



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

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

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and
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**Parliamentary History Project
Parliament of Western Australia
2012**

LOUISE CLARE PRATT



MLC East Metropolitan Region 22 May 2001–29 October 2007 (ALP). Senator Western Australia from 1 July 2008 (ALP). Chairman Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs 2005–2007; and member from 2001. Member Parliamentary Services Committee 2001–2005; Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges 2005–2007; Select Committee on Reserves (Reserve 43131) Bill 2003–2004; Select Committee into Public Obstetric Services 2006–2007. Member several Senate standing committees and the Select Committee on Climate Policy from 2009.

When Louise Pratt was elected to the Australian Senate in November 2007 as an ALP candidate to take her seat on 1 July 2008, she became only the second woman to be elected to the upper Houses of both the Parliament of Western Australia and the Commonwealth of Australia.¹ Her only predecessor, Diane Elizabeth (Dee) Margetts (q.v.) representing Greens WA, had served one term in each of the two chambers, the Senate from 1993 to 1999 and the Legislative Council in Western Australia from 2001 to 2005. Louise, for her part, served a total of six and a half years in the Legislative Council representing the East Metropolitan Region and then entered the Senate for a six-year term expiring on June 2014.

Louise Clare Pratt was born in Kalgoorlie on 18 April 1972, the daughter of Sandra Thompson, a physiotherapist, and stepfather Greg Pratt, an orchardist and plant propagator, who, in her own words in her Inaugural Speech, ‘I now claim as my dad’.² After a primary school education at Mt Helena, Pickering Brook and Jolimont, she attended Perth College from 1985 to 1986 and Eastern Hills Senior High School from 1987 to 1989, and graduated from the University of Western Australia with a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in history. Louise joined the Australian Labor Party in 1994 and served on the Labor Women’s Executive and Young People’s Policy Committee as well as the Law Reform and Justice Policy Committee. Between 1995 and 1998 she was employed in the office of opposition leaders Jim McGinty and Geoff Gallop and then worked as an electorate officer for Carmen Lawrence

¹ Dr Carmen Lawrence had been elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1986 and then to the House of Representatives in Canberra in 1994.

² *WAPD(LC)*, 23 May 2001, p. 345.

from 1998 to 2001 and also undertook research work for Megan Anwyl, MLA (q.v.). During her years at UWA she was President of the Arts Union, president of the Education Council, a member of National Executive and education officer for the National Union of Students (WA branch). From 1996 until her election to Parliament she was the spokesperson for Gay and Lesbian Equality (WA) and until 1999 she was a delegate to the Australian Council of Gay and Lesbian Rights. In 2000 she was a delegate to the ALP state conference. Over the years she was also a member of numerous organisations including Greenpeace, the state Greenhouse Task Force, the WA Renewable Energy Association and the Friends of Parkerville Children's Homes.

In February 2001 Louise was elected as an ALP candidate to an East Metropolitan Region seat with her term commencing on 22 May 2001. At the age of 28 years and nine months (29 years and one month when she took her seat) she was, and still is, the youngest woman elected to the Legislative Council in WA. She was re-elected in February 2005 for a further four-year term in the Legislative Council but resigned on 29 October 2007 before the term was completed in order to contest the Senate election scheduled for 10 December. At that election she won a Senate seat for Western Australia, taking her place in the Senate on 1 July 2008. In the 2001 and 2005 state elections she had been in third place on the ALP ticket, while for the 2007 Senate election she headed the ALP ticket.

During her six and half years in the Legislative Council Louise was a member of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, and served as committee chair from August 2005. She also served for four years on the Parliamentary Services Committee and for two and a half years on the Standing Committee on Procedures and Privileges. In addition, she was a member of two select committees—on the Reserves (Reserve 43131) Bill 2003 and in 2006–2007 on the committee inquiring into public obstetric services. For the first four years she was the secretary of the Parliamentary Labor Party and in 2004 she was the Commonwealth Women Parliamentary Association delegate at the Commonwealth Women's Ministers meeting in Fiji.

With regard to her federal parliamentary experience, during her first three years in the Senate Louise served on a variety of parliamentary committees, including senate standing committees on senators' interests; scrutiny of bills; legislative and general purpose committees on economics, environment, communications and the arts. She also served on the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties as well as the Select Committee on Climate Policy. Since entering the Senate she has also become chair of the Parliamentary Liaison Group for HIV/Aids, Blood Borne Viruses and Sexually Transmitted Infections, and served with the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development.

During her Inaugural Speech in the Legislative Council, delivered on 23 May 2001, Louise referred to the example set by her mother, who for a number of years raised Louise and her siblings while working as a physiotherapist, and highlighted the importance of family experiences rather than genetic factors as the key to true family values.³ As already indicated, during her years at UWA she was very active in student politics, including involvement in organising a large-scale protest against voluntary student unionism legislation, and she gradually moved towards a political career by working for members of Parliament. From her early 20s, too, Louise had been an active lesbian and gay rights activist and in the Legislative

³ *WAPD(LC)*, 23 May 2001, p. 344ff.

Council at the time of her election she described Western Australia as having ‘the worst laws in the nation as far as lesbian and gay rights are concerned’.⁴

Six years on from delivering her Inaugural Speech Louise reflected that on that occasion she had spoken ‘quite a bit’ about ‘activism and change’ and that over the six years there had been ‘quite a lot of change ... and I have loved it’ while also reflecting on the fact that ‘community activism [had] been able to militate [sic] against some of the worst excesses of change’.⁵ Not surprisingly she referred specifically to gay and lesbian law reform, citing the Labor Government as having delivered ‘the best gay and lesbian equality laws in the nation’ while also paying tribute to Liberal Attorney General Peter Foss concerning ‘some of the sympathies he had for reform’. In this regard therefore she looked forward to taking part in debates in the Senate concerning national reform in this area.

In her final speech in the Legislative Council Louise also referred to her pleasure at being involved in reforms ‘that have protected and enhanced the status of women in this state’.⁶ She stressed in particular reforms concerning the midwifery workforce and the provision of greater ‘continuity of care for women and babies’, which she suggested were ‘under way in Western Australia’.⁷ Other issues to which she paid specific attention in her valedictory speech included the environment and industrial relations, with specific references to the WA Labor’s anti-nuclear and anti-uranium stance, the management of genetically modified organisms and the need to protect vulnerable workers in the sex industry.

Ten months later on 27 August 2008 Louise addressed the Senate for the first time, emphasising her pride at being part of a Government in Western Australia ‘that completely removed ... discrimination against same-sex couples and their children in all state laws’⁸ and stating that in the wake of these laws support for recognition of same-sex relationships was stronger in Western Australia than elsewhere in the nation. In this light she looked forward to the day when all discrimination on these grounds was removed at the national level.⁹ In launching her senate career she emphasised ‘the principles of dignity in working life and social inclusion’ as ‘at the heart of traditional Labor values’, and hence she welcomed the challenge of ‘being part of a national Government committed to a socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable, economically productive and globally responsible Australia’.¹⁰

Louise’s political career had clearly developed directly from her days as a student activist with a strong commitment to social and economic ideals including the fundamental importance of social inclusiveness. In her own words:

The principles of dignity in working life and social inclusion are at the heart of traditional Labor values and are fundamental to the answers to the many challenges we face today ... challenges of social and economic marginalisation and environmental degradation’.¹¹

⁴ Ibid., p. 347.

⁵ *WAPD(LC)*, 27 September 2007, p. 5883.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *CPD(Senate)*, 27 August 2008, p. 3936.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 3936–3937.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3940.

¹¹ Ibid.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Parliaments have been transformed over recent decades from institutions that have privileged male participation to places that are more equal today.

It's change that has been hard won from the very beginning with women like Edith Cowan and May Holman carving out a place not only for women in politics, but for so many issues affecting women and families that were simply unaddressed by male politicians.

What is remarkable to me, though, is that so much of the change that has taken place has gained real momentum in very recent decades, and that as a politically active woman I know so many of the women who have featured in this book. Lyla Elliott (q.v.), who was only the fifth woman elected to Parliament in this state, was someone with whom I was able to work on election campaigns. I was also able to work for Carmen Lawrence (q.v.), who at the time I was privileged to work for her had already built a ground breaking career in both state and federal Parliament. I also worked for Megan Anwyl (q.v.), who was a young MP breaking new ground as a woman in a goldfields marginal seat.

I knew Jackie McKiernan (Watkins), Cheryl Davenport, Diana Warnock (qqq.v) and most of the other women who had developed political careers in the Labor Party in the 1980s and 1990s.

I begin my contribution to this book by talking about all these Labor women because I know that I am really among the first generation of women MPs to have had such a complete and diverse set of women role models come before me.

There is no doubt that this also involved watching these women endure entrenched sexism, even at times of great hardship. Watching Carmen Lawrence confront charges of which she was found not guilty arising from the Marks Royal Commission certainly caused me to question my own desire to be involved in politics. At the same time it was also a privilege to witness her personal dignity, earnest truthfulness and honesty as she endured the court case.

It also involved seeing some great wins for women through some big political and parliamentary struggles, such as Western Australia's abortion law reform led by Cheryl Davenport, MLC (q.v.).

Amongst these women, and others in the Labor Party, exists some shared values and a common understanding of the impact of inequality on society and the way it underpins social and economic disadvantage and exclusion (as borne out time and time again in evidence from social research).

These values have been informed by the Western Australian labour movement, by local feminism and by the need to address racism in Western Australia and the legacies left from the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land.

Addressing inequality is a common thread that runs through my work in both Parliaments, and it is my key driver and inspiration. I am also driven by a desire to support other Western Australians who, like me, want to play a role in shaping a healthier and more equal, prosperous and sustainable community.

Inequality is a local, national and global problem and I feel very fortunate to have had a career that has enabled me to pursue this agenda at both a state and national level with the Commonwealth Parliament affording me many opportunities to make a contribution to addressing these issues internationally.

I have been pleased to enjoy the support of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, a blue-collar and predominantly male-membership union. The union has given me the support to pursue these issues of inequality. I have also enjoyed working closely with United Voice on issues affecting their female-dominated and low-paid membership, which embody the reasons why addressing inequality is so important.

I relish the role of being an upper House parliamentarian. I am very humbled by the fact that I have been given the opportunity by the Australian Labor Party to serve both in the Legislative Council of Western Australia and the Australian Senate.

These roles have brought with them the opportunity to work with many diverse communities to make a difference. And as an upper House parliamentarian I have enjoyed in both the state and federal Parliaments the opportunity to do this without the constraints of a tightly defined geographic community to serve.

It is also clear to me that the women who have come before have very much been part of connecting the needs of excluded communities into the political process. The key to this had been the experience of women in bringing the needs and experiences of women into the political process.

This has also meant that I have been able to play a role in bringing the experiences of lesbian, gay and transgender people into the Parliament. It has been terrific for me as someone who has played a role as a GLBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities) activist to go on to reforming laws that affect people of diverse sexuality and gender at both a state and federal level.

Like the women's movement the GLBTI community has now also accelerated its political participation, which can be seen to paying dividends in the reforms achieved in the last decade.

I now look back somewhat enviously at State Parliament and politics where the melting pot of issues—as complex as they are—is not diffused and confused by the demands of our Federation.

In hindsight, I am incredibly grateful for the fact that I had the chance to get to know Western Australia really well before weighing in on WA's behalf in Canberra's debates.

There is no doubt that one of the many legacies of women's participation is the political mainstreaming of previously unexamined areas of social and community need.

Issues like mental health, aged care and child care have rightly become part of the mainstream political agenda. There is no doubt in my mind of the political continuity between such issues connecting through from the days of campaigns for the welfare of poor women and children in Edith Cowan's day to the feminists behind the creation of our women's health centres in the 1980s.

The continuity of this involvement has reaped great rewards for Australian society—and also for other peoples in our international advocacy and development abroad.

I see this very much in action today at a federal level with our Prime Minister Julia Gillard and great Cabinet Ministers such as Penny Wong, Nicola Roxon, Tania Plibersek and Jenny Macklin. Never before have we had such a critical mass of women making a difference at the top levels of government. Representation like this brings with it great progress on issues like equal pay, paid parental leave and women's retirement incomes.

Seeing this beneficial impact that a critical mass of women has brought with it also reminds me of how much more there is to be done.

This is true not only for many marginalised communities, but particularly for Australia's Indigenous people.

Parliamentarians like myself can advocate on behalf of and work closely with Indigenous people. Ultimately though, as is revealed in the histories of the many amazing women MPs in this book, I believe that mainstream acceptance of the issues confronting Indigenous Australians will be greatly enhanced by critical mass of Aboriginal people attaining positions of power.

I am a bit of a nerd when it comes to the institution of upper Houses.

I love the significance that our upper House committee systems have in both Western Australia and the Commonwealth Parliament. Both chambers, when the numbers in the Parliament allow, have great processes for dealing with weighty issues and forging directions on new questions of community debate—or for challenging government decisions.

It is deeply rewarding to be able to listen to witnesses and deliberate on the evidence given by ordinary citizens and experts before parliamentary committees.

As a community activist who has often sought to influence Parliament and government, I particularly value that people from all walks of life can participate in parliamentary proceedings through its committee processes.

My experience as both a member and chair of the Legislative Council's environment and public affairs committee instilled in me an appreciation of the power that parliamentary committees have to produce significant outcomes, particularly where there is genuine bipartisan deliberation.

I see the same thing in my participation in the Senate, which is recognised as having a powerful committee system.

There can be many reasons why a committee's work can be required.

Some issues need further consideration because they are unresolved and unaddressed. They can be controversial or there may be a clear need for community debate, and parliamentary deliberation on how to move forward on them.

At other times, there are genuine controversies, conflict and confusion about the possible options for resolution.

Bipartisan work from committees on issues like these can produce great results—and while it is sometimes intellectually taxing and hard work, it is always a pleasure to be part of such inquiries.

However, committees of both the state Legislative Council and the Senate have some common problems.

The momentum of a government position on an issue can often restrain the scope of deliberation on important issues.

Similarly, committees are overburdened with purely political references from the opposition and short reporting timelines; they simply do not have the time to do their work properly.