



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

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

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and
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LYLA DAPHNE ELLIOTT



MLC East Metropolitan Province 22 May 1971–21 May 1986 (ALP). Deputy Chairman of Committees 1974–1977 and 1983–1986. Member several parliamentary committees including Honorary Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into and Report upon the Treatment of Alcohol and Drug Dependents in Western Australia 1973–1974 and Select Committee on Sport and Recreation Activities in Western Australia 1984. Chairperson Parliamentary Labor Party 1978–1986.

Lyla Elliott had been steeped in the culture of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) by the time she was first elected to the Legislative Council in 1971 for the North–East Metropolitan Province. A member of the party since 1955, for nearly two decades she held the post of secretary to the general secretary, state executive of the ALP, the controversial F.E. (Joe) Chamberlain, whom she held in great respect. She had also undertaken secretarial work for the federal executive and federal conferences, as well as having a brief sojourn in 1966 and 1967 with the overseas department of the British Labour Party. Ruby Hutchison (q.v.), the first woman elected to the Legislative Council, had wanted another woman to succeed her in the North–East Metropolitan seat, and from 1971 to 1974 Lyla was the only woman member in the twenty-seventh Parliament. Subsequently, from 1978 to 1986 she was the first woman to hold the post of chairperson of the state Parliamentary Labor Party. Her service in the Labor Party policy committees was also extensive, including 10 years as convenor of the ALP health and social welfare committee. Earlier, from 1974 to 1977, she was the first woman to be Deputy Chairman of Committees, a position she again occupied from 1983 to 1986. She was very active in the Parliament’s committee structure and played a constructive role in its enhancement, and by the time she retired from Parliament in 1986 she had done much to promote the image of women parliamentarians.

Born in Geraldton in July 1934, Lyla was educated at Reedy and Waroona State Schools before completing her Junior Certificate at St Joseph’s Convent, Waroona. Her father, Albert (Darkie) Elliott, was originally a brewer but lost his job during the Depression years. He later worked as a tool sharpener at a goldmine at Reedy before becoming a fitter and turner at Waroona. Against this background, Lyla developed a strong affinity with working people, describing her parents as ‘working class’ and people who, in her view, were ‘decent living

people who struggled all their lives ... although not to the point of poverty'.¹ During her 15 years in the Legislative Council, she considered it a privilege, denied to other people, to raise matters of community concern in Parliament, particularly those pertaining to any injustice. She also regarded it as very rewarding to help constituents solve many problems. She had a long involvement in many community organisations that were reflective of her policy concerns, including a family day care scheme of which she was the founding chairperson and which was later named after her. After her retirement from Parliament, Lyla was named chairperson of a number of government bodies such as the Home and Community Care Advisory Committee, the Consultative Committee on Residential Child Care, the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Performance and Appraisal Panel, and the Training Department of Western Australia (formerly DEVET) Promotion by Merit Board of Review. Two other bodies with which she had a membership role were the Western Australian Community and Family Commission and the state Animal Welfare Advisory Committee.

In her Inaugural Speech, Lyla advocated the Labor platform of electoral and parliamentary reform and sought a better deal for Aboriginal people. As she said:

... the Indigenous people who inhabited this country at the dawn of its history were a proud, self supporting race, rich in culture and religion...They belonged to the land; they loved it; they were part of it, and it was part of them. Once it was taken from them the fabric of their society was destroyed.²

Over the years she gave a special emphasis to the problems of women, such as equal opportunity, abortion legislation, family planning and domestic violence. On the latter subject, she chaired a task force for the Burke Government. Other major concerns included child welfare, children's employment, housing, care of the aged and mental health patients, a better deal for disabled people, animal welfare and nuclear disarmament, including membership of People for Nuclear Disarmament. Further membership included the WA Voluntary Euthanasia Society and Friends of the ABC. After her retirement from Parliament, she was public in her opposition to privatisation, particularly the sale of the Commonwealth Bank.

Lyla was also concerned by the lack of community awareness of the functioning of the upper House. Conscious that it was once part of the Labor platform to abolish the Legislative Council, she offered the suggestion of an enlarged Legislative Assembly with an extensive committee system ensuring thorough examination of each legislative initiative,³ and she also felt there was a strong case for Parliament to provide better training for its members. However, she was most critical of the handling of parliamentary business, particularly the pattern of requiring long late-night sittings as a means of rushing through many Bills towards the end of the year⁴ and at a time when parliamentarians were usually overloaded with the demands of attendance at many citizenship awards, senior citizen ceremonies, and community and school functions.

¹ *Sunday Independent*, 14 February 1971, Lyla Elliott, Interview by Ronda Jamieson, July to October 1987, Western Australian Parliament Parliamentary History Project, p. 8.

² *WAPD(LC)*, 15 July 1971, p. 6.

³ Lyla Elliott, Interview by Ronda Jamieson, July to October 1987, Western Australian Parliament Parliamentary History Project, p. 147.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

While in Opposition, Lyla found that there was a responsibility on each individual member to handle Bills that came up within a policy area for which the member was responsible within the party, whereas, by contrast, in government the Ministers usually handled the Bills, with the backbenchers only required to speak at times to defend the legislation. Again, although there was an opportunity in Opposition to ask parliamentary questions and sometimes expose the governing party, this required considerable research time, and in this respect the assistance of the Parliamentary Library was invaluable. The level of this service, she believed, had improved steadily during her time in Parliament during which she served on the Library Committee. All things considered, however, from Lyla's point of view, being in government was highly advantageous in making possible the achievement of aspects of the party platform.⁵

Based on her extensive experience, Lyla was a defender of the political party system, although she was critical of the emergence of factions within the ALP.⁶ In her view, the Liberal Party also maintained strict party discipline and it was misleading to suggest otherwise. She recognised that politics can cause real problems in human relationships, with party leadership spills in particular having the potential to conjure hatreds that endured forever; placing the perceived best interests of the party above personal loyalties always placed great strain on people. There was, nevertheless, she believed, an obligation to uphold the party platform. In terms of the place of women in politics, Lyla felt that there were no obvious obstacles to women in the party's structure and no overt discrimination in the House, yet she did believe that men in the House tended to speak to her in terms that they would not use to address other men. Over time, her presence became less of a novelty and she believed she was increasingly accepted simply as a Member. Interestingly, she did postulate that constant socialising with other members, nearly all men, had an effect on her personality, making her more aggressive in style and language.⁷

There is little doubt that Lyla retired too early from Parliament. A group in the party, mainly women, was keen to witness her promotion to ministerial rank when Labor won government in 1983.⁸ However, in a preselection wrangle after a redistribution of boundaries by decision of the Labor administrative committee, she was given only a half term of three years, dating from 1983. Although very disappointed with the party's decision, she opted not to appeal to the state executive. Thereafter, she could have renominated in 1986 but decided against it. Nevertheless, upon retirement, Lyla did confess to missing the comradeship of Parliament, as well as being in the decision-making arena of caucus. She did have the opportunity, however, to give a well-considered farewell speech in which she concluded with a special tribute to the electorate secretaries, people who she considered shared many of the burdens placed upon members by the demands of their constituents.⁹

Subsequently, from 1976 Lyla was able to enjoy a less pressured life with her husband, Jack White, as well as pursuing her interest in higher education, studying history at Edith Cowan University. In 2000, she achieved first-class honours in her BA and became active in several historical organisations, including the Royal WA Historical Society, the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation Inc, the Mundaring and Hills Historical Society, the Oral History

⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

⁶ Ibid., p. 244.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 168–169.

⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

⁹ *WAPD(LC)*, 20 November 1985, p. 4775.

Association of WA and the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. Indeed, she was the author of a chapter for a book titled *The Workshops: A History of the Midland Government Railways Workshops*, published in 2006, which was awarded the Premier's Book Award for History. She was also the author of *Next of Kin*, a 20-year history of the Hills Community Support Group.

In terms of more direct women's interests, Lyla's membership of women's organisations has included the Family Planning Association, Abortion Law Reform Association, Women's Electoral Lobby, Emily's List and Perth Labor Women. She was also made a life member of the Midland Women's Health Care Place board of management, and the Lyla Elliott Family Day Care Scheme. As mentioned, Lyla was only the second woman elected to the Legislative Council, and at the time in 1971 she was the only female parliamentarian. This, too, was an era before the Labor Party had adopted quotas for seats that were deemed safe. Her tenure in the Parliament was prior to the electoral reform in the Legislative Council, where the introduction of the proportional representation voting system in 1987 was thought to have facilitated the election of more women, rising to a percentage of nearly 50 per cent of members after the 2008 state election. She would have approved of the passage of the one vote, one value legislation for the Legislative Assembly in 2005, but would have remained despaired at the retention of vote weighting in her former upper House. She greatly helped to overcome the novelty factor of women in Parliament and was universally regarded as a dedicated and fine parliamentarian.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

(These Reflections were written in 1999.)

There are several areas which dominate memories of my first three years in Parliament from 1971.

Firstly, as the only woman member in either chamber in those three years, I believe I was regarded as something of a novelty. I was not treated in an offensively discriminatory way. However, I do not think I was taken seriously as a member of Parliament elected to perform the same duties as the male members nor as a person with a worthwhile contribution to make. The community, too, was not used to women parliamentarians. Often, when ringing someone about a constituent's problem and identifying myself as Lyla Elliott, MLC, the response from the other end of the telephone was a puzzled, 'Did you say you were from Methodist Ladies' College?' It was not until later in the decade that the feminist movement began to make an impact on community awareness and attitudes about women's role in society, and more women began to join me in the Parliament, albeit only gradually.

The second issue which has remained vivid in my memory was the unfairness and undemocratic nature of the electoral system. This was reflected in the parliamentary process, which ensured the conservatives had retained political power from the granting of responsible Government in 1890, a situation achieved through control of the upper House, the Legislative Council. The bicameral system in Western Australia, unlike that of Britain, still gave the upper House the power to reject any legislation including money Bills. This meant that while the Labor Party was elected to office by virtue of its numbers in the Legislative Assembly, the conservative upper House always held the ultimate power and could reject any Labor

legislation purely on ideological grounds. This happened on many occasions in my first three years and left a burning resentment in me at the injustice of such a system. Although the electoral system still retains a weighting factor in favour of certain seats, it is at least more democratic than in those days.

The third memory I have of ‘the early days’ is of the lack of facilities and support for members. Not only were there no secretaries or electorate offices, no decent library resources and minimal technology, but there were only two typists in Parliament House for 81 members. This meant that backbenchers’ letters were often handwritten or unprofessionally typed by themselves. Their filing systems also left a lot to be desired! The improvement in facilities for members, particularly the introduction of secretaries, not only provided enormous assistance to the parliamentarians, releasing them for other duties, but also offered a greater service to constituents.

Life in Parliament was at times exhausting, appalling, satisfying, exhilarating or disappointing. The business of the House is better managed today to allow civilised sitting hours. But in the 15 years I spent in the Legislative Council, the hours of sitting were absurd with both members and Hansard staff being required to work into the early hours of the morning. One day I calculated I had actually worked nearly 24 hours straight. Someone knocked on my door at seven o’clock in the morning with a town planning problem. After dealing with him, I had breakfast and went into the office where I spent the day until Parliament sat. That particular sitting went on until six o’clock the next morning.

Long sittings usually happened at the end of the session when there was a build-up of legislation that the Government was trying to get passed. The most appalling aspect of this was when the Government suspended standing orders to enable a Bill to be rushed through Parliament in one day. Often it was very important controversial legislation affecting people’s rights—for example, industrial legislation. This, of course, could be done only by a Government with control of both Houses. I always felt a more intelligent system would be one in which there was an enlarged single legislature (unicameral) with an effective standing committee system like that in Britain, which ensures detailed scrutiny of all Bills. This allows the public to be properly informed and results in better legislation.

One of my major concerns that developed while I was in Parliament was the direction in which government was heading on the question of secrecy. Not only were the public denied access to information to which they were entitled, but this also applied to members of Parliament. On a number of occasions, I was refused information from a government department under direction from its Minister on issues concerning the environment or vital to the health and wellbeing of the public. We are still seeing this to an even greater extent in the 1990s. This should not be possible in a democratic society.

When entering Parliament, my perception of my role as a member was not one of an individual, but rather as a member of a team endorsed by a political party with a platform of reform aimed at achieving a fairer society. However, I always regarded as extremely important my responsibilities to the people and organisations in my electorate and enjoyed my contact with them. It was here that I gained great satisfaction. Many of the issues raised by me in the Parliament came out of these contacts.

I took advantage of all the usual ways to introduce matters of concern to me and the community. These included parliamentary questions, motions, speaking during debate on

government Bills and procedural motions, and by way of introducing private members' Bills. The subjects ranged over a very wide area, but some of the more important ones dealt with the care of the aged, problems of Aboriginal people, protection of children, women's issues, consumer affairs, the environment, workers' industrial conditions, animal welfare and the dangers associated with the uranium industry and nuclear technology.

One of the most disappointing aspects of life in Parliament as a backbench member is to introduce a motion or a private member's Bill on an issue one believes of importance to the community and have it treated almost with contempt and then rejected on party lines. Following an approach by Actors' Equity, I introduced a Bill to provide protection from exploitation for children employed in the entertainment industry. It was rejected by the then government members and became law only when my party came to office. This also happened in respect to motions I introduced seeking a better deal for victims of rape and domestic violence and asking for equal opportunity legislation. These too were rejected and had to wait until the subsequent Labor Government introduced sexual assault and equal opportunity legislation and set up a domestic violence task force, which I was privileged to chair. The wide-ranging inquiry brought down over 100 recommendations, the majority of which were implemented.

Other private members' Bills were introduced by me following consultation with the Family Planning Association. These were designed to change the law to enable specially trained nurses to be able to prescribe and fit contraceptives. This would have been very helpful to women in remote country areas but, once again, the Bills were defeated in the Legislative Council along party lines. However, they resulted in the establishment of a fairly high powered committee of doctors, nurses and representatives of women's groups to look at the whole area of family planning and contraception.

One surprising victory I did have was the passage of my 'cat' Bill. Again, following an approach by an organisation, the RSPCA, I introduced a Bill to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act to make it an offence to dump any animal. Previously, the law had covered dogs, but not cats. This Bill was passed! I was not so successful in my long campaign to get steel-jawed traps banned. Like politicians on the other side of the fence, vested interests can also stop reform.

An area of great concern to me that I raised on a number of occasions was uranium mining and nuclear technology. In 1978, the then Government introduced the Nuclear Activities Regulation Bill related to uranium mining. During his second reading speech, the Minister said:

At present only mining and milling will take place in Western Australia, but there is the strong likelihood of further processing and nuclear power generation in the future. While there is no move toward nuclear power station waste storage in Western Australia, the legislation will allow for proper control should this ever occur.¹⁰

In strongly opposing the Bill, I said:

Those are ominous words. We are given fair warning that if we pass this Bill not only are we giving support to uranium mining and the export of yellow cake to other countries, but also we

¹⁰ *WAPD(LC)*, 23 November 1978, p. 5463.

can expect the strong likelihood that there will be further processing and nuclear power stations in Western Australia, and the possibility of storing this lethal waste in our State.¹¹

I concluded my speech with the following words:

I do not believe we should be contributing to the advancement of nuclear technology which is capable of unleashing enormous dangers on mankind. We should be rapidly researching and supporting the use of the non-polluting renewable energy resources, such as the sun, the wind and the tide. If we proceed with the mining of uranium at Yeelirrie and help to promote nuclear technology, we will be toying with the fate of generations to come. We have a grave responsibility to do everything possible to ensure a healthy, safe environment, and to safeguard the future of human life on this planet.¹²

Of course, the Bill passed.

As I write this 21 years later, Australians are debating the serious suggestion that their country become a vast nuclear waste dump for the rest of the world.

Addendum to Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

Although having retired in 1986, as a former member of Parliament I still take a passionate interest in politics.

As this publication is being updated in 2012, I feel impelled to comment on what I believe to be a dangerous development in politics in this nation.

In 2010, a minority Labor Government took office in Canberra with the support of Independents. Since that time, there has been the most toxic propaganda campaign by the opposition Coalition in Australia's history.

I have never witnessed a period of politics in which an Opposition has created such an atmosphere of hatred with relentless vicious personal attacks on the Prime Minister of the country. These attacks have been so outrageous that there have been people of the right in prominent positions in the media and politics who feel it is acceptable to advocate physical harm to the person who holds this high office. This has included an influential radio personality, a Liberal–National Party and a senior Liberal Party strategist.

Despite some bitter fighting between political enemies in Australia in the past, this kind of reprehensible behaviour was unthinkable.

One would hope that this is a passing phase which will disappear with the departure of the individuals responsible. If not, I fear for the future of decent peaceful democracy in this country.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 5466.