs communicate in Parliament, just like schoolyard bullies. It is certainly a gender issue, with men being the worst offenders and comprising 75 per cent of the MPs in the Legislative Assembly.

I noted in my Inaugural Speech that I'm not the likeliest of MPs, being a mother with three school-age children named Genevieve, Claudia and Charlotte. The strange hours that Parliament sits, long into the night at times, make it hard for MPs like me who are mothers. I supported a motion by a fellow female Independent MP for business hours to be introduced for Parliament, but we were the only two MPs out of 59 to support it. I then realised that both big parties like the status quo, where middle-aged men in suits are the norm. These male MPs don't want to see more women in there, particularly women who dare to speak out in Parliament.

As an Independent MP, I am not constrained by party politics and I vote freely on the merits of each matter before me, so I am different from all other MPs in the chamber. I tend to support the Labor Opposition on contested votes, particularly on social justice issues. However, I will support the Government when I believe it is on the right track. I speak out when I can see that the women's, children's or environmental perspective has been missed—unfortunately, these viewpoints are often sidelined. That's why we need more women in Parliament and why I know that while I have the privilege of being there, my voice counts.

As I write this, new prostitution legislation hinges on my vote and I have the opportunity to negotiate changes that will benefit some of the most vulnerable women in this state—those

²⁷ Beatrice Thomas, 'No deals on phase-out in prostitution', *West Australian*, 10 April 2012, p. 18.

trapped in prostitution. I am seeking proper exit funding for women harmed by prostitution who wish to leave, including a women's shelter with support services including drug and alcohol rehabilitation, medical and psychological treatment.

Sometimes it's a lonely place to be and I feel like an outsider in Parliament. However, this sense of difference that I feel as I look around the chamber only makes me more determined to speak out for women and other marginalised groups in this state.