



**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
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VALMA EILEEN FERGUSON



MLC East Metropolitan Region 2 February 1993–21 May 1993 and 4 April 1995–21 May 1997 (ALP). Member Standing Committee on Legislation 1995–1996; Printing and Library Committees 1995–1996.

Between 1993 and 1997, Val Ferguson served two short terms in the Legislative Council but did not secure party endorsement to contest the 1996 election and her second term expired in May 1997. In the 1989 election, she had stood unsuccessfully in fourth place on the ALP ticket for the East Metropolitan Region but was elected in February 1993 after a recount of votes to serve out the remaining three months of her colleague Kay Hallahan's (q.v.) term as an Upper House member. This followed the latter's resignation to successfully contest the Armadale seat in the Legislative Assembly. Parliament did not sit in the ensuing weeks and, as was also the case with Diane Airey (q.v.), Val was not sworn in as a member before her term expired in May. In the meantime, on 6 February she had again contested the East Metropolitan Region election, this time in fifth place on the ALP ticket, and on 1 April 1995 she was returned to the Upper House for a second time to fill the casual vacancy resulting from the resignation of former ALP State President Tom Butler.¹ She was sworn in on 4 April and played an active role during the remaining two years of her term.

Val Ferguson was born in Perth on 20 November 1941, daughter of Robert and Mavis Tucker. She was educated at Highgate Primary School and Girdlestone High School and at the age of 15 commenced work with Country Newspapers and then with Craft Print. Between 1959 and 1970 she worked within the industrial wing of the labour movement, including five years with the Australasian Society of Engineers, during which time she married Ken Ferguson, and three years from 1967 to 1970 with the Trades and Labor Council. She then moved to the political wing and became an administrative officer in the ALP's head office.

¹ The number four placed candidate from 1993, Michelle Roberts (q.v.), who in all likelihood would have otherwise filled the vacancy, had in the interim been elected to the Legislative Assembly to succeed former Premier Carmen Lawrence (q.v.) following the latter's resignation to enter federal politics.

During the mid-1970s Val spent two years in Karratha during which time she worked for a few months at Karratha Senior High School. Returning to Perth, she and her husband settled in Bassendean and, between 1981 and the commencement of her second term in Parliament, she worked successively for Kim Beazley, MHR, from 1981 to 1990, Senator Peter Walsh from 1990 to 1993 and, subsequently, Senator Chris Evans after she left Parliament for the first time in May 1993. As an active member of the Federated Clerks Union, she was an initiator and coordinator of the Trades Hall Staff Agreement in 1968.

Over the years Val has served on an enormous variety of community and service organisations. She was secretary of the Bassendean Parents and Citizens Association from 1972 to 1973 and then at Karratha she was secretary of the Parents and Citizens and the Arts and Craft Exhibition Committee, and also carried out official duties for the Karratha Swimming and Junior Football Clubs, as well as for the Ashfield Football Club and the Bassendean Rovers Netball Association on her return to Perth. In 1991–92 she was a member of the Bassendean Town Council Australia Day Young Citizen and the Citizen of the Year Award panels and also for a time of the committee of the Belmont and Swan CYSS. After leaving politics her manifold variety of responsibilities included being chairperson of WISH (the Western Institute of Self Help), of the Stand By Me Youth Service and of the Alice Davoren Senior Citizens Centre; vice-chairperson of Midland Women's Health Care Place; and board member of the North-East Regional Youth Centre. She served also as a committee member of the Midland Gate Street Work and the Midland Youth Centre and on the board of management of Jobs Australia in Midland. Subsequent activities included treasurer and board member of the Eastern Region Domestic Violence Centre, and with the International Volunteer Day of Appreciation and the Belmont and Swan Community Youth Support Schemes. In 2012 she was again chair of the Midland Women's Health Care Place.

Within the ALP, Val at one time or other 'held every branch position available' including terms as secretary of both the Ascot and Karratha branches and then secretary, vice-president and president of the Bassendean branch and from there vice-president of the Perth Electorate Council. She served on the Administrative Committee, was a delegate to the State Executive between 1976 and 1983 and again from 1985 to 1992, and attended various national conferences between 1973 and 1991, as well as acting as campaign manager or campaign treasurer in numerous election campaigns. One can only reiterate the comment by Judyth Watson (q.v.) in her book *We Hold Up Half the Sky*:

In so many ways she [Val] represents the commitment of dozens of women whose work has been indispensable in the labour movement and who have generously stood for seats with little expectation of winning. Those women who have stood for unwinnable or marginal seats they did not win are also owed a place in the history of our party.²

² Judyth Watson (ed.), *We Hold Up Half the Sky. The Voices of Western Australian ALP Women in Parliament*, Perth: ALP (WA Branch), 1994, p. 183.

Reflections on the Member's Parliamentary Career

(These reflections were written by the editors in 1999.)

Throughout her short political career, Val Ferguson maintained a constant concern with the plight of the less fortunate, an outlook reflecting the enormous amount of her own time devoted to the various service organisations in the community. Thus, in her Inaugural Speech, after expressing her gratitude to family and party colleagues who had worked with her over the years, she set out to speak on behalf of those 'who are unable to articulate their needs against the might of the bureaucracy' and to assert her 'strong belief in the importance of educating people about their rights'. In this regard, she mentioned that she had been reminded recently of:

... my history of advocating for people. It began in grade 1 when I challenged a teacher [at Highgate Primary School] for her unfair treatment of a classmate. It was fostered while working for the Australasian Society of Engineers and the Trades and Labor Council where, in the absence of officials, I assisted members of unions with queries regarding their industrial entitlements. While employed at the Trades and Labor Council, I instigated an industrial agreement for administrative workers, all women, in union offices who, until 1969, had no formal union coverage. I am proud that my efforts resulted in the enactment of the Trades Hall clerical staff agreement.³

Reflecting on the need for more women in Parliament, she gave special attention to the demanding nature of the politician's world:

I believe that one of the reasons more women do not become members of Parliament is the demands made on politicians' time. The subsequent challenges created for members and their families makes [sic] it more difficult for a woman to balance the work role with the role of wife and mother. Women have proved their relevance in both Houses of State and Federal Parliaments. However, because women have been socialised to nurture, social conventions now impede their progress. Traditionally most successful male members have an extremely supportive spouse. I have often heard the lament of my female colleagues when they say, 'What I really need is a wife.' I acknowledge that I am one of the lucky ones because I am fortunate in having a very supportive partner in Ken. I was able also to continue to work in the 1960s while raising a family because of the vision of the late Jim Coleman, the first Secretary of the Trades and Labor Council. Jim gave me the opportunity to develop a career path in the Labor movement by introducing the concept of flexitime, long before it became the norm in public sector awards. However, Mr President and honourable members of this Chamber, I contend that women in the 1990s should not have to seek the support of any one individual to represent people in this place.

Structural barriers impeding participation of larger numbers of women should be removed or addressed. I refer particularly to hours of sittings, the lack of child care facilities, and the party preselection process ... As long ago as 1975, the women's movement addressed the inappropriateness of meetings scheduled during the evening meal period. They recognised the negative impact it could have on families and the subsequent reluctance of women to participate in any number of public forums. The Australian electors have indicated they want more women representing them in Parliament. They must be listened to, and changes must be made to accommodate such wishes. If more women are to take their place in Parliament, the way Parliament operates needs to be reformed ... Parliament needs to sit more during the day rather than working late nights and early mornings. All members of Parliament with young families are affected. They should not be forced to work this way, if we really believe in and are committed to family life. It is

³ WAPD(LC), 4 April 1995, p. 494.

ludicrous that this tradition of the 1890s still exists when the twenty-first century arrives in five short years!

... Sitting hours impact not only on members of Parliament. The staff of Parliament House should receive due consideration with regard to this issue. This is only one of a number on the list of detrimental working conditions for employees in this place. For instance, Hansard reporters work in cramped spaces which have been likened to dog boxes. I am told that in the summer it is like working in a sauna. People are surprised and astounded when told there is no air-conditioning in Parliament House other than in the dining room and in the strangers' bar. People cannot believe that in this day and age these workers have such antiquated conditions.⁴

In the same speech Val also took the opportunity to express her concerns about the consequences of privatisation:

The push to privatise at all costs concerns me because many people are hurting badly. Privatisation has been promoted as a panacea to our changing economy but there is a social consequence to this requirement for economic change ... Redeployment as an option gives limited opportunities. Consider the impact on families when the worker is transferred to a country area because it is the only job available. Consider the impact of his leaving the family home and the upheaval to children's schooling, which can have devastating results ... Rhetoric about the creation of jobs in the private sector is deceptive. Take the case of the Department of State Services in Welshpool, which was privatised late last year. Workers who were already in short term contracts with the Government were assured of ongoing employment. However, early last month 15 people were told they were no longer needed. Many of those people are blue collar workers in their fifties, and they are fearful of their future prospects. We should consider the repercussions on the families if a parent is not working. We are not able to build role models for young people in our society.⁵

Val's concern with the underdog can be illustrated from another angle by her references in her inaugural and subsequent speeches to the so-called 'unsung heroes of the parliamentary process':

... electorate officers, particularly those in the state arena who in most cases work on their own in the absence of their members. They must be prepared to run the electorate office single-handedly, be multiskilled, work with community groups and deal with constituents ... These tasks are just a few confronted daily by electorate staff. For some time now more resources for state electorate offices have been an issue. I firmly believe we should endeavour to provide extra staff where necessary to ease the ever increasing workload of this group of diligent people. We should also be conscious of the fact that some are at risk of physical threat, and consideration should be given to their safety.⁶

And again in 1996:

I take this opportunity to support our electorate officers in their negotiations for an enterprise bargain agreement. It is time that the changes in their duties were recognised. They have progressed from electorate secretaries to valuable personal assistants. Without their support it would be impossible for members of Parliament to carry out all their electoral commitments. The complexities of electorate officers' duties have increased significantly. The skills to cope with many of the changes in their duties have had to be developed over the years as no formal training has been provided ... The role of members of Parliament has changed and they have received many

⁴ Ibid, pp. 496–497.

⁵ Ibid., p. 497.

⁶ Ibid., p. 496.

increases in salary to accommodate this change. It is not reasonable to believe that electorate officers are the only members of staff who have not increased their productivity.⁷

Among issues raised in her other speeches were the implications of changes to the school entry age, funding cuts and job losses within the public sector impacting, for example, on financial counselling services, while in her second Address-in-Reply speech in March 1996 she took the opportunity to congratulate the Bassendean Town Council's junior council first formed in 1991 and the Lockridge Youth Service.⁸

Her views on the House of Parliament in which she spent all too brief a time can best be summarised in the closing paragraphs of her Inaugural Speech:

The Legislative Council was established to be a watchdog over the other place, not a rubber stamp. The tragedy is that whenever the conservatives hold government this Chamber is a rubber stamp. However, when Labor holds the Treasury benches this Chamber is obstructionist. One need only look at the statistics. If the Legislative Council is not positively reformed through the Commission on Government process, I believe—like others before me—that it should be abolished.⁹

(These Reflections were written in 2012 by Val in conjunction with a close friend.)

It was not an ambition of Val Ferguson to become a member of Parliament. It came about simply because of the way that the upper House ticket was structured and in her case it happened twice. On the first occasion she was not even sworn in; however, she worked out of the office of Kay Hallahan in Armadale in the role as Member for the East Metropolitan Region. During the second short term, Val found in her new role as an MP that she had more resources available to work with and for the community which was very important for her. She enjoyed the community representation. The electorate allowance gave her the opportunity to throw herself into representing the community, working with groups to benefit the community at a grassroots level. Over the years she has remained in contact with many good people she met during her short time as an MP and is still involved in similar activities wherever possible. When her term was due to end, many community members, not necessarily Labor supporters, openly lobbied the ALP to re-endorse Val to remain in the position. This was not to be, as although Val had worked in the industrial and political movement since the age of 17, she refused to join a faction which did impact on her non-endorsement by the party. Since the reflections published in the previous volume, Val has said that she is not aware of any significant changes that would encourage women to become members of Parliament. The reforms she spoke about in her previous reflection have, as far as she is aware, not progressed to the point where things have changed for the better.

As for privatisation, this is still an issue that concerns Val immensely. The trend by the current Government is worrying in this regard and Val supports Labor in opposing this agenda. She still believes there has been and will continue to be social consequences arising from privatisation.

Despite never having been endorsed in a winnable position for a full term, Val enjoyed the opportunity she did have to represent the ALP in her role as an MP as this enabled her to implement party policy directly to her constituents. As such, her only regret would be that she had so little time and opportunity to serve the people of her community.

⁷ WAPD(LC), 29 March 1996, p. 159.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ WAPD(LC), 4 April 1995, pp. 497–498,