



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

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

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SHELLEY ELIZABETH EATON



MLC Mining and Pastoral Region 12 September 2008 (casual vacancy)–21 May 2009. Member Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 2008–2009.

Shelley Eaton is one of a small number of women who were elected to the Legislative Council to fill a casual vacancy but did not have the opportunity to serve a full term. She served in the state's upper House from 12 September 2008, six days after the general election in that year, until 21 May 2009 after which the newly elected members took their seats in the chamber. The vacancy in the Mining and Pastoral Region had resulted from the decision of ALP member Vince Catania to contest the Legislative Assembly seat of North West (successfully as it transpired) enabling Shelley as fourth on the ALP ticket in the 2005 election to fill the vacancy on a recount of votes cast in 2005.

Born in Subiaco on 11 January 1965 Shelley Elizabeth Eaton was the daughter of engineer Ronald John Chamberlain and Patricia Joan Lawson. Shelley was educated at Marmion Primary School, Carine Senior High School and Tuart College, and on 6 November 1993 at North Beach married Graham Eaton by whom she had one son. She became actively involved in politics in 1995 and over the next thirteen years worked as an electorate officer and policy adviser to Labor MLCs, first Tom Stephens and then Ljiljana Ravlich (q.v.) and again for Tom Stephens after relocating from Perth to Broome in 2000. Her involvement with the ALP which included terms as secretary of the Broome sub branch, delegate to the Kalgoorlie north electoral council and vice-president of Country Labor, was hardly surprising given that her mother had worked first for a succession of state members including Lyla Elliott (q.v.), Roy Cloughton and John Harman and then for federal members John Dawkins and Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) before returning to the state scene with Jim McGinty. It was in the early stages when she was about the age of twelve and her mother was working with Lyla Elliott that Shelley first visited Parliament House and in her Inaugural Speech in September 2008 she told the House when 'some 20 years later' she came to work at Parliament she had the experience of working 'from the exact same office my mum had worked in all those years

before'.¹ Such was the family involvement that both her aunt and brother also worked for Labor MPs.

Having attempted for the first time in 2005 to enter Parliament itself from fourth place on the ALP ticket for the Mining and Pastoral Region, Shelley broadened her political experience when elected in October 2007 for a four-year term as a councillor on the Shire of Broome, though as it eventuated she left the Broome Council a week before the expiration of her term in the Legislative Council. Before her election to the Legislative Council to fill the casual vacancy she also worked as school registrar at Roebuck Primary School and after leaving the Parliament she relocated to the Northern Territory where she became actively involved in small business.

During her eight month term in Parliament, Shelley served on the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation and asked a number of parliamentary questions, mostly related to issues concerning the Mining and Pastoral Region. The strongest indication of her focus and allocation of priorities came from her Inaugural Speech when she spoke at length about the diversity in the Kimberley Region and the challenges which this posed to Governments, including those connected with the more than 200 smaller indigenous communities to other communities with both population and land area greater than some of the gazetted townships. In this regard she placed particular stress on native title holders whom she described as having:

... legal rights and interests that leave governments with obligations to deal with those rights and interests with respect and in accordance with the requirement of law, let alone the Australian ethical imperative to give them a fair go ... The new government must make it clear that the Indigenous leaders will sit at the negotiation table with industry and government as legitimate and respected stakeholders.²

When leaving Parliament she expressed pleasure as to what had been achieved in negotiations with native title holders over the Browse Basin near Broome while expressing reservations concerning continuing issues about social impacts in the Shire of Broome. More broadly she related her shire council experience to the need in the Broome area to 'promote strategies for affordable and adaptable housing, support youth programs that enhance the lives of young people and encourage the provision of safe places to socialise'.³

The theme of isolation was another that concerned her, arguing in her Inaugural Speech that:

... isolation is a factor that features in cases of child abuse, regardless of cultural background.

To Shelley, isolation:

... is not just about living in a remote place. It is about feeling remote—not being a participant in the everyday workings of society, not having choices economically, being dependent, and lacking the basic skills and necessities for the future. This feeling of isolation in its broadest sense is still the experience of many local Kimberley people.⁴

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 25 November 2008, p. 364.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 364–365.

³ *WAPD(LC)* 19 May 2009, p. 4128

⁴ *WAPD(LC)* 25 November 2008, p. 368.

In her view then:

For the Kimberley to succeed, ideology shall be put aside, leadership and respect shall be pursued, and we can expect that sitting at the negotiation table will be the full gamut of stakeholders. Perhaps the Kimberley will produce another first: we can show others that embracing diversity and encouraging broad participation will result in success.⁵

Despite her very short parliamentary career Shelley Eaton, like her mother before her, has spent a significant part of her life working for the political ideals in which she believed. Those parliamentary members with whom she worked found her a valuable associate but the vicissitudes of party and factional politics limited to a few months her opportunity to participate actively in the Parliament itself.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

The demands on Shelley Eaton's life after she relocated in the Northern Territory were such that she felt unable to contribute written reflections. However, in her valedictory speech she was able to describe her feelings as her short term in Parliament came to a close.

It has been an enormous privilege and pleasure to have served the community of Western Australia through the Mining and Pastoral Region, albeit for only the past eight months. I thank the Labor Party for its support and belief in me and for giving me this great opportunity.

As I leave the house this week, I take with me many treasured memories of the experience. It was mentioned earlier today that I was here as a babe in arms, but I was probably about 12 years of age when I started running around the corridors of Parliament. I do not know if my mum appreciates the age she has been given a couple of times today! Although I have worked in the building for a number of years, I do not think a person can truly appreciate the work of members of Parliament until one is sitting in this place ...

Over the past eight months I have had the opportunity to travel a lot through the Mining and Pastoral Region. I have met a lot of community groups and organisations, and continue to hear the many issues associated with living and working in regional Western Australia ... I believe the return to country program is absolutely critical for the north west of Western Australia. When Aboriginal people come into a town for whatever reasons—they could be going to a funeral, for health reasons or justice issues—often they get stuck in the town and cannot get back to their communities. The return to country program provides them with an avenue to get back to their communities ...

The other program run in the Northern Territory is the identification program. A lot of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions do not have birth certificates and they do not have the knowledge of how to access them. The Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation provides identification cards to people ...

The third program is the short-term accommodation program ... We desperately need to look at affordable short-term accommodation in our towns ...

⁵ Ibid.

In my maiden speech I quoted a great Aboriginal leader from the Kimberley, Patrick Dodson. I thought I would pick up on what another great Indigenous leader from the Kimberley, Hon Ernie Bridge, said in his valedictory speech. He stated —

Never let go of the obligations we have to look after the interests of ordinary Australians because they make up Australia; they are Australians. Not only are they Australians, but also we are all Australians together.

My final plea to the members of this Parliament is never to lose sight of that reality and their obligation to fight for that cause.⁶

⁶ *WAPD(LC)*, 19 May 2009, pp. 4125–4127.