

History Notes: Australian Political Firsts by Western Australian MPs
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Australian Political Firsts by Western Australian MPs

First Woman Premier: Dr Carmen Lawrence

The first Australian woman premier was Dr Carmen Lawrence (ALP). Dr Lawrence was appointed as Premier in the Parliament of Western Australia on 12 February 1990. When she lost the 1993 election she became the Leader of the Opposition. Dr Lawrence was elected to the seat of Subiaco on 8 February 1986. The electorate was abolished in a redistribution. She contested and won the seat of Glendalough on 4 February 1989. She retired on 14 February 1994 and then won the federal seat of Fremantle at a by-election on 12 March 1994.



State Library of Western Australia

Dr Carmen Lawrence, first woman Premier of Western Australian, 1990

Photograph courtesy of the State Library of Western Australia: 135232PD

*“As a member of Parliament
I am particularly sensible of
my obligation to give voice
to and further the
aspirations of all citizens,
regardless of their status,
wealth, sex, race, creed or
disability.”*

Dr Carmen Lawrence
(Member for Subiaco)

Inaugural Speech

Hansard

Tuesday 10 June 1986

First Indigenous Member of Parliament

Ernie Bridge

Ernie Bridge (ALP) was the first Indigenous person elected to a lower house of an Australian parliament. On 23 February 1980 he won the seat of Kimberley in the Parliament of Western Australia. He was also the first Aboriginal cabinet minister when he was appointed the Minister for Water Resources, the North-West and Aboriginal Affairs on 25 July 1986.



State Library of Western Australia

The press doorstop Ernie Bridge outside Parliament House [1990] by Evan Collis

Photograph courtesy of State Library of Western Australia: BA1622/155

Carol Martin

Carol Martin (ALP) made history by becoming the first Indigenous woman member of an Australian parliament. Martin was elected to the seat of Kimberley in the Parliament of Western Australia on 10 February 2001 in succession to the Hon Ernie Bridge. She was re-elected in 2005 and 2008. During her parliamentary service, Martin was Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Education and Health and a member of the Parliamentary Services Committee. She retired from the Parliament of Western Australia on 9 March 2013.

First Indigenous Woman Member of Parliament



Carol Martin

Photograph courtesy of news.com.au 25 October 2012, 7:18pm

First Woman Member of Parliament in Australia



The first woman politician in Australia was Edith Cowan (Nationalist) in 1921. Cowan represented the seat of West Perth in the Parliament of Western Australia as a Nationalist, from 12 March 1921 to 22 March 1924. She was also one of the first women to be elected to a parliament in the British Empire. However she failed to win the 1924 and 1927 state elections.

Mrs Edith Cowan O.B.E. J.P.

Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia collection of photographs
Photograph courtesy of State Library of Western Australia:BA1272/14

First Upper House Woman Parliamentarian



The first woman to take a seat in an Australian upper house chamber was Ruby Hutchison (ALP), also known as Red Ruby, on 22 May 1954. Ruby Florence was born on 15 February 1892 in Footscray, Victoria. She moved to WA in 1896. From the 1920s she ran boarding houses and worked as a dress-maker. Hutchison was elected as an MLC, representing the ALP, for the Suburban Province and began her term on the 22 May 1954. In 1965 she was elected as MLC for the North-East Metropolitan Province.

Mrs Ruby Hutchison M.L.C. [195-?]

Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia collection of photographs
Photograph courtesy of State Library of Western Australia: BA1272/13

First Woman Re-elected

Australia's first female member of parliament to be re-elected and serve for more than 10 years was May Holman, from 1925. She was also the first woman to win a seat for the Labor Party.

First Woman Attorney General

The first female Attorney General in an Australian parliament was Cheryl Edwardes (Lib) in 1993.

First Woman Independent Minister

The first Independent woman in Australia to be appointed to a cabinet post was Dr Elizabeth Constable in 2008.

First Green Lower House MP: Adele Carles

The first Green to win a Legislative Assembly (lower house) seat in Australia was Adele Carles in 2009.



Stephen Dawson
 Photograph courtesy of the Hon Stephen Dawson

First Married Gay MP

The first gay politician to get married in Australia was Stephen Dawson (ALP) in Canberra, 7 December 2013. The marriage was annulled when the High Court of Australia nullified same-sex marriage. Dawson was elected for the Mining and Pastoral Region on 5 April 2013. In December 2022, he was appointed the Minister for Emergency Services; Innovation and the Digital Economy; Medical Research; Volunteering.

First Openly Lesbian MP

The first openly lesbian Australian politician was Giz Watson (GWA) WA. Watson was elected on 14 December 1996 as a Member of the Legislative Council representing the North Metropolitan Region for a term which commenced on 22 May 1997. In her inaugural speech on 10 June 1997 she talked about her commitment to represent the lesbian and gay community as the first openly declared lesbian parliamentarian.

“We face many challenges, including an intolerant society that is prepared to judge and not accept. But we will accept and stay true to the dream that we hold in our hearts.”

Hon Stephen Dawson (Member for Mining and Pastoral Region)
 Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 12 June 2013

First Married Couple in Parliament

The first married couple to serve concurrently in an Australian parliament was the Hon Ruby Hutchison and the Hon Frederick RH Lavery (both Labor members in the WA Legislative Council) when they married on 14 May 1966. Hutchison was the only woman MP in the chamber.

First Cabinet Minister to Give Birth

The first Australian female cabinet minister to give birth whilst in office was Yvonne Henderson (ALP). She was elected to the seat of Gosnells in the Parliament of Western Australia on 19 February 1983.



Peta Monley tests the hearing of Hugh Morgan watched by the Hon. Yvonne Henderson, Perth, 27 August 1992.

By Stevenson, Kinder & Scott Corporate Photography
 Photograph courtesy of the State Library of Western Australia: BA883



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Official opening of the Old Womens Home, Mt Henry by Mrs Cardell-Oliver, February 1951

Photograph courtesy of State Library of Western Australia: 816B/C/5050

Cardell-Oliver: First Woman Suspended: "Disgrace to the Assembly"

In 1941, the Nationalist, Florence Cardell-Oliver was the first woman MP in Australia to be suspended from the 'service of the House' when she commented on a fellow party member's speech as a 'disgrace to the Assembly'. She refused all requests to withdraw her remarks. Despite Cardell-Oliver's outspokenness, on 7 October 1949 she became Australia's first female minister. She was responsible for Health, Supply and Shipping. Aged 70 years, she was the oldest person to be appointed a minister. In 1948 she was the Honorary Minister for Supply and Shipping. Cardell-Oliver was elected on the 15 February 1936 in the seat of Subiaco. She held the seat until 1956 becoming one of the longest serving women parliamentarians in WA. In September 1934 she unsuccessfully contested the federal seat of Fremantle.

Florence Gillies Cardell-Oliver was born on the 11 May 1876, Ararat, Victoria to Johnson Wilson, storekeeper and Annie Thompson. She was educated in Victoria and England. In 1895 Cardell-Oliver married David Boyd in Melbourne. He died in 1902 from an accidental overdose of sleeping tonic. The following month she married Arthur Cardell-Oliver in London. They had two children together. They moved to Western Australia circa 1912.

First 10 Years

May Holman (ALP) was the first female Australian MP to hold a parliamentary seat for ten years from 3 April 1925. She was also the first female in the British Empire to sit in parliament for ten years.

Three Parliaments

The first Australian to be elected to three parliaments was former Premier, Sir John Forrest. He was nominated as an MLC for the Parliament of Western Australia on the 10 January 1883. In 1890, Sir John was elected as the Member for Bunbury in the Parliament of Australia which he held until 1901. In 1918 he was recommended for a barony and he sailed to England to take his seat in the British House of Lords but died on route.



Drawing of Sir John Forrest

Image courtesy of State Library of Western Australia: 816B/C/5050

“Hon Samantha Rowe, my sister, the MLC for the East Metropolitan Region, you have always been my role model, my best friend and a truly superb campaign director.”

Cassandra Rowe
Member for Belmont
Inaugural Speech
Hansard
16 May 2017

First Sisters in an Australian Parliament

For the first time in Australia two sisters are sitting in the same parliament. Cassandra Rowe (ALP) was elected to the seat of Belmont at the 11 March 2017 election defeating the sitting Liberal member, Glenys Godfrey with a 12.7% swing. Her sister, Samantha Rowe (ALP) was elected as MLC for the East Metropolitan Region on the 5 April 2012 for a term commencing 22 May 2013. She was re-elected at the

2017 and 2021 elections. Samantha was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture and the Arts; Sports and Recreation; International Education; Heritage on 21 December 2021. Cassie was appointed Government Whip on 17 March 2021. The sisters’ father, Barry Rowe held the seat of Essendon in the Victorian Parliament from 1979 to 1992.



The new member for Belmont, Cassie Rowe, and her sister Samantha, who sits in the Legislative Council

Picture: Nic Ellis. Courtesy of West Australian, 14/3/2017, p.5.

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[Mrs Ruby Florence Hutchison, member of Western Australia Legislative Council, has started a new organisation which aims at protecting the interests of Australian consumers. Ruby at home in Perth, WA, reads mail from all over Australia welcoming the Association](#) [photograph], National Archives of Australia database, accessed 4 December 2013. ([8926277](#)), 1960.

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Abbreviations

ALP	Australian Labor Party
GWA	GreensWA
Lib	Liberal Party
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of the Legislative Council