



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

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

David Black  
and  
Harry Phillips

**Parliamentary History Project  
Parliament of Western Australia  
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## CAROL ANNE MARTIN



MLA Kimberley from 10 February 2001 (ALP). Chairperson Education and Health Standing Committee 2001–2005. Member Parliamentary Services Committee 2001–2005.  
First Aboriginal woman elected to an Australian Parliament.

For her Inaugural Speech to the Legislative Assembly on 1 May 2001, Carol Martin was afforded the honour of moving the Address-in-Reply motion, and told the House ‘I am more proud than I ever thought possible to be the first Aboriginal woman elected to Parliament in Australia.’<sup>1</sup> Since winning the Kimberley seat as an Australian Labor Party (ALP) candidate at the general election three months earlier on 10 February, there had been widespread national interest in Carol’s credentials to achieve such an historic electoral breakthrough for any federal, state or territory Parliament. Significantly, she was able to repeat her electoral success, holding the vast Kimberley seat, geographically larger than Victoria, at the 2005 and 2008 state elections. In her first speech Carol emphasised that it was delivered on 1 May, a day depicted as very significant for working men and women. It was a reminder of the 1947 Pilbara strikes when hundreds of Aboriginal people from stations throughout the Pilbara protested for better conditions and award wages. It was also, sadly, the day when her great friend, mentor and kindred spirit, Rob Riley, had taken his life five years earlier. Some of Riley’s advice was mentioned in the chamber: ‘there are two things you must always remember: You can’t be wrong if you are right; and you don’t stop fighting for justice simply because those around you don’t like it, you just keep on fighting’.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Subiaco as Carol Pilkington on 31 October 1957, Carol attended Victoria Park (1963), Highgate (1964) and Carlisle (1967) primary schools, and Kewdale Senior High School from 1970. At the age of 12 Carol was removed from her family and placed in foster care, and a

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<sup>1</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 1 May 2001, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> See Phillip Pandal, David Black and Harry Phillips, *Parliament: Mirror of the People?—Members of the Parliament of Western Australia 1890–2007*, Perth: Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, ‘First Woman Aboriginal Member of Parliament in Australia’, 2007, pp. 67–70.

care and protection application was issued which legally removed her from her family until the age of 18. She has recounted that, after three particularly hard years in the system running away from her foster homes, she finally made a decision to move to Broome at the age of 15 in 1973 to live with her mother, ‘a decision’, said Martin, ‘that changed the entire direction of my life’.<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the move back to the Kimberley Carol has lived in the area. In 1982 she settled in Derby where she met and married her second husband, Brian, in 1984; he subsequently ran against Ernie Bridge (Martin’s predecessor in Kimberley) as an Independent at the 1996 state election. Carol and Brian had two children, a son and a daughter, and five grandchildren. In 1993 she completed a Bachelor of Arts (Social Work) at Curtin University and subsequently worked with several organisations and projects in the Kimberley as a consultant, counsellor and trainer. She is also a talented artist, and examples of her art work can be seen hanging in the Governor-General’s office and at Curtin University in the Centre for Aboriginal Studies.

Before entering Parliament Carol had for two years been a shire councillor for Derby and the West Kimberley. This provided her with some very useful political training, and in 1993 she joined the ALP. As with many other Labor women, appreciation was afforded to Emily’s List, said by Martin to be ‘the organisation involving amazing women by whom I have been fortunate to have been embraced and supported during the process of becoming a member of Parliament’.<sup>4</sup> Carol has also been a member of the National Association for Loss and Grief in Western Australia, a member of the Industry Training Advisory Board and a member of the Support Committee for Young Women’s Health Wise.

In 2011 Carol announced that she would not be standing for re-election for the planned state election in March 2013, as after some 12 years of busy parliamentary life including extensive travel, she sought to spend more time with her family and fishing, hunting, camping and reading. She is also a keen darts player. When Carol announced her intention to retire, the state ALP Leader of the Opposition, Eric Ripper, paid tribute to his parliamentary colleague of more than a decade: ‘Carol has made a valuable contribution to the people of Western Australia and has worked towards building better facilities and services in the fast growing Kimberley region.’ He judged that she ‘has been an outstanding advocate for bettering the lives of people in the Kimberley’ and chose to list a number of projects in the Kimberley, including the spending of more than \$100 million for the replacement or upgrades to every hospital in the Kimberley; the upgrading of critical infrastructure in the Kimberley region including roads and power supplies; building multifunction police facilities at Balgo, Bidyadanga, Dampier Peninsula, Kalumburu and Warmun; and continuing work on the Ord River irrigation scheme and associated native title issues.<sup>5</sup>

Not all the projects Carol supported gained a consensus of praise. One of her most difficult experiences in public life arose from her being vilified over her support for the controversial Woodside Petroleum \$30 billion liquefied natural gas hub project planned for James Price Point, 60 kilometres north of Broome. Reports indicated that in April 2011 a vote by the Goolarabooloo Jabirr Jabirr people was passed to allow the gas hub and a deal was signed in June, after the Kimberley Land Council negotiated a \$1.3 billion jobs and compensation

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<sup>3</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 1 May 2001, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 1 May 2001, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> <http://janinefreeman.com/news/2011/09/28/eric-ripper-pays-tribute-to-carol-martin-au>

package for Kimberley Aborigines.<sup>6</sup> In some quarters the veracity of the deal was questioned. The scale of the protests at James Price Point led the police to claim that some residents and workers were at risk. In Carol's view the vast majority of Australians concerned about the environment would also be concerned by the behaviour of some anti-gas campaigners who had 'bullied, lied and abused' Indigenous people in a bid to stop the project'.<sup>7</sup> A newsletter naming Kimberley Land Council Chief Executive Nolan Hunter, former chief Wayne Bergman and Carol contained such offensive language that Premier Colin Barnett decided to ask the Attorney General's department to investigate whether charges could be laid against the authors of the material under racial vilification laws. Carol herself was also considering legal action.<sup>8</sup>

Carol has certainly had to face many challenges and trying times. She invariably attempted to place a positive construction on even the most trying circumstances. Even though she went close to being one of the so-termed 'stolen generation', she refused to designate herself as 'stolen'. In her view she was not a victim but a 'survivor.' Upon announcement of her intention not to nominate for the expected 2013 election, she gave an interview to prominent 6PR radio compere, Graham Mabury, in which she had admitted that she had 'stepped on quite a few toes', but had attempted 'to do the right thing' and 'had never walked away' from a challenge. From the Liberal side of the chamber, former MLA Arthur Marshall had guided her to the view that it was necessary to recognise that, as people are often doing the best, it was necessary to try to avoid 'getting bitter and twisted' over matters of conflict. She had 'loved' her parliamentary journey and spoke very highly of party colleagues, particularly Michelle Roberts and Margaret Quirk (qq.v.) Labor leader Eric Ripper was always approachable and she was saddened that people 'don't see him for what he is'. Moreover, she felt she could have few jokes with Premier Colin Barnett even over his canal project, which she opposed before the 2005 election. Her electorate staff were also singled out for praise.<sup>9</sup>

In her retirement Carol has indicated that she intends to write a book about her life and career. Given her unique place in Australian politics it could be a very valuable narrative detailing how she overcame so many barriers to serve the Kimberley community and gain a seat in Parliament and subsequently be electorally successful. She even liked the idea of gaining a PhD. Certainly retirement meant being able to be at home with family more often than serving as a parliamentary representative of a far-flung electorate usually permits. She could even spend more time at Bunnings, as husband Brian is a builder. Time with the grandchildren was going to be very special.

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Barrass and Paige Porter (2011), 'MP Carol Martin's serve for "a mob of bludgers and liars",' *The Australian*, 29 September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.news.com.au/mp-plans-to-sue-aftercocunut-slurs/story-eofrg13u-122614...25/10/2011>

<sup>9</sup> Radio interview with 6PR compere Graham Mabury, 11 October 2011.

*Reflections on the member's parliamentary career as told to 6PR compere Graham Mabury: 11 October 2011*

**GRAHAM MABURY** Another *Nightline* “Personality in Profile”, one I’ve been really looking forward to on this occasion—the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to an Australian Parliament recently announced that she won’t contest the 2013 state election. She’ll be working hard, as she always has, for her electorate up till then, but she won’t be standing again. She’s going to leave politics and she’s reported as saying she’s doing that in order to spend more time with her family. We wanted to catch up with her and have a chat about her journey in politics and the issues that she’s faced over the years. I’m delighted to say we’ve been able to do that. Carol Martin, welcome to *Nightline*. Good to talk to you.

**CAROL MARTIN** You too. Lucky you caught me. Better than Bunnings!

**GRAHAM MABURY** I was going to put that at the very end. What’s your favourite store?

**CAROL MARTIN** Bunnings!

**GRAHAM MABURY** You’re getting into the hardware and the do-it-yourself and all that, that’s a bit of a passion?

**CAROL MARTIN** I just love going in there because you can get everything you want and everybody knows you. You can go and have a yarn and look at this and look at that. You can even take your hubby there. My hubby’s a builder so he has a great time there.

**GRAHAM MABURY** I reckon the thing you’d like best is that you have a great time there.

**CAROL MARTIN** I do. I go to all the aisles. I check out everything. I’ve got some new shelving for my shed and got some canvasses really cheap, bubble wrap because I’m packing things away. It’s been really good.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Carol, time with your husband, I’m told, is what this is about. Your decision to quit politics really is that you just want to spend more time with your family.

**CAROL MARTIN** By the time I’ve finished, it will be 12 years. Hubby has been living in Perth for four years, only because when Parliament sits, I’m in one place. When I’m in the Kimberley, I might be in Broome, I might be in Derby, I might be somewhere else. In 2006, I think it was, we spent 40 nights together, if you count the one I think I drove 400 kilometres and I got there about one o’clock in the morning; so we didn’t count that one.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Forty in 365.

**CAROL MARTIN** Yes, and that’s not the way to have a marriage. We decided he should live down here and at least I’d get to see him when Parliament sits. Even that doesn’t work because I don’t get home until after 10 on Tuesday nights, eight o’clock Wednesday nights and we’re busy on Thursday nights.

**GRAHAM MABURY** And you've represented an electorate that is twice the size of the state of Victoria.

**CAROL MARTIN** Yes. I've had a brilliant time; it's been great. I'm not going to miss anybody because I'm going to still catch up. As far as the political job's concerned, it takes its toll, I think. As I said, I really like my hubby; I want to spend more time with him. We've got five grandkids now. My husband's standing here saying, 'I want that in writing.'

**GRAHAM MABURY** That's it.

**CAROL MARTIN** My son and his partner had a baby yesterday.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Wow! Congratulations.

**CAROL MARTIN** That's number five. I've got five grandies and I want to be a part of their growing up. I want to be a part of them becoming the young adults that they will become, and you've got to have a bit of time to do that and this job doesn't allow that.

**GRAHAM MABURY** What prompted you to put up for Parliament? What started it all off, Carol?

**CAROL MARTIN** That bloody husband of mine! It's all his fault. I blame him. I don't know if you're aware but Ernie Bridge was an Independent for his final term. When he ran in the 1996 election, my husband ran as an Independent because Labor didn't endorse a candidate. My husband ran against Ernie and he missed out by about 300 votes or something. We realised that the party wouldn't endorse Brian as a candidate for the 2001 election. He says to me, 'You'll have to do it.' 'No way, mate, I'm not doing that; bullshit.' Anyway, he said, 'Ask around and see what people think.' He did that and they all said, 'Yeah, you should because you've got a loud mouth.'

**GRAHAM MABURY** They didn't say that.

**CAROL MARTIN** No; it was called the gift of the gab.

**GRAHAM MABURY** That's it; that's what they said.

**CAROL MARTIN** I thought I was just a loudmouth.

**GRAHAM MABURY** It's not quite the same thing, Carol.

**CAROL MARTIN** Anyway, we did the phone calls with the respected members of our community and our elders. I went out to KALACC, the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre festival, and asked for them to endorse me as a candidate for the Labor Party, and they all agreed that they would support me. Of course that was why I was out at Fitzroy last week, to tell them, if it was okay with them, I would really like to retire.

**GRAHAM MABURY** So you went to them first and said 'Look, I've had enough'.

**CAROL MARTIN** I had to. It was a respect thing. It's a part of who I am, to pay due respect to my elders.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Of course. In fact, like Ernie before you in lots of ways, you've been a real nor'-wester in the sense that you've obviously seen it as your job to represent the people who voted for you. You haven't worried about who you upset on the way through if it's not in their best interests.

**CAROL MARTIN** I have to say to you I've stepped on quite a few toes along the way, especially on my side of politics. I always believed that if you do the right thing, you've done the right thing and that always stands alone. It's not always the easy thing. Sometimes you upset people along the way but ultimately ... I don't know —

**GRAHAM MABURY** I think a classic instance of that, Carol, was the night I spoke to you shortly after that snap decision was made federally to close down the cattle trade. You were just absolutely outraged, thinking how on earth did this happen? It didn't matter that they were your federal Labor colleagues, you were just saying, 'This is a crazy decision.'

**CAROL MARTIN** There are two parts to that, too. The other parts are when we went to state conference, word for word, the Bill that the Greens were putting up was there as an amendment to the animal welfare Bill. This is in our state conference for the Labor Party. I was really angry then. I was choked up. Anyway, we got them to change it so I didn't attack them on the floor! That didn't go down well. Then of course I had to have a go at some of the brown left because they're all saying, 'Do this, do that, save these poor animals.' I'm a meat eater. I'm an omnivore, like most humans, and I eat meat as well. It would be hypocritical of me and others to say, 'Well, we've got to stop other people from eating meat'. I was a bit choked up. I didn't make too many friends out of my own caucus.

**GRAHAM MABURY** This is absolutely true but you were reported in the *West* when you announced your decision as saying that one of the things you're proudest of is that you have never crawled into the gutter, as you put it, when it came to anything racial or any slurs.

**CAROL MARTIN** No, I couldn't do it. The other thing is I've got to set an example for another generation of children in my family. My brother just rang me from Darwin. He said, 'Sis, thank goodness. At least you can be with us now and help us instead of everybody else and their dog.' It's like, 'Good on you!'

**GRAHAM MABURY** That's a great call to get.

**CAROL MARTIN** I really do take it seriously about being a role model for my children and now my grandchildren, another generation.

**GRAHAM MABURY** If you look back now over what will be 12 years, as you say, once you got inside, was it like you thought it would be?

**CAROL MARTIN** No. It was completely different. When I first went in, I had stars in my eyes. I thought I could do this and do that. Sometimes you're a lone voice. I used to make this stupid statement. I call it stupid now but it sustained me, especially with the racist stuff. I'd always say, 'I've always been black so I'm qualified to make this statement.' I'd always start with that. It's my view that people aren't generally racist; they just don't understand. The only way that we can help people is to give them more information, if they're willing. I know

the hardest times I've had is when people have made throwaway remarks and it was meant to be a joke but I can't joke about it. If you let it through, then you're going to wear it.

**GRAHAM MABURY** That's it; you've never got into the gutter but you've never walked away.

**CAROL MARTIN** No, I couldn't—too much at stake. The other thing is we're a multicultural family. I've got all sorts of people in my family. If it affects one part of the family, it affects the others. We just can't do it.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Has it been a good journey?

**CAROL MARTIN** I've loved it. I've learned more in my time in Parliament than anywhere else. I've had a few low blows, I have to say, but that's okay. It just makes you stronger and you learn never to ... I've always come out of it at the end learning something new.

**GRAHAM MABURY** I don't want you to name names of course, but will there be colleagues you'll miss?

**CAROL MARTIN** Of course. I can tell you—Michelle Roberts (q.v.). I told her, and she said, 'But you didn't talk to me.' I said, 'No, I talked to my husband.' 'Well, he didn't talk to me!' It was so funny. I love Michelle. I've known her for so long. Her [sic] and I have been very close, and Margie Quirk (q.v.) as well. I suppose, you just have these alliances with people, and Eric [Ripper], always been approachable, always been supportive of me and I will miss him. It saddens me to think that people don't see him for what he really is, which is this really generous man, a great leader. He's compassionate, he's all these things, but people don't see that in him. They see it as a weakness whereas I think it's one of the greatest strengths he has.

**GRAHAM MABURY** What about across the House? We like to think that you might fight over policy and there might be some fierce debates but actually there's a good deal of respect in the House between various people and you can be friends when you're not fighting the political battles. Is that a bit naive or is it true?

**CAROL MARTIN** Arthur Marshall, believe it or not, taught me very early on that you leave what you leave in the House. When you leave the House, you actually are around people who are doing the best that they can with what they've got. Arthur Marshall taught me that, that you can do what you want in the chamber because that's your job. You have to provide an alternative argument and all that but you've got to leave it in there. Don't take bitter and twisted stuff out of there because it just colours your view of the world and it shouldn't.

**GRAHAM MABURY** And that came from the other side.

**CAROL MARTIN** Colin Barnett—remember before the last election he was sitting up the back then, me and him laughing, he said, 'I'll come and run for the seat of Kimberley and tell them we're going to put a canal in or something!' We always have these jokes. I say, 'Don't you dare!' Of course the big joke for those guys is they're going to dam the Fitzroy and call the dam the Martin dam and the lake beyond it Lake Carol! Good on you! I've had a great



time. I've met some wonderful people in Parliament. All the staff too, they're just so wonderful. They look after you. They keep you safe and fed and looked after.

**GRAHAM MABURY** So it's not something you'll leave with any regrets but you will have a great treasure trove of memories to look back on.

**CAROL MARTIN** You've got to read my book.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Ah, there you go. Between Bunnings and how many grandchildren?

**CAROL MARTIN** I've got to write this book. Like, I've made history. I didn't intend to. I never set out to do that but I did. I became the first Indigenous woman elected to an Australian Parliament.

**GRAHAM MABURY** The Premier said you have a place in history.

**CAROL MARTIN** That's it. I want to write it the way it should be written. There's a few warts in there but the reality is really simple. It needs to be what it really is, not something that you chop into pieces and dissect and take away the simple humanity of a ward of the state becoming a state MP. That's what it's about, isn't it?

**GRAHAM MABURY** Yes, it is.

**CAROL MARTIN** The way I see it is that's got to be written properly. I want to inspire people to do the best that they can. When I finish, I don't even know what I want to do yet. It's like, 'What am I going to do when I grow up?' I'm a social worker, I'm a trainer, I'm a mother, I'm all these other things, and I need to write this. I want to do a deal with a university to do an autoethnography on my journey into politics and beyond.

**GRAHAM MABURY** Fair enough.

**CAROL MARTIN** And I want a PhD and you can call me Doc Martin then.

**GRAHAM MABURY** 'Doc Martens' would suit you, I reckon. That would go very well. Listen, Carol, it's a great delight to talk to you. I'm glad you ran for a little bit longer, and thank you for sparing us your time tonight.

**CAROL MARTIN** I hope I've entertained you.

**GRAHAM MABURY** More than that; you've done significant things. Thanks for joining us.

**CAROL MARTIN** Take care.