



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

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

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ANDREA RUTH MITCHELL



MLA Kingsley from 6 September 2008 (Lib). Acting Speaker from 2011. Chairman Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People 2009–2012; member 2008–2012. Member Economics and Industry Standing Committee from March 2011.

In November 2008, the honour of moving the Address-in-Reply in the Legislative Assembly to His Excellency the Governor Dr Kenneth Comminos Michael, AC, following his speech to open the thirty-eighth Parliament in the Legislative Council, was afforded to Andrea Mitchell, the newly elected Liberal member for Kingsley. Although the Legislative Assembly had been expanded to 59 members, she was one of only two women (the other was Liza Harvey [q.v.]) to gain election for the Liberal Party in that chamber. In fact, the number of women members in the chamber was only 11, or a little below 19 per cent, the lowest percentage reading of women in any Australian legislature.¹ Andrea had literally come a long way as she was born in Brisbane on 27 February 1956. When Andrea was in year 5, her accountant father, Ronald Mitchell, and mother, Margaret Mitchell (nee Gracie), had been transferred to Bowen, a small town in north Queensland. There Andrea, who had briefly attended Wellers Hill Primary School in Brisbane before the family moved north, was educated at Bowen Primary School and then Bowen High School. In her opinion:

The five years that my family had in this town were amazing and formed a significant part of my life, and they have been instrumental in how my life developed'.²

Subsequently, with her father's employment transfer to Perth in 1970, Andrea completed her secondary schooling at Melville Senior High School. The family had only planned to stay for five years but they 'fell in love with Perth and its lifestyle' and they remained in the west.³ For

¹ Janet Wilson, *Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender*, as at 13 April 2011, Commonwealth Parliamentary Library.

² *WAPD(LA)*, 6 November 2008, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*

Andrea, the support of her parents and two sisters and their families meant that she continued to benefit from 'a close family environment with strong Christian values and support'.⁴

At the University of Western Australia, Andrea was one of the inaugural Bachelor of Physical Education graduates, and then completed her Diploma of Education leading her in the direction of a career in teaching linked with sport. As a physical education teacher for some 15 years, she had postings at senior high schools at Kwinana, South Fremantle, Kent Street and Rossmoyne. In her view, '[d]eveloping and educating young people is a very rewarding and, of course, at times very challenging experience'.⁵ And:

It is vital that our education system supports our long system supports our young people as they prepare for the future. Education is a lifelong process and should be a positive experience.⁶

Andrea then transferred her employment to the Department of Sport and Recreation where she was in turn a youth sport consultant, executive officer, manager consultant and manager of regional services. The latter position was found to be most rewarding because she was able to use sport and recreation 'to achieve broader based community outcomes while at the same time improving the lifestyle of people living in the regions'.⁷ Working experience can be recalled in places as remote as Quobba station, Indigenous camps at the Argyle diamond mine, Meekatharra and Kalumburu, as well as more well-known centres such as Albany, Esperance, Broome, Kununurra, Kalgoorlie, the midwest, the Gascoyne, the Pilbara and the south west. All this helped Andrea to acquire an appreciation of the need to develop the state outside of Perth and the presence of:

... incredible people throughout regional Western Australia who are committed to reinventing their towns and their industries and to growing the opportunities in the country.⁸

In this context, Andrea developed an ideology which she expressed in the Parliament to promote the value of sport and recreation in the community. In her view, it forms part of the social fabric of the community and has the potential to prevent many problems in health, crime, and antisocial behaviour. Moreover, it can assist in education, tourism, community development and social cohesion. On other occasions, she has linked these theories to the social capital research of scholar Hugh Mackay and suggested they can be applied to music and the arts.⁹ Some of these ideas were formulated during her extensive experience in tennis administration, which has been a major part of her life story. A long-time member of the Hensman Park Tennis Club in South Perth, with sister Glynis being a leading player in the state, Andrea also filled a number of voluntary roles at Tennis West before she became president of Tennis West in 1996, a position she held until the year of her entry to Parliament in 2008. This encompassed responsibility for overseeing the development of the game of tennis in Western Australia, where there is hardly a town without a tennis court and where the club is often part of the social fabric of many communities. In addition, she was a director of Tennis Australia, which sets the direction of tennis in Australia and conducts the highly successful Australian Open. Another role was as a director of the Hopman Cup, being the only

⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *WAPD(LA)*, 6 November 2008, p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹ *WAPD(LA)*, 15 February 2011, p. 188.

director of this International Tennis Federation event who lived in Perth. These roles led to the development of extensive networks at state, national and international level, and in 2000 she was awarded an Australian Sports Medal.

It may be said that Andrea made a significant change in the direction of her life by entering politics. Although always interested in politics and government, it had not been a lifetime ambition for her to be a politician. However, when she changed from 'enjoying watching' from the outside to be actively involved in the 'Alliance' Government from the inside she made the following observation:

The sport and recreation industry is full of politics and I am well versed in getting the best from people in situations that require a cool head and a calm, considered approach. The sport and recreation industry is a people industry, and politics is about representing people and preparing the future for our people. Setting the direction for the future of Western Australia is a critical component that I am excited about as there are few professions that can really impact in this area.¹⁰

Andrea's immediate electoral success had been facilitated by her decision to follow one of the recognised best practice electoral strategies by establishing residence within the electoral district of Kingsley, for which she had won Liberal Party preselection. She appreciated the support of Hon Cheryl Edwardes (q.v.), a former MLA for Kingsley, as well as two notable personalities with tennis links—namely, Hon Peter Collier and Pastor Margaret Court¹¹—but she was well aware that Kingsley, though eminently winnable, was not a 'safe seat'. Previously, at least by residence, she had mainly been a 'south of the river person'. Without doubt, her campaign, which produced a 4.6 per cent swing to her candidature, was grassroots based, incorporating doorknocking of more than 11 000 homes across the Kingsley, Greenwood and Woodvale suburbs and listening to local school parents and citizens associations, church groups, seniors, sporting and resident groups to determine what was needed to progress solutions for issues confronting the community. Important local matters given attention included bus and train services to the suburbs, the expansion of the Mitchell Freeway, the redevelopment of Greenwood Senior High School, the establishment of a Greenwood educational precinct, development of the Luisini Winery and reduction of the antisocial behaviour in some sections of the district. These matters, plus scores of others, are featured on the member's website. The tabulation of media releases is also extensive. They total an extremely busy schedule for Andrea Mitchell, MLA.

One parliamentary procedure which Andrea has regularly employed to focus on events in Kingsley has been the 90-second statement. Not surprisingly, she spoke of the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kingsley Tennis Club, the home of well-known tennis player Casey Dellacqua. Many of the benefits that flow from the club's activities were identified, including people volunteering their skills and time, family involvement, social cohesion, development in tennis skills, governance and management, competition, a healthy environment incorporating physical, social and mental health, and leadership.¹² The same parliamentary procedure was employed to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kingsley Woodvale Junior Cricket Club, with special recognition given to the club's

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 6 November 2008, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² *WAPD(LA)*, 18 June 2009, pp. 5263–5264.

administrators for actively promoting a culture of participation, teamwork, excellence and community spirit.¹³

The annual Premier's Statement, to which members respond, is an occasion that Andrea has used to provide more detail of her electorate and broader state needs in the context of the Government's direction. For instance, on one occasion she acknowledged the work of Minister Robyn McSweeney (q.v.) with a group called Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. It was once again a case of 'discovering different people in the community who are doing a remarkable amount of work, and not for any praise or anything'.¹⁴ The group had indicated 'that many grandparents are now raising grandchildren for reasons that are not of their choice but are mostly unfortunate'.¹⁵ As a consequence of this action, some of these people were to become eligible for some funding. It highlights how Ministers and members constantly attempt to make a difference. Another initiative was the Minister for Health introducing swimming pools into remote communities. Andrea was aware that many people questioned the point of such a program '[b]ut the benefits have been fantastic not just for health but also for education'.¹⁶

In Parliament, Andrea has been appointed as an Acting Speaker of the Legislative Assembly to assist the Speaker to fulfil his duties in the chamber. She was also for three years Chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, and from March 2011 a member of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee. In the winter of 2011, Premier Barnett appointed her to undertake a special project on training and tourism in which she was required to work closely with Hon Kim Hames as tourism Minister and Peter Collier as the Minister for Training and Workplace Development. Earlier, she had gained membership of the Australian and New Zealand Sports Law Association and became a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Although Andrea had not planned a political career, she was soon able to 'make a difference'. Despite Australia often being depicted as a sport loving nation, this observation is often made with singular focus on achieving outstanding sporting results. Historically absent from the debate have been the broader social capital benefits of sport. She has constantly been prepared to argue intellectually in Parliament for the broader benefits of sport. If she was not articulating these benefits, she has been asking questions of Terry Waldron, the 'Alliance' Government's Minister for Sport and Recreation. These responses record in Parliament the broader positive outcomes such as community health, particularly pertinent at a time when the Government has been planning the building of a major sporting stadium at Burswood and other important facilities. This is not to overlook, moreover, the comprehensive fulfilment of tasks by Andrea as a backbench member of Parliament as the member for Kingsley.

¹³ *WAPD(LA)*, 11 March 2010, p. 633.

¹⁴ *WAPD(LA)*, 15 February 2011, p. 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁶ *WAPD(LA)*, 15 February 2011, p. 189.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

To be elected to the Western Australian Parliament is a great honour and privilege for me. My family has always had a commitment to community service, but I am the first member of the family to undertake a political career. This move has created much interest amongst my family and friends who have all supported me and taken a keen interest in my transition. I recall my surprise when my niece who was 10 years old at the 2008 election could announce to the family at dinner the Sunday night after the election my winning margin. She continues to maintain an interest in any upcoming elections to ensure that I am prepared.

I have the greatest respect for the Parliament, the proceedings and the traditions. They have provided a wise basis for our democracy with a long history of success and stability. I will never take for granted the honour of working within Parliament and the responsibilities that accompany the position as a member of Parliament.

I must say the role of a member of Parliament is one of very few key positions for which there is little specific information about the job, or in fact a job description! Prior to the election, the entire focus is on winning the seat, with little attention to what occurs after the result. After the election, there was a briefing from the Clerk and current and former members of Parliament, but I suspect for many of us, much of what was said was probably missed.

My experience with the parliamentary process was limited before becoming a member, although I was very familiar with the work of government. One of my first tasks was to be upskilled in the parliamentary processes. I did this by spending as much time in the chamber as I could, to listen and observe the debates and the processes. This was valuable advice, and as I would give to anyone else commencing their parliamentary career, regardless of their experience.

My knowledge and experience of the parliamentary process again increased significantly when I became an Acting Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 2011. I know that my participation in the parliamentary process will be more effective over the years as a result of dedicated learning and understanding of these systems.

I believe that more people in the community should have a greater understanding of the Parliament and the role of their elected representatives. This should commence for all students at school and continue throughout life at all levels. I compliment the Parliamentary Education Office at Parliament House for the outstanding tours and programs it conducts for schools and the public. I do believe that these should be more widely promoted within the community. Our democracy is very well respected, and as a nation and a state, more people should understand the process of the Parliament, but not solely from short 'grabs of action' taken for a news broadcast. Our state relies on an effective parliamentary system and the election of quality personnel with a range of skills and experiences.

I do not believe in quotas for the number of women as members of Parliament, although I recognise the immense value of women within the Parliament. I am pleased that I am a member of a party that supported me because of my skills and abilities for this position, and not because I am a woman. I believe that the best people should be elected, not representation based on a quota.

Yes, I have certainly had the comments that 'I am only one of two lower House female members of my party' or 'how do I get on with all those men'. I have been most fortunate that my professional and voluntary lives have been in a male-dominated industry, so I in fact thrive in this situation. I was the first woman to be elected president of a state tennis association in Australia, and the first woman to be elected to the board of Tennis Australia.

I do welcome more women into the Parliament as I believe they add another component to the fabric of any organisation, but I would not support a quota system to increase the number of women parliamentarians as I believe this is even more demeaning to women than having few representatives.

There is no doubt that previous experiences and positions make a significant impact on your effectiveness as a politician, and having a broad range of experiences and networks contribute to this. Being one-dimensional in knowledge or interests would be restrictive in what you can contribute to the Parliament or what you gain from the experiences.

I see also the qualities of self-motivation, high organisation skills, time management, integrity and being true to yourself and your values, as being important in this position. Weaknesses and inconsistencies will be exposed. A sense of humour is a prerequisite, and the ability to laugh at yourself should not be lost.

I believe that a member of Parliament is in the people business; that is, serving the people, legislating for the people, and setting directions and visions for the people of Western Australia. As such, I would suggest that if you do not like spending time with people, meeting with many people, listening to people, communicating with people and thinking about people, this position may not be for you.

I welcome making speeches, public speaking, debating and undertaking interviews, as it is vital that you are able to effectively present a situation, create opportunities for promotion and provide solutions. Participating in debates and making speeches in the chamber are critical in the fabric of being a successful politician, and I relish these occasions. I was very honoured to be asked by the Premier, Hon Colin Barnett, MLA, to move the Address-in-Reply to the Governor's address at the opening of the thirty-eighth Parliament. There would be few politicians who make their maiden speech in such an inspiring and unique environment.

I am pleased that I have been able to represent and recognise many members of my electorate in speeches in Parliament, particularly through grievances and members' statements. This is such a unique and simple method to achieve outcomes and promote accomplishments in the electorate.

Committee work provides another avenue for parliamentary work, which is very valuable. I am on two committees, I chaired an oversight committee (Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People) for three years, and I am a member of a committee of inquiry (Economics and Industry Standing Committee). Although the focus for each is different, I have gained in knowledge and experience through these committees. The reports tabled from this committee work complement the legislative component of the Parliament.

My first term as a member of Parliament has been most rewarding and stimulating. I thoroughly enjoy the role and am so pleased with my move into a political career. If I could quote from the final lines of my maiden speech:

I am excited about the opportunities I now have.

I am humbled by the responsibilities I now have.

I am committed to the future of Western Australia and to the electorate of Kingsley.¹⁷

¹⁷ See *WAPD(LA)*, 6 November 2008, p. 21.