



**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  
2012**

## **JAYE AMBER RADISICH**



MLA Swan Hills 10 February 2001–6 September 2008 (ALP). Parliamentary Secretary 2007–2008. Chairman Economics and Industry Standing Committee 2005–2007. Member Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission 2001–2004; Public Accounts Committee 2003–2005; Parliamentary Services Committee 2005–2008; Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 2006–2007.

On 10 February 2001 Jaye Radisich made history when at the age of 24 (six weeks before her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday) she became the youngest woman ever elected to either House of the Western Australian Parliament, winning the Legislative Assembly seat of Swan Hills from the sitting Liberal member June van de Klashorst (q.v.). At the time, and as was the case still in 2012, the only younger member of either gender elected to either House had been Edwin Corboy, who was four months younger when he won the Legislative Assembly seat of Yilgarn in 1921 but who in fact had already served a short term (1918–1919) in the Australian House of Representatives at the age of 22. Jaye's success in 2001 came as a consequence of a swing of 11.78 per cent to the Labor Party, giving her a majority of a little over 1,000 after preferences and a safety margin of 2.05 per cent.

Jaye Amber Radisich was born in Middle Swan in Western Australia on 29 March 1976, the daughter of Jeffrey Joseph Radisich, a public servant, and Dorothy Joy Rakich. She began her education at Herne Hill Primary School and then spent five years at Mt Lawley Primary School and a further year at Coolbinia before attending Mt Lawley Senior High School from 1989 to 1993. She worked as a cashier at Bedford Market gardens part-time (on Saturday mornings) from 1990 to 1992 and then as a cash office clerk and cashier at Coles Fossey in Perth for five years. By the time she entered Parliament she had worked as a cosmetic consultant at Priceline, a research officer for MP Ted Cunningham, and a temporary admin clerk with Career People as well as undertaking full-time studies in law at the University of Western Australia, from which she later graduated with a BA and LLB.

Among her many outside activities were membership of the executive of the Australian Republican Movement in 1999 and of the Australian Institute of International Affairs and a role as a director at the Ellenbrook Cultural Foundation. While at school she was a finalist in the Young Achievement Australia, Achiever of the Year in 1992; prefect and student councillor; and in 1993 she won the prestigious Mt Lawley Senior High School Caltex All-rounder award.

In her Inaugural Speech to the Legislative Assembly on 3 May 2001 Jaye expressed her pride in being the first person of Croatian descent to become a member of the House.<sup>1</sup> In her own words:

I doubt that my parents and grandparents would have thought that their daughter and granddaughter would be a member of Parliament. I hope they think it as cool as I do.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of her speech she reflected on what she described as ‘intimidation of young people’ who were discriminated against when it came to rates of pay, asking:

Why is there a pay differential when the same work is undertaken and the same productivity is achieved ... This is a mere discrimination of convenience because young people are generally less organised and less able to speak up for their rights.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to her law studies she suggested that ‘the most valuable’ unit she had studied in her law degree course was ‘alternative dispute resolution’, which hopefully would lead to a reduction in ‘the increasing volume of litigation in our society’.<sup>4</sup>

During the course of her first speech to Parliament, Jaye also took the opportunity to reflect on the issue of civics education:

Like others before me, I am particularly concerned about the lack of civics education at the primary and secondary schooling levels in Western Australia. We all know just how sceptical our constituents are about politicians. Maybe that is our fault. The education that we provide to young people about our democracy, our parliamentary system, separation of powers, the Constitution and other civic matters is highly inadequate ...

While our system is not perfect, it is important for us to explain the intricacies and uniqueness of our democracy, and also to explain the potential for people to become involved.<sup>5</sup>

Jaye was elected to membership of the Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission on which she served from 2001 to 2004 and of the Public Accounts Committee from 2003 to 2005. On 7 April 2005, after retaining Swan Hills in the February election with a swing of almost two per cent in her favour, she became chairperson of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, relinquishing that position in June 2007 after she was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Energy; Resources; Industry and Enterprise, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Ljiljana Ravlich (q.v.), who was born in Croatia and was the first woman born in a non-English speaking country to be elected to either House of the Western Australian Parliament, was elected to the Legislative Council in December 1996 taking her seat in May 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 3 May 2001, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207–208.

post she retained until September 2008. In addition, for the full term of the 37<sup>th</sup> Parliament (2005–2008) she was a member of the Parliamentary Services Committee, and from March 2006 to October 2007 a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. In 2003 she attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Commonwealth Parliamentary Association seminar at Ottawa.

When the process of preselection commenced for the 2008 election, the redrawn boundaries had left the Swan Hills electorate less favourable for the Labor Party, and in the wake of the preselection process for that and the neighbouring probable safe Labor seat of West Swan Jaye announced her retirement from politics and moved to New South Wales. While in the eastern states she was, from February 2009 to May 2010, the Chief Executive Officer of the Council of Small Business of Australia (COSBOA). The following month after leaving COSBOA she commenced Navigate Business, a consultancy specialising in devising small business engagement strategies for corporate, not for profit and government clients, and continued her work in the consultancy when she returned to Western Australia.

One issue with which Jaye associated herself from the outset of her parliamentary career was that of gay and lesbian reform. After presenting petitions seeking a removal of discrimination against gay and lesbian persons, in her speech on an amending Bill in December 2001 she linked the issue with suicide. In this speech she described youth suicide as a ‘tragic reality’ which occurred disproportionately among young people in Western Australia and ‘particularly among young gay and lesbian people’. ‘Isolation and stigma’, she argued, affected ‘young gay and lesbian people every day’.<sup>6</sup> Attempted or actual self harm was another manifestation of the problems facing these young people. In her view, gay and lesbian people were among those who ‘pay taxes ... have families ... work, study, sing, dance, sleep and eat; they are just like anybody else’.<sup>7</sup>

Several years later in September 2007 Jaye made a vigorous contribution to the debate on the Prostitution Amendment Bill which she described as proposing ‘minimalist decriminalisation in the prostitution industry’.<sup>8</sup> Much of her speech focused on the tone of the debate and the remarks made outside the chamber, where she insisted that the debate should be regarded as a community issue not as a ‘women’s issue’ and that the debate should also be about ‘the men who participate—the men who create the demand for these services’.<sup>9</sup> The Bill, she contended, ‘neither encourages people to be involved nor condones people’s involvement’ and that the government needed ‘to ensure that women who find themselves in this industry are protected as far as possible’ as well as going further to find strategies to ‘encourage women to exit the industry’.<sup>10</sup>

Premier Carpenter’s sudden decision to call the September 2008 election deprived Jaye of the opportunity to make a valedictory speech but in February 2008 she had used a speech during debate on the Premier’s Statement to reflect briefly on her seven years in Parliament. At the time she delivered this speech Jaye suggested that she did not know for how long she:

---

<sup>6</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 5 December 2001, p. 6512.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6513.

<sup>8</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 26 September 2007, p. 5800.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5801.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5802.

... will be a member of this place; it could be another six months, six years or even 16 years, although I think the latter period is probably the least likely of all.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the first part of this speech was devoted to a survey of the achievements and prospects for the people of her electorate. However, she also suggested that while members:

... are generally here to advocate for people in our electorates and for volunteers and others ... if we do not stand up and speak for ourselves, how on earth can we expect other people to do the same thing'. I thought, 'Well, here I am in a very privileged position of being elected to Parliament with an unfettered voice, and I have one shot in the locker'.<sup>12</sup>

With this in mind, and referring to the Premier's assertion that 'the Western Australian Parliament is not a boys' club' she cited a number of extracts from the 1921 Inaugural Speech of Australia's first woman parliamentarian, Edith Cowan:

If men and women can work for the State side by side and represent all the different sections of the community, and if the male members of the House would be satisfied to allow women to help them and would accept their suggestions when they are offered, I cannot doubt that we should do very much better work in the community than was ever done before.<sup>13</sup>

Referring to her own university days and the attitudes surrounding her there Jaye contended that:

I thought that was how things were, that people would be judged on their merits and that we were all equal. However, the longer I spend in my professional and working life, the more I realise that this is, sadly, not the case. I fear that Western Australia is further behind the eight ball than are other jurisdictions around the world.<sup>14</sup>

Specifically, she focused on the fact that she had joined the Labor Party because she felt that:

it had a better approach to equality and equal opportunity than the other major party.

But then asserted:

Now is the time for the Labor Party and the Labor government to take a leadership role on an issue that is clearly unresolved.

One particular area of concern was that:

many laws that protect people in other locations around the state do not apply to members of this place. This state's equal opportunity legislation does not apply to members of Parliament; nor does the occupational health and safety legislation or the public sector standards legislation; and the Auditor General cannot inquire into the operation of this place—the house of democracy ... Everybody in this place ... who works in the Parliament of Western Australia, our house of democracy, must apply the same standards that apply to any other workplace of Western Australia.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *WAPD(LA)*, 28 February 2008, p. 548.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 549.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, to an extent she foreshadowed her post-parliamentary focus with reference to a discussion paper she had written concerning having the public sector ‘deliver more and better services for more people’, with the use, for example, of ‘cash or other significant incentives’.<sup>16</sup>

Jaye’s parliamentary career and promotion to ministerial ranks as a Parliamentary Secretary was brought prematurely to a close in 2008 but her parliamentary contribution during her seven plus-year career embraced consideration of and focus on a range of significant and challenging issues. Tragically the cancer with which she been afflicted during her parliamentary career and which had gone into remission returned and, despite extensive medical treatment, brought her life to a premature end on 17 March 2012 shortly before her 36<sup>th</sup> birthday. Few, if any, Australian politicians had enjoyed the range of experience and achieved so much in such a short life span while leaving so much promise unfulfilled.

#### *Reflections on the Member’s Parliamentary Career*

*(Jaye Radisich passed away on 17 March 2012 before she was able to make a direct contribution to this volume. These Reflections are based primarily on material she submitted to an editor in 2009 but was not able to complete because of demands of her post parliamentary career and her long and sustained attempt to combat the disease which had first affected her early in her parliamentary career and then returned in 2009. As it eventuated, the calling of the early election in September 2008 also meant she had no formal opportunity to make a valedictory speech.)*

At Mount Lawley Senior High School in 1993 Jaye was appointed as school prefect, Caltex All-Rounder and Belle of the Ball and was a member of the senior debating team and numerous committees including Amnesty International. Prophetically when applying to the Queen’s Trust while still at school she wrote:

I would be keen to obtain an insight into the operations in Parliament, as the idea of becoming a parliamentarian myself in the future, to help the community is appealing

With the vision of allowing her to be:

... among many who will be part of Australia’s future and will help decide which direction it takes.<sup>17</sup>

This vision became a feasible if somewhat hopeful prospect towards the end of 2000 when as a law student at the University of Western Australia the option was put to her of seeking endorsement as part of the ALP team for the 2001 election. ALP was attempting to regain office after nearly eight years in the political wilderness.

Looking back in October 2008, with her seven-year parliamentary career behind her, Jaye put pen to paper concerning her fateful decision to seek election in an ‘unwinnable seat’ and then to her thoughts when against all the odds she won the seat on Saturday, 10 February 2001 meaning the ‘course of my life was to change forever’.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 547.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Alumni Obituary—Jaye Radisich—Class of 1993, *Lawley News*, Term 1 2012, p. 6.

The first decision was whether to ‘apply for clerkships in law firms’ or ‘to spend the summer campaigning for office around my part-time jobs... [However] Parliament seemed somewhat more enticing’:

Having been active in student affairs at school and at university it wasn’t that much of a jump for me to find myself involved in partisan politics. It was much more of a giant leap though to find myself in elected office. I remember being invited one Friday afternoon to join some ALP colleagues for a pizza lunch in the city. Over lunch the small group began to analyse the list of seats for which the ALP had yet to preselect a candidate for the upcoming State election. When we got to the seat of Swan Hills, I jumped straight in.

‘My family is from that area, and I know heaps of people there’.

My mind was already ticking over about who I could approach to fill the vacancy. But the group had other ideas. They asked me to run for the ‘unwinnable’ seat of Swan Hills which needed a 9.73% swing to win. I felt incredibly honoured and humbled to be asked to stand even though no attention would be given to the campaign by the party and that the chances of success were incredibly remote. I spent a week weighing up the pros and cons of putting my name on the ballot paper, not to mention giving up my summer to undertake what would most likely be a futile exercise. In the end I decided that the experience of being a candidate would be a worthwhile exercise in and of itself, and that the ultimate outcome was not necessarily the main game. I accepted the offer, on the conditions that I would not start campaigning until after the end of the November examination period, and that my part-time job had to come first as I couldn’t afford to turn down the extra hours as I was living out of home ... I harnessed the labour of friends, family and strangers to compensate for the lack of financial resources, with superior human resources. I can count on one hand the number of people who truly believed that we could achieve success at that election, but as it turned out they were the best bookmakers of all.

Against the odds success came and:

on Saturday 10 February 2001, the course of my life was to change forever. It was my friend Damian who said to me in no uncertain terms that

‘Now you have to grow up’.

Seven and a half years later for Jaye, those words were ‘as clear as if it were yesterday’. On election night she had worn an outfit in her signature colour, red:

Suffice to say that dress has not seen the light of day for eight years.

Once elected, in a paraphrase of a well know, Australian anthem about the Anzacs, Jaye concluded:

They gave me an office, and they gave me two staff and they sent me away to make laws. Seriously, no one believes that’s how it works, but it’s true. ‘Collect the keys, walk into the electorate office and Bob’s your uncle—you’re a legislator and a representative’.

A week or so after the election she prepared to attend her first caucus meeting. She had decided that:

because I was young and new, the best thing for me to do would be to sit down, shut up and see what others had to say and learn from them ... I should have known that my inner self would not be so easy to repress.

From ‘the first moment of my first meeting’ Jaye became agitated and frustrated, not the least because, in her words:

As my seat was written off by the party before the election, as one that was unwinnable, no specific promises were made to my electorate...The sit down, shut up, learn from the others policy went out of the door. I took the opportunity to point out to the leadership team and the newly elected cabinet that they would not have their jobs but for the success of people in ‘unwinnable seats’.

Over the years she reflected on what she had learned from ‘the three or so hours a week’ that she spent in caucus meetings:

The first is that there is more than one way to skin a cat. The second is that you have to pick your battles, so that you can concentrate your efforts on winning the war ... It took a while but I finally mellowed over the years (although there are some people who would still dispute this) and reacted more calmly to situations that raised my ire. I may have seemed at times emotional or melodramatic ... [b]ut I wouldn’t retract single comment or change a single reaction. My responses were fundamentally linked to my beliefs.

One event which remained vividly in her mind was her first meeting with former Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 2001 at which she asked him ‘what advice would you give to a newly elected 24 year old MP’. His response:

Well that’s easy. ‘Don’t do it’ was shattering to say the least but with the benefit of hindsight, it turns out that Hawkey was probably right. While I still believe passionately that there is a place for people of all ages, colours and creeds in our houses of Parliament, I have great difficulty in recommending that young people aspire to election earlier rather than later. Not because they are less competent, less appropriate or anything of that nature—but because the toll and cost in my view is disproportionately high. The spotlight of public life and the scrutiny that comes with that, the imposition of your work on your private life many evenings and weekends, and the fact that your peer group becomes people roughly the age of your parents all have an impact. It marks you out as very different from your peers.

After her re-election in 2005 Jaye’s career flourished, but only for a time:

By 2007 life was rosy, I was working hard enjoying my role as Parliamentary Secretary ... and getting to know the information, communications and technology community in WA. Projects in the electorate were progressing, the cohesion in my office with the staff was exceptional, and on the surface, all was rosy. But as the months went past the announcement of the redrawing of the state electorate boundaries loomed.

As Jaye tells the story, ‘the political machinations and landscape within the ALP that underpinned the pre-selection process’ obviously affected her decision making in what was ‘an increasingly stressful time’; in any case she had for some time been considering alternative lifestyle options, especially given that there appeared to be meaningful opportunities available



in the commercial world. Her decision to retire from State Parliament at age 32 was both ‘the biggest decision of my life’ and arguably ‘the first real decision of my life’’. Musing at the end of 2008 she wrote:

After having been thrust into public office at such a young age, with no consciousness of my own or the system’s limitation, I can now start to appreciate just how much growing up I did during that eight year period. I was a bright-eyed, bushy tailed, ambitious over-achiever who tried to judge people on merit and performance and expected others to do the same. It was only later that I realised my confidence and exuberance was viewed as arrogance, immaturity and naivety.

Nevertheless, she concluded:

The values that I held most dear when I entered parliament, and still hold dear, are honesty and integrity. I interpreted those in practice as meaning always to do what you say you will, and not make empty or unfulfilled promises...I believe that foundation principle served me in good stead throughout those two terms, and that the application of that principle was responsible for my re-election in 2005.

Earlier in May 2008 she had spoken in the budget debate, stating that:

Although I am not prepared just now to make my valedictory speech, there are a number of things that I want to put on the record for the future. In recent times I have been reflecting a lot on what the electorate expects from all of us as members and what my electorate expects of me. The most important thing that members of Parliament can do is what they say they will do ... I would like to think I got re-elected because I am a fairly straightforward person ... and because I follow up on things that matter to them.<sup>18</sup>

Looking back on her Inaugural Speech, Jaye suggested in her post-politics reflections that her maiden speech seemed ‘somehow to fall into the category of a uni assignment, and it was an overnight sprint to complete it’. In retrospect, however, she felt both that the speech captured many of her beliefs and values ‘today, just as it did then’ and that ‘I managed to implement or influence all but one of the outcomes’ outlined in that first speech.

Indeed when the Legislative Assembly debated the condolence motion for Jaye on 27 March long-time friend and colleague Michelle Roberts quoted from the closing words of Jaye’s Inaugural Speech inspired by her brother’s reaction when asked for advice on making the speech. His response—‘I dare you to tell them you’re going to keep it real’—was just what she needed to hear:

I am humbled by the position and privilege that I now hold and will be an adamant and perhaps on occasion loud voice in this place. I am here to work hard and I will do my best to keep it real.

Her friends and colleagues agree that she did ‘keep it real’ throughout her political career and in the traumatic last months of her illness.

---

<sup>18</sup> WAPD(LA), 3 May 2008, p. 3214.