



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

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

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SUZANNE MARY ELLERY



MLC South Metropolitan Region from 22 May 2001 (ALP). Parliamentary Secretary 2003–2007. Minister of State 2 March 2007–September 2008. Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council from 23 September 2008. Shadow Minister from 2008. Member Joint Standing Committee on Anti-Corruption Commission 2001–2004; Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Procedures by the Department for Community Development 2005–2006; and two other standing committees. Chairman Select Committee into Workers' Compensation 2004.

On 23 September 2008 when the members of the outgoing Carpenter Ministry submitted their resignations and the new ALP Opposition Shadow Cabinet was formed, the members of the ALP Caucus elected Sue Ellery as their party leader in the Legislative Council, making her the first woman ever to act as Leader of the Opposition in the Western Australian Legislative Council. Sue had become a Parliamentary Secretary only a little over two years after her swearing in on 22 May 2001 as a member of the Council for the South Metropolitan Region, and four years later in March 2007 she was included in the restructured Carpenter Ministry.

Suzanne Mary Ellery was born on 12 May 1962 in Perth, the daughter of Peter John Ellery, a consultant, and Rosemarie Gellard. In her Inaugural Speech in 2001 she 'confessed' that her parents had first met at a Young Liberal function and 'political discussion was always part of the household as I grew up'.¹ In her own words:

I did not get my brand of politics from my family, but I got a commitment to involvement in political matters...It later dawned on me that they were teaching me to play a role in public policy'.²

Sue was educated at Newman College, Churchlands and then at the University of Western Australia, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts. As an industrial officer she spent 12 years in the trade union movement and after working with a number of different unions 'covering a broad

¹ *WAPD(LC)*, 22 May 2001, p. 244.

² *Ibid.*

range of working people' she was for seven years industrial advocate for the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMWU). Among those she worked with were 'members in water and manufacturing, members employed as Aboriginal health workers in the community control sector and in government, and with members employed in child care, in disability services, in aged care, in private health and in the public health sector'.³ Reflecting on her career she described 'one of the most inspiring times for many of us in the WA union movement was during the 1997 campaign to oppose ... the third wave of industrial relations legislative changes'.⁴

Sue first joined the ALP in 1982. Over the years she held various party positions and at the time of her election to Parliament in 2001 was a member of the ALP WA branch administrative committee and of the national executive. She was also a member of the Australian Republic Movement and the Warnbro Family Centre management committee and gave active support to a range of community agencies in disability services and women's health.

Her entry to the WA Parliament in 2001 came from first place on the ALP ticket in South Metropolitan Region in an election at which the ALP won two of the five seats being contested. Sue's first appointment as Parliamentary Secretary in June 2003 was as Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney General and Minister of Health, a role she undertook until March 2007. In addition for a few months in 2004 and 2005 she was Parliamentary Secretary to Sheila McHale in her role as Minister for Community Development; Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth; Disability Services; Culture and the Arts. In March 2007 Sue entered the Cabinet as Minister for Child Protection; Communities; Women's Interests; Seniors and Volunteering. Since September 2008 Sue has been responsible for many of the same areas in the Shadow Ministry, in addition to disability services. In this regard, she told the House in her Inaugural Speech that in 1994 her mother had been involved in a serious car accident and thus she and her family had 'experienced the frustrations and the mind-numbing exhaustion of working our way through the disability and health systems'.⁵

Within Parliament itself during the years in government Sue undertook a range of committee assignments including membership of the Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission from June 2001 to May 2004 and the Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance from June 2001 to May 2005. Subsequently she served on the Parliamentary Services Committee from August 2005 until she entered the Ministry. Her select committee assignments included chairing the inquiry into workers' compensation in 2004 and membership of the committee inquiring into the adequacy of foster care assessment procedures by the Department for Community Development from September 2005 to August 2006.

In her Inaugural Speech on 22 May 2001 Sue paid tribute to a number of women union leaders and political activists and referred proudly to the Emily's List brooch she was wearing as she made the speech and emphasised her government's commitment to reviewing discrimination in the workplace. Conceding that the Labor Party 'has not always been the voice of change for women' she nevertheless contended that the:

³ Ibid., p. 242.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

... modern Labor Party has done much while in government to improve the status of women. It used to be from the outside that the sisterhood was watching. Now that the numbers of the sisterhood inside the Parliament are growing, the sisterhood is among us, and Western Australian women will hold us accountable to deliver for them.⁶

Questioning the role of the Legislative Council she argued:

We have in place three tiers of government and many checks and balances. In any event checks and balances can be applied genuinely only in the absence of partisan behaviour. In the debate in this place in 1997 about the industrial relations legislation, the House did not provide an independent review. A calculated partisan decision was made. If we put aside the merits or otherwise of the legislation in my example, the Legislative Council duplicated the role of the other place in that instance. I do not believe that is what the people of Western Australia wanted. The question becomes all the more pressing when the system of electing this House of Review is weighted very unevenly against the majority of the population.⁷

Sue's early promotion to Parliamentary Secretary meant that over the four years of her first term, most of her parliamentary speech time was spent answering questions in her role representing various Ministers in the Legislative Council, particularly the Minister for Health. As a Minister, her involvement with answering parliamentary questions became if anything even more substantial and on one occasion in 2008, for example, she had to respond to more than two dozen questions relating to budget expenditures and other issues at Kaleeya Hospital in East Fremantle, located in her electorate (q.v.). Subsequently, as a shadow minister, she constantly directed questions in particular to Robyn McSweeney (q.v.), the Child Protection Minister she was shadowing, but also to her government counterpart, Norman Moore, and his deputy, Simon O'Brien.

Sue was re-elected to the House in 2005, when she was one of three ALP members elected from the region, and again in 2008, in each case from number one position on the ALP ticket. In 2008, as in 2001, only two Labor members won seats representing the region.

Although the opportunity did not arise often for Sue to speak at length about her personal views, as both a minister and shadow minister she always endeavoured actively to be involved in such issues. The overlap between the ministerial and shadow ministerial responsibilities enabled her to maintain similar connections before and after September 2008, including supporting the YWCA Encore Programme for women who have experienced breast cancer, the Disability Coalition and the Adults Surviving Child Abuse organisation. She worked with others in opposition to produce Labor's discussion paper 'The Health and Happiness of our Children' and in June 2008 while still a Minister she made a submission to the Productivity Commission supporting 'a national, government funded, paid maternity leave scheme paid at the minimum wage for 14 weeks'. There is little doubt that Sue's areas of responsibility as a government and opposition frontbencher coincided closely with her personal passions.

⁶ Ibid., p. 244.

⁷ Ibid., p. 245.

Reflections by the Member on Her Parliamentary Career

It is a pleasing sign of the maturity of our representative democracy that at the time WA Labor elected me to be the first woman to be Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council; the Greens and the National Party in the Legislative Council both also had women Leaders. Poor Norman Moore, as the Leader of the Government in the House and one of the longest serving men in the WA Parliament, wasn't quite sure what he was facing I think. Women hold all sorts of senior positions in all works of life in business, in the community and right across our economy so it really shouldn't be seen as a big deal that it happened in the Parliament in 2008.

Not long after being elected to the position I moved into the parliamentary office designated for the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council. It is a small suite of offices; you enter through a reception area and the leader's office is off that. One day in the very early days after we went into opposition I was alone in the suite and sitting at my desk working at the computer. An elderly gentleman who I recognised as a former Liberal member came into the office and asked me where my boss was. I asked him who he was looking for, and he said, 'You know the one on the sign on the door; is he not around?' I said that this was my office now and asked if he was looking for Norman Moore, the previous occupier of the office when the Libs were in Opposition. He said yes so I gave him the number of the Premier's office to get in touch with new government Ministers. He went on to thank me and then again he said, 'So who is your boss? Who are you working for?' I said, 'This is my office; I'm the new Leader of the Opposition.' I swear the look on his face was priceless.

While some things change, some remain the same.

The daily life of a politician can take you from a school assembly to a parliamentary committee hearing to meetings with distressed and angry constituents to functions to mark the opening of a new community service, to making a speech at short notice in the chamber on a matter you might not have known a lot about 15 minutes before you are asked to speak. In my observation women are pretty good at juggling the different tasks a politician is expected to perform. It is not, however, a job with neatly defined hours. There are times when with a bit of organisation of the diary, it can be flexible enough to allow you to fit in all the other life jobs we have to fit in. There are other times, like when Parliament is sitting and you have responsibility for a particular piece of legislation or there are a lot of events on in the community, when it is really hard to get the family life balance right. I don't have children. I do have a mother with a significant disability and obligations to manage her care and there are times when I certainly feel like many other women with family responsibilities that I am not doing justice to either role.

Prior to entering Parliament I worked in the trade union movement for 12 years. In some of the roles I had during that time I was the first woman union official working with union members in very male dominated industries. I found then as now in politics that women do have to work a bit harder to demonstrate our competence, but once it's established I had no problem. It is irksome that the default position is to assume a man is competent. My experience in the union movement and in the Parliament is that there are many very clear examples of that not being so.

I love my job and I'm very proud my colleagues elected me as Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council. The job I really want though is on the benches opposite; I want to lead the Labor Party in the Legislative Council in government.