



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

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

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MARGARET MARY QUIRK



MLA Girrawheen from 10 February 2001 (ALP). Government Whip 2001–2005, Parliamentary Secretary 2003–2005. Minister of State 25 November 2005–23 September 2008. Shadow Minister from September 2008. Chair Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation 2001–2003. Member Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission 2005–2006; Community Development and Justice Standing Committee from 2010.

Margaret Quirk won the Legislative Assembly seat of Girrawheen for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) at the February 2001 election when Labor gained office, led by new Premier Geoff Gallop. By the time Labor had lost office, at the 2008 election, with Alan Carpenter as leader, Margaret had risen to be a prominent government minister. She entered the Parliament with an impressive list of credentials, helping to ensure that her deliberations are given weight. In her Inaugural Speech she said:

I come to this place under no illusions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we face an environment in which the expectations of the role of government are blurred, trust in the political process is diminished and political dialogue is impoverished. On 10 February, the people of Girrawheen in particular, and the voters of Western Australia more generally, clearly indicated that they demand that government take full responsibility for a range of vital services such as health, police and education.¹

Prior to the recognition of the challenges facing the new government Margaret firstly paid respect to:

... the Nyoongah people on whose land we stand. I look forward to working with members in this place during the currency of this Parliament in a bipartisan manner to formulate changes that will ensure that the aspirations of indigenous Western Australians about self-determination, access to their land and economic viability are met.²

¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 23 May 2001, p. 399.

² *Ibid.*, p. 398.

She was also very proud to be pleased to serving in a party elected to government that included Carol Martin (q.v.), the member for Kimberley and the first Indigenous woman elected to an Australian Parliament. In addition, she congratulated Dianne Guise (q.v.), as the first woman to be elected as the Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.³

Margaret Quirk was born in Adelaide on 26 June 1957. Her father, James Quirk, was a social scientist who became a university professor and her mother, Helen (nee Sykes), was a teacher librarian. Her educational record is wide and varied, including time at Notre Dame School in Oxford. In South Australia she attended Unley High School. In Western Australia, where she first arrived in 1967, her schooling included enrolment at Loreto School, Claremont. She also gained an LLB (Hons) at the University of Western Australia in 1981, and a Master of Arts from Murdoch University in 2003.

As a lawyer before election to Parliament, Margaret held a very wide range of positions, principally in the public sector. She was the assistant director of the administrative review of the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, and was personal assistant to Ian Temby as the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, and then worked for its Office in Canberra. For a time in 1988 and 1989 she was closer to the political scene as a ministerial advisor on energy and environment to the Dowding ALP government in Western Australia, before briefly working as an associate for a large commercial firm in the civil litigation section. Prior to winning her seat in the Legislative Assembly, Margaret was regional counsel for some 10 years for the National Crime Authority in Perth, where she worked closely with both the Australian Federal Police and a number of state police forces, including Western Australia. In addition to this employment experience Margaret had been a member of a host of boards and councils with civic goals. This included the Board of Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital (1991–1994), the Legal and Welfare Rights Centre (1987–1988), the Renewable Energy Advisory Council (1989–1991) and the Catholic Social Justice Council. She has been the National Vice-President of the Australian Society of Labor Lawyers, member of the Australian Clerical Officers Association (ACOA) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) as well as Chair of the Gay and Lesbian Reform Committee in 2001 and member of the Premier's Anti-racism Taskforce.

As early as 1984 Margaret joined the ALP. Again, she has held a host of posts at the electorate and branch level and has regularly been a delegate to state conference and national conference—an indication of her keenness to play her part for the party. This has included being a member of the Executive for Labor Women as well as a member of the Committee of Review. As soon as she took her seat in the Legislative Assembly she became the party whip for her first term in Parliament. Midway through this term she began her period as a Parliamentary Secretary in fields for which she had expertise, including Police and Emergency Services, Justice and Community Safety. This was followed by a Parliamentary Secretary role to the Premier (Dr Geoff Gallop); Minister for Public Sector Management; Water Resources; Federal Affairs, and in 2006 she was promoted to the Ministry, holding portfolios until Labor lost office in September 2008. During this period she was responsible at various times for Disability Services, Citizenship and Multicultural Interests, Women's Interests, Justice, Corrective Services and Small Business. Of the 12 women first elected to Parliament in 2001, Margaret was in company with Sue Ellery (q.v.) as the only women to have reached the Ministry by mid 2007; as late as 2012 the number had only risen to three.

³ Ibid., p. 399.

From the beginning of her parliamentary service Margaret's legal training was utilised with her appointment for the exacting role as Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. Thereafter came membership of the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission; this was followed in the 38th Parliament, with membership, in Opposition, on the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. Margaret was also a member of the Parliamentary History Advisory Committee from 2001 to 2005.

In the multiplicity of positions Margaret has held, she has invariably spoken as a learned person. In her Inaugural Speech she cited Adam Smith's seminal work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Although Smith wrote about buyers and sellers meeting in the market whereby a pattern of production develops that results in social harmony without control or direction 'as if by an invisible hand', he still contended that the administration of justice was an area in which government had a key role to play. He asserted, as Margaret reminded the House, 'that government alone had the means to expend the moneys necessary to protect the whole of society'.⁴ Given that premise Margaret has argued that:

Crime has a devastating effect on our community [and] government should bear the principal responsibility for policing ... Trends over recent years, which have eroded this responsibility for policing, should not be encouraged ... The collective will of the people of Western Australia is to have a highly professional, well-trained and intelligently deployed public Police Service.⁵

While accepting that policing is a government responsibility, Margaret has recognised the need to manage the state's police resources intelligently and that changing circumstances and conditions at times require that police personnel need to be redeployed and priorities reassessed. Given her breadth of experience in law enforcement she has indicated 'it is clear to me from that experience that crime is becoming increasingly complex'.⁶ At the same time it was important to appreciate that while police have to detect and apprehend offenders, they had to so within the parameters of the law and the administrative guidelines as well as the budgetary constraints. At times, though, the limitations upon officers 'are not fully appreciated'.⁷

Throughout her parliamentary career Margaret has been a particularly penetrative speaker on the multiplicity of law and order issues which have come before the legislature. As Corrective Services Minister she also grappled with some particularly contentious issues. In 2007 she received criticism for her initial refusal to grant convicted heroin trafficker Holly Deane-Johns the opportunity of a prisoner exchange arrangement with Thailand. However, the stance may have been due to Margaret having a keen appreciation of the protocols involved. In June of the same year Minister Margaret was devastated with the death in custody of Mr Ward, a respected Warburton community elder. As he had died being transported in a prison van for a traffic offence in conditions which State Coroner Alistair Hope later severely criticised, Minister Quirk had quickly sought to review the contract of the company responsible for prisoner transport.

⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 401.

Another policy domain in which Margaret has been very active has been road safety. Her parliamentary record clearly shows how she has closely monitored road safety policy, performance, education and research. For instance in her 2009 response to the Premier's Statement she indicated how 'the road toll in remote and regional Western Australia is escalating at present and it is matter of great concern'.⁸ On this occasion, with a broad comprehension of the issues she spoke about four cornerstones of a 'Towards Zero' road safety, which the Barnett Government had endorsed. These objectives were, firstly, safe road usage, which encompassed education for road users, enforcing road rules and enshrining measures to encourage good driving habits; secondly, safe roads and roadsides, requiring investment through programs such as Safer Roads, black spot funding, sealing shoulders, installing proper edge lines and similar measures; thirdly, safe speed through ensuring better speed enforcement and targeting speed limit reductions; and, finally, preventing death or serious injury by increasing the purchase of safer vehicles and specific safety measures, such as those recommended by the Australasian new car assessment program arrangements.⁹

While Margaret is a big issues person, she has always been a keen constituency member. In her Inaugural Speech, after paying tribute to her predecessor, Ted Cunningham, for his role in the seat of firstly Balga, then Marangaroo and thereafter Girrawheen, she indicated a range of matters that needed continual focus, such as schools, facilities for local youth and road safety measures.¹⁰ Even when she spoke to the Cat Bill 2011 she was concerned about its imposts. While supporting the general thrust of the legislation she was worried about whether local governments would have the resources and whether the \$200 chipping and sterilisation costs could be met by pensioners and elderly people who often rely on the companionship of their cats.¹¹

In more than a decade in Parliament Margaret has made a mark. During this journey she has been most appreciative of the support of many family and friends, some of whom are well known union and Labor figures. Union people have included Helen Creed (Miscellaneous Workers Union) and Jock Ferguson (Australian Manufacturing Workers Union). Parliamentarians mentioned include MLC Hon Kate Doust (q.v.), MLA Bill Johnston, MLC Hon Nick Griffiths, former Senator Jim MacKiernan, MHR Stephen Smith, former MHR Jann McFarlane, and Graham Edwards, both a state and federal parliamentarian. Very important are Michelle Roberts (q.v.), the member for Midland and, as mentioned previously, Carol Martin (q.v.). Not forgotten are family, particularly mother Helen, and father, Professor Jim Quirk. They were thanked for instilling a strong sense of faith and social justice, an unflagging work ethic and a high regard for the enrichment which education can provide. A final legacy from her parents is her first name Margaret, after St Thomas More's daughter Margaret Roper. St Thomas More was recalled as a man of principle, choosing execution rather than compromising his values and integrity. Significantly, too, St Thomas More was recently made the patron saint of politicians.¹²

⁸ *WAPD(LA)*, 17 November 2009, p. 9141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9142.

¹⁰ *WAPD(LA)*, 23 May 2001, pp. 399–400.

¹¹ *WAPD(LA)*, 7 September 2011, p. 6960.

¹² *WAPD(LA)*, 23 May 2001, p. 402.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

In 2001, when I entered the Legislative Assembly, it was with five other new women members. Not only was there a certain safety in numbers, but we also joined experienced and capable women on the Government side who had become Ministers in key portfolios: Michelle Roberts in Police; Judy Edwards in Environment; Alannah MacTiernan in Planning and Infrastructure; Sheila McHale in Community Development (qqqq.v). On the other side, there was former Attorney General Cheryl Edwardes. (q.v). These women were excellent role models and guides for us new arrivals.

The class of 2001 also enhanced WA's fine tradition of political firsts for women. Within our ranks were the first Aboriginal woman member (Carol Martin); the youngest woman ever elected (Jaye Radisich); and the first female Deputy Speaker (Dianne Guise) (qqq.v).

There is a longstanding debate about whether women MPs approach their role differently from their male colleagues. Some suggest the life experience of many women in local community activism is an excellent grounding for Parliament. Others assert that juggling work and family demands gives women the capacity to multiskill successfully. There are also those who say only women can articulate effectively issues affecting women. Some believe the image of woman politicians is better because we are not seen part of the dominant political culture.

After ten years in Parliament, I am uncertain of the degree to which these factors really do translate into a qualitative difference, although it is evident that these kinds of life experiences do make any person a more effective member of Parliament. I am certain, however, that it is essential that the character of our Parliament better reflects that of the general community. That means that it is important to have a significant number of women from varied backgrounds in our rank.

It is also important, however, that Parliament be more ethnically diverse. I am saddened that little progress has been made thus far in securing the election to Parliament of a more ethnically diverse cohort of MPs. Our state's population comprises migrants from over 200 countries, speaking 270 languages and practising 100 religious faiths. Of all the states and territories, Western Australia continues to have the largest proportion of its population born overseas (just over 25 per cent, or more than half a million people). Almost half of the total population have one or both parents born overseas.

This rich and extraordinary diversity within our community is not reflected in a similarly diverse Parliament. The people's representatives are still a pretty monocultural lot, unlike the people themselves.

There does need to be a more tangible readiness to increase diversity across the political spectrum. I am not talking about something as prescriptive as quotas here. Rather all parties need to be actively identifying cultural deficits and seeking to fill them through mentoring and the normal preselection processes.

Since my election to Parliament, I have had the enormous privilege of performing a range of roles. Whether as a committee member, Minister or Shadow Minister, I have been able to meet all sorts of Western Australians under all sorts of circumstances from across our state. Many of these encounters have been inspiring and life affirming; others have caused me personal

grief and to reflect on systemic failures of public policy in various areas by successive governments.

Experiences in the disability portfolio fell into the life affirming category. Seeing ordinary Western Australians having to do extraordinary things to care for their disabled children never ceases to have a profound impact. In years to come, as carers age and are less able to cope by themselves, there will be increasing demands on government for support and respite. While it has become trite to say that a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable, it is trite because it is true. For this reason the proposed national disability insurance scheme is a key initiative to ensure that those with disabilities have the support, therapy, access to essential care and early intervention programs. It would be reprehensible if a Western Australian government for venal political motives did not actively support and participate in this scheme.

It is issues such as this which demonstrate that the relationship between the federal government and the state government has the capacity to impact on people's daily lives. For decades, and for unworthy reasons, Western Australian politicians have often cultivated a rhetorical hostility to Canberra. While not everything that Canberra does is good for us in the West, it is essential to approach federal–state relations with maturity and good sense.

Making federal–state relations more functional and equitable has long been an interest of mine, and when I became Parliamentary Secretary to Premier Gallop in 2005, it was an interest that I pursued, accompanying him to several Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meetings. When I joined Cabinet, one of the portfolios I was given was to assist the Premier in federal–state relations. Issues which were current at that time included measures to reform the health system, issues around the river Murray and combating terrorism as well as reforming the COAG process itself. And of course, there was the ongoing issue about the equitable distribution of GST revenue and the formula adopted by the grants commission to allocate funding to states.

After a few months in Cabinet I was given the portfolio of Corrective Services. With overcrowded prisons, a recidivism rate in excess of 40 per cent, a disproportionate rate of Aboriginals in our prisons (43 per cent of the prison population yet three per cent of the general population), and the logistical difficulties of dealing with those elements of the system which had been privatised, the challenges were obvious. Less obvious were procedures and guidelines which entrenched unequal outcomes for Aboriginal prisoners. Many of these were embedded not just within corrections, but in the justice system more generally. Whilst there are many well-meaning people who work hard to improve these outcomes, there are many systemic problems which mean their efforts are inevitably hampered. I regret that I had the job for too short a time to address these issues head on. It is an enduring interest of mine and I continue to articulate those concerns when the opportunity arises in Parliament. On a more positive note I was successful in the establishment of a new prison at Derby in the West Kimberley which will have a greater proportion of Aboriginal staff and focus on skills and training for the, mainly Aboriginal, prisoners to break the cycle of recidivism which desolates families and communities.

Moving to Opposition in late 2008 marked a new phase in my parliamentary career. As the Shadow Minister for Police, Emergency Services and Road Safety I have valued meeting front-line police, career firefighters and volunteer emergency workers from all over the state. With so many recent fires and floods, there has been significant attention paid in Parliament to the state's preparedness for such disasters.

In recent times, and as someone who values good public policy, I despair having to consider and debate laws that have been framed more by a desire to please a hungry and sceptical media than serve the community. Evidence is often a casualty in such debates, as is the solid and quiet work of many MPs. The work of parliamentary committees is often undervalued. This is a great pity. Over the years, I have enjoyed working with colleagues from both sides of the House in examining issues of major concern. Committee work offers the opportunity to focus closely on and to examine comprehensively major issues of concern. Yet while the outcomes of such inquiries can set the agenda for policy on key matters, they can also be dumped if political expediency requires it.

My proudest achievement in politics is being the member for Girrawheen. It is a great privilege to represent a culturally diverse northern suburbs community. To assist constituents with their problems; to hear to their concerns; to share with them in key life events like births, school graduations, marriages and bereavements; to be entrusted by them with the job of being their member of Parliament—these are honours that I value enormously. Ultimately, all the debate and high level policy deliberations should be about materially improving the lives of ordinary Western Australians, and for me that means the people in the seat of Girrawheen.