



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

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

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CATHERINE (KATE) ESTHER DOUST



MLC South Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2001 (ALP). Parliamentary Secretary 2005–2008. Shadow Minister and Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council from 2008. Member several parliamentary standing committees and select committees. Chairman Parliamentary Superannuation Board 2005–2008; member from 2008.

In the Legislative Council on 30 May 2001 Catherine Doust, widely known as Kate, presented a relatively long, interesting and insightful Inaugural Address. She took much pleasure in congratulating Hon John Cowdell for being the first member of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to hold the position of President of the Legislative Council. For Kate, as a very committed Labor person, this was a significant development as ALP Governments in Western Australia had historically had their power curbed by absence of a majority in the upper House and the denial of the Presiding Officer's position in the upper House. After an unsuccessful tilt for a parliamentary seat at the 1996 state election, she regarded her 2001 success at being elected as a member of the Legislative Council for the South Metropolitan Region as a 'great privilege'. In her opinion 'being elected to Parliament, and being able to participate directly in legislative change, is an amazing opportunity that at times over the past couple of years I thought might not eventuate'.¹ For Kate election to Parliament had been her long term goal in order to make a difference, and accordingly in her first speech she spoke of looking forward 'to participating in the Gallop Government's program of repair and reform to restore to the people of this state a decent standard of living in the areas of health, education and policing'.² She considered that of key importance in this regard would be the removal of 'the antiworker legislation' of the previous Government.

She was born on 27 May 1962 as Catherine Esther Doust in what she has described as 'that great hub of the universe,' Kalgoorlie, where she lived for her first 12 years as well as in neighbouring Coolgardie. Her father, Barry Doust, was a postal worker and her mother, Esther Grogan, was a medical secretary. They had resided in what is now the museum and postal

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 May 2001, p. 656.

² *Ibid.*

building in Coolgardie. This setting had helped Kate develop her ‘love of history—particularly for architecture’.³ Another ‘outstanding memory of my childhood in Coolgardie is the strong sense of community that existed among the local townspeople’.⁴ She had also attended St Michael’s School in Kalgoorlie as well as St Anthony’s in Narrogin, St Michael’s in Bassendean, Mercedes in Perth and Our Lady of the Missions High School in Fremantle. The number of schools had partly been the consequence of her father being shifted to different parts of the state experiences, which she thought enabled her to master the “new girl at school” technique quite well’.⁵ Subsequently she attended the University of Western Australia, from where she graduated in 1990 with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in politics and industrial relations.

Before her election to Parliament, Kate had a range of employment experiences. This included being employed as a shop assistant, library clerk, insurance clerk and trade union official. Moreover, she could readily speak of having gained valuable political skills from being a community activist and as a parent of three young children. The latter had required a remarkable balancing act of family duties and paid work. She had married on 14 January 1995 William (Bill) Johnston, who later was the State Secretary of the ALP and at the 2008 state election gained the seat of Cannington in the ‘other place’, the Legislative Assembly. Kate’s Labor Party membership dated from 1985, several months after she had been employed as an organiser by the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association of WA (SDA). This required the exercise of political skills such as recruiting, problem solving, holding workplace meetings to educate members about their rights in the workplace and advocating and negotiating on behalf of members in their workplace. She also cited the influence of her grandfather, Jack Grogan, who had been a long time member of the Labor Party, as well as the Transport Workers’ Union.⁶ He was reputed to have discussed with Kate and her family the various political personalities of his day, including the Charles Court Government, which they felt ‘had let down the working people of [the] State and had focused only on the business end’.⁷ These influences she thought had ‘subliminal effect on my psyche and planted the seeds for the direction that I would take in my working life’.⁸

When she entered Parliament Kate had risen to be Vice-President of UnionsWA. She was most praiseworthy of the outstanding stewardship of Mark Bishop, the SDA’s general secretary of the time. Bishop later became a senator in the Rudd and Gillard federal Labor Governments. Significantly, she believed that working at the SDA reinforced the relevance and importance of the role of trade unions for the working people of the state, particularly when the working conditions of SDA members in industry were compared with those substandard conditions suffered by retail workers labouring under state workplace agreements.⁹ A policy domain of special interest to the new Labor MLC was occupational safety and health. Indeed, she thought Worksafe WA should conduct an annual audit to assess whether employers are complying with the requirements of the Act and to establish a direct link between occupational safety and health and workers’ compensation. In her view ‘the time has come to allow WA safety representatives the same right that the Victorian and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 May 2001, p. 657.

Commonwealth safety reps have had; that is, the right to issue improvement notices to employers'.¹⁰

Understandably, another area of interest was the issue of balancing work and family. As Kate told the Legislative Council, 'like other Western Australian workers, I have had to deal with this issue on a personal level as a parent of three young children juggling the pressures of a full-time job, community activity, political involvement with the Labor Party and sustaining a relationship with my husband'.¹¹ She could speak appreciatively of the understanding shown by some employers and her husband. Unfortunately, not all the workers she had represented in the retail industry could recall such positive experiences. At the same time it had to be recognised that 'the task of balancing all the aspects of work and family life places enormous pressure on individuals, and sometimes workers can be pushed into extremely stressed times if they are prevented from dealing with their first commitment'.¹² Significantly, it was added that 'families should always come first. The family is the most important unit in our society, and employers should recognise that, occasionally, things happen and employees need to be freed up from their work responsibilities' when organising staff rosters.¹³

Although Kate recognised how proud she was 'to reside in this State and celebrate that we live in true democracy without fear of reprisal' she expressed dissatisfaction that Western Australia 'has effectively turned a blind eye to the people incarcerated in the detention centres in the north of the State'.¹⁴ She recognised the reasons why people may be trying to beat the migration system to gain entry to a better life in Australia and saw the need to properly assess new arrivals who try to enter Australia illegally. However, she strongly said 'it is unacceptable that young children are kept locked up in these artificial situations for such long periods of time'.¹⁵

A decade later the same refugee issue was troubling Australian jurisdictions of government. During this period of time Kate had 'made a difference' in the Parliament after having been successfully re-elected at the 2005 and 2008 (for 2009) Legislative Council elections. The *Hansard* record of her roles is very substantial. In her first term she was a member of the Standing Committee on Legislation as well as the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. With the latter standing committee she continued her membership in her second term and became deputy chair in 2009. She served on the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges between 2001 and 2005 and during this period was Deputy Chair of Committees. In addition she was a member of the Select Committee on Advocacy for Children, which in its final report in 2004 recommended the appointment of a Commission for Children and Young People with a commissioner at its head, appointed by the Governor.¹⁶ She served on the Select Committee into the Appropriateness of Powers and Penalties for Breaches of Parliamentary Privilege and Contempts of Parliament, the six recommendations of which included a specification that the Western Australian Parliament adopt guidelines as to what constitutes a contempt of Parliament. In addition, it was recommended that Parliament should

¹⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 May 2001, p. 660.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *WAPD(LC)*, 30 May 2001, p. 661.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ 'Report of Select Committee on Advocacy for Children (Appointment of a Commissioner for Children), Legislative Council, 2004, p. i.

lose its power to imprison or expel a member, but could still impose a fine for any amount in relation to a breach of privilege or contempt of Parliament; and that the parliamentary precinct should be clearly defined by statute.¹⁷ Another role for Kate, during late 2008, had been membership on the Parliamentary Services Committee.

During the period after the 2005 general election and until the loss of government in September 2008, the greatest demand on Kate came from the numerous Parliamentary Secretary positions she held, covering a very wide range of portfolios across the breadth of government. Included in this tabulation, most of which signalled one of the interests outlined in her Inaugural Speech, were public sector management and government enterprises, small business, housing and works, heritage, community development, consumer protection, land information, women's interests, seniors and volunteering, youth, education, and culture and the arts. After Labor's electoral loss in 2008 Kate rose to be the Deputy Leader of Opposition in the Legislative Council while also serving as the Shadow Minister for Energy, Science and Innovation.

With reference to her Shadow Ministry responsibilities, Kate Doust has played an important role in helping to keep the Barnett 'Alliance' Government 'on its toes' to justify its rise in household utility charges with frequent appearances in the media and a plethora of parliamentary questions to the relevant ministers. At the same time she has sought to play an innovative theme particularly with her movement of a motion calling on the Barnett Government 'to endorse the expansion of the national broadband network proposed by the Gillard Government to support business, industry and residential users across the state, giving them high-speed internet access while at the same time avoiding the construction of numerous unsightly wireless towers in residential areas'.¹⁸

Invariably Kate has spoken at length and in detail in the Legislative Council on important and contentious issues, taking a pro-life stance on Bills related to euthanasia, cloning and stem cell research. One example was her speech on the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill 2011, which sought to broaden the definition of drug paraphernalia and to make it illegal to display drug paraphernalia for sale and sell to a child or adult. Mandatory sentencing was to apply for adults who commit an offence relating to possession with intent to sell or supply, manufacture or prepare, or sell or supply or who offer to sell or supply a prohibited drug. Kate clearly understood the scale of the problem and was able to make constructive suggestions with a commitment that Labor, despite concerns, would support sections of the Bill, although not those parts of the Bill that expressly dealt with mandatory sentencing.¹⁹ Given her eye for the future Kate is also ready to support motions such as 'this house condemns the government for taking an old-fashioned piecemeal and politically driven approach to marine park planning in Western Australia'.²⁰ This led her to recall her long service of membership on the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, to which the public is continually canvassing planning issues surrounding marine parks.

¹⁷ 'Report 1, Select Committee into the Appropriateness of Powers and Penalties for Breaches of Parliamentary Privilege and Contempts of Parliament', Legislative Council, May 2009, pp. i and ii.

¹⁸ *WAPD(LC)*, 19 August 2010, p. 5783.

¹⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 20 October 2011, pp. 8437–8443.

²⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 23 November 2011, pp. 9608, 9623.

From her early youth Kate had had a keen interest in politics. It was nurtured by the sense of community which prevailed in her Coolgardie days. She later studied politics at a tertiary level to help provide a framework for her thoughts, which were further developed by her roles in the union movement. As the mother of three young children when she was first elected to the Legislative Council in 2001, she has managed a substantial balancing act between her family and political responsibilities. Her husband, Bill Johnston, as both a previous State Secretary of the ALP and then parliamentarian himself, was undoubtedly conscious of the demands upon her time, but the multiplicity of roles still required fulfilment. When Edith Cowan became the first woman elected to an Australian Parliament in 1921, her four children were beyond school age but even then doubts were cast about whether being a parliamentarian was possible in such circumstances. Kate for one has proved it is possible even with young children.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Election to Parliament in 2001 was the realisation of a long term ambition although at times I wondered whether such a goal was going to be realised. I had grown up on a 'diet of discussion' about the Labor Party, courtesy of my grandfather Jack Grogan, who was a long term member of the party and his trade union, the Transport Workers' Union. He would often speak about the various political personalities of the day, including Sir Charles Court, who my grandfather thought focused too much on the business end of town. Over the years I suppose these stories had some subliminal effect on my psyche and planted the seeds for the direction that I would take in my working life.

In preparation for my parliamentary career I believe my wide work experience has been invaluable. I was variously employed as a shop assistant, cleaner, library clerk, insurance clerk and trade union official. When employed in 1984 by the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association of WA, I worked as an organiser with tasks including recruiting, problem solving, holding workplace meetings to educate members about their roles in the workplace, and advocating and negotiating on behalf of members in their workplace. In 1985 when I joined the ALP as a 'natural extension' of my work as a union organiser I found these skills to be invaluable in the parliamentary scene. Another role that I held was that of 'women's officer', in which I handled issues of equal opportunity and sexual harassment in the retail industry. This background has enhanced my ability to contribute constructively to legislation and discussion in this domain for adults and children.

Another asset for my parliamentary role has emanated from my University of Western Australia studies for a Bachelor of Arts, with majors in politics and industrial relations. Apart from broadening my understanding of politics and industrial relations, it has enabled me to be more evaluative and helped me assess the claims made by many of my parliamentary colleagues. I enjoy parliamentary debate and while at times it is my responsibility to deliver the 'party line' for the public record, I also have been free to express my conscience on Bills related to euthanasia, cloning and stem cell research. With respect to the surrogacy legislation I think it was fortunate that the national executive took on board my recommendations for a conscience vote. It enabled the Legislative Council to look fairly and broadly at the matters dealt with in the Bill. Moreover, the Legislation Committee presented a good report with its inquiry and came up with some very sound amendments. In retrospect I thank the Government

for supporting those amendments the committee proposed. Eventually I had decided to support the legislation, which had meant a lot of hard work for me.²¹

With respect to the euthanasia legislation I could not bring myself to support a Bill that would assist in taking a person's life, so I opposed the Bill. As I also told the Legislative Council during a debate on the matter:

One final comment I might make is that I think that these type of debates are very healthy. We have been fortunate in some ways over the past few years to have a range of these type of debates on very complex ethical, moral and legal issues. Members in our community probably in some ways look forward to these debates because we can act and speak our minds. I think we have all been through copious amounts of paper work. Sometimes we just have to put that to one side and think about what our views are and how we have come to them. I say this as a member of the Labor Party. I think the community expects members of Parliament to express their own views more often or to be more reflective of individual parts of the community. I think that we will have more and more of these debates over time dealing with a diverse range of matters. We have seen that here in this chamber when we have dealt with stem cells, cloning, surrogacy, abortion and euthanasia a couple of times. I am sure that there will be more to come our way. I think that in some ways it better educates us as members and it actually gets us thinking about these issues. I think it also encourages the community to think about these issues, which is a good thing as well.²²

Of the contentious issues mentioned above I still have some particular concerns with abortion rates in Western Australia. In August 2011 I presented a petition containing some 4,945 signatures seeking an inquiry into post-20 week abortions performed in Western Australia since the 1998 legislation, with a view to changing the law to prohibit all abortions after 20 weeks' gestation. At an earlier date, I had indicated to Parliament in an adjournment debate that a pro-life rally was being conducted on the steps of Parliament House to commemorate the eleventh anniversary of the passage of the abortion legislation. To those people who support pro-life matters, it marked a sad day in Western Australia's history. In that speech I called on the Government to review the processes and procedures currently in place and the information provided to women who are in the situation in which they may have an unplanned pregnancy. In particular I expressed concern that the counselling processes that were included in the legislation at that point of time are not occurring to the extent that they should be.²³

One aspect of my parliamentary life that I have regularly valued has been its committee work. Upon election I soon became a participant in the extensive committee system of the Legislative Council. While meeting committee obligations can sometimes be taxing, I have felt they provide an opportunity for members to sometimes 'make a difference'. Members often take off their 'party hats' and combine to make recommendations which are then gradually given 'input' to the political system. Whether this approach is more common in the Legislative Council than the Legislative Assembly is difficult to say. Nevertheless, parliamentary committees are invariably educative for members.

²¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 26 June 2008, pp. 4398–4399.

²² *WAPD(LC)*, 22 September 2010, p. 7077

²³ *WAPD(LC)*, 21 May 2009, p. 4413.

When I entered the Legislative Council, the Labor Party had taken the reins of power with Geoff Gallop as Premier. From 2005, during the second term of Labor Party office, I fulfilled a wide range of Parliamentary Secretary posts. This gave me a ‘hands on’ feeling about the demands of Government. Of course when Labor lost government in 2008 the Shadow Ministry role befell me as my party was in opposition. I share the view of most of my parliamentary colleagues that it is better to be in government than opposition. I have taken the view of ‘opportunity in diversity’ and regard being in opposition as a good learning period.

Whether in government or opposition there is no doubt that being a parliamentarian provides challenges, particularly for women with young children as I have—who are named Rebekah, Zoe and Liam. Fortunately I have not been alone in this regard with the increasing number of women, particularly in the Legislative Council, having children. Occasionally we have conversations about how to balance all the aspects of family and work life. To me the family is the most important unit in our society so I seek to give a very high priority to my children. As my husband, Bill Johnston, is a member of the ‘other place’, I am perhaps fortunate that I benefit from his understanding of the pressures on members of Parliament. In conclusion, I would have to say that being a member of Parliament is a great privilege. To be one of fewer than 80 women elected to the Western Australian Parliament throughout its history is a very special honour. Having gained preselection with first place on the Labor Party ticket for the South Metropolitan Region for the next Parliament, and holding the post of Deputy Opposition Leader in the House, I am confident that I will be able to continue my political career after the 2013 election.