

History Notes: Cultural Diversity of Western Australian MPs
March 2019. Updated 17 July 2023

Cultural Diversity of Western Australian MPs

Over 20 countries are represented by WA MPs

Since 1870, the members of the Parliament of Western Australia have been born in over 20 different countries. Before 1900, a slight majority of members, 75 to 59, were born in the United Kingdom. However since the beginning of the twentieth century more parliamentarians were born in Australia. Seven Aboriginal Australians have been elected as WA MPs. By 2017, approximately 685 members were born in Australia whilst 246 were born in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Of the Australian born parliamentarians, the majority, over 430, were born in WA. The other MPs were born in the British West Indies, Canada, China, Croatia, Fiji, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Jamaica, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Sarawak, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and the United States. One MP was born at sea between the UK and Tasmania. At the 2021 election, the first Ethiopian born MP, Ayor Makur Chuot and the first Serbian born MP, Klara Andric were elected as MLCs.



Ayor Makur Chuot and supporters, Parliament of Western Australia, June 2021



*“...the drive, determination
and hard work of refugees
and migrants make our
cultural diversity one of our
greatest assets.”*

Mr Papalia, MLA

Minister for Citizenship
and Multicultural Interests

Hansard

Thursday, 12 April 2018

First Aboriginal Member of Parliament

Ernie Bridge

Ernie Bridge (ALP) was the first Aboriginal person elected to a lower house of any Australian parliament. He contested and won the seat of Kimberley, as a Labor Party candidate, in the Parliament of Western Australia on 23 February 1980. 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 BA1622/155

Carol Martin

Carol Martin (ALP) made history by becoming the first Aboriginal woman member of any 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. Martin retired from the Parliament of Western Australia on 9 March 2013.

First Aboriginal Woman Member of Parliament



Carol Martin

Photograph courtesy of [ABC News](#), 2 May 2011, 11:12am

First Aboriginal Treasurer: Hon Ben Wyatt MLA

Ben Wyatt (ALP) is the first Aboriginal Treasurer in an Australian parliament.

Ben Sana Wyatt was born 1 April 1974 in Wewak, Papua New Guinea. He is the son of Cedric Morgan Wyatt, CEO Jigalong Community, and Janine Nowotna, teacher and librarian. He was educated at Kalgoorlie Catholic Primary School, Christian Brothers' College, Kalgoorlie Primary School, St Columba's College and Aquinas College.

After school, Wyatt studied law at the University of Western Australia. He then received a Masters degree with distinction at the London School of Economics. In 1996, he graduated from Duntroon Military College. He served as an officer in the Australian Army from 1996 to 2000. He was awarded the Town of Victoria Park Young Australian of the Year in 2001.

From December 2004 to January 2006 Wyatt was Counsel Director of Public Prosecutions (WA). He then joined a private practice as a barrister and solicitor.

Wyatt married Vivianne Truscello, daughter of Salvatore and Amalia Truscello, at Burswood, WA on 13 January 2007. They have two daughters.

At a by-election on 11 March 2006, Wyatt was elected MLA for Victoria Park, representing the Australian Labor Party, following the resignation of the Hon Dr Geoff Gallop, former premier. Wyatt was re-elected in 2008, 2013 and 2017. He has held the positions of Shadow Treasurer and Shadow Minister for Federal State Relations, Aboriginal Affairs, Native Title and Government Accountability. When Labor won government at the 2017 election, Wyatt was appointed Treasurer, a position that he held until his retirement at the 13 March 2021 election.

Ben Wyatt, Treasurer
Photograph courtesy of
WA Business News, 2017

"How do we ensure that all Western Australians share in our economic wealth and have access to basic citizenship entitlements such as education, health, power, water, environmental health and security?"

Mr Ben Wyatt MLA

Inaugural Speech

Hansard

29 March 2006



Irish Representation in Parliament: Hon Stephen Dawson MLC



*Hon Stephen Dawson
MLC*
Photograph courtesy
of Stephen Dawson

“For us, like many other migrants, Australia has been the lucky country, but it is only lucky for those of us who make it!”

Hon Stephen Dawson MLC

Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 12 June 2013

The Hon Stephen Dawson (ALP) is the 23rd Irish born parliamentarian. He is the first WA state politician to be born in Ireland in the twentieth century. Stephen Noel Dawson was born in Dublin in 1975 to Noel Dawson, footballer and Phyllis Dawson. As a teenager he migrated with his family to Australia in 1989. They settled in Nedlands and Dawson went to Hollywood Senior High School. When he was fourteen years old he worked at Hungry Jacks. In 1995, he continued his education at Edith Cowan University graduating with a degree in education. On his first day of orientation at university he joined the Australian Labor Party. After university, Dawson worked as State Manager for Essential Media Communications. On 9 March 2013, he was elected as MLC for the Mining and Pastoral region with his term starting 22 May. In the same year Dawson married Dennis Liddelow but it was annulled when the High Court of Australia invalidated same sex marriages. They remarried in 2018 after same sex marriage was legalised in Australia. Dawson is currently the Minister for Emergency Services; Innovation and the Digital Economy; Science; Medical Research. He has previously held the Environment; Disability Services; Mental Health; Aboriginal Affairs and Industrial Relations portfolios.

23 Irish MPs

There have been 23 Irish born MPs in the Parliament of Western Australia. George Throssell was the first Irish born parliamentarian. Throssell was born on 23 May 1840 in Fermoy, County Cork in Ireland. As a child he emigrated to Australia with his father on board the convict ship, Scindian. In 1861 he began his own business as a merchant in Northam. He was the MLA for Northam from 1890 to 1904 and MLC for East Province from 1907 to 1910. For three months in 1901 he was premier and treasurer of the state.

Suspicion

At the beginning of European settlement in Western Australia the Irish were Australia’s second largest ethnic group, after the English. Irish people mainly emigrated to Australia in the nineteenth century. After 1900, Irish immigration slowed dramatically. The difficult relationship between Ireland and England affected the Irish experience in Australia. The Irish were treated with suspicion and fear up until the mid-twentieth century. The majority of Irish immigrants were Catholic which only increased the prejudice against them.

First Female MP Born in a Non-English Speaking Country

Ljiljanna Ravlich (ALP) was the first female Member of Western Australian Parliament born in a non-English speaking country. She was born in Kozica, Split, Croatia on 9 January 1958, the daughter of Ivica Ravlich, grano worker, and Ljubica Sulenta. Her family emigrated to Western Australia on 9 May 1963. She was educated at Midvale Primary School and Governor Stirling Senior High School. She graduated from Curtin University with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in economics.

From 1980 to 1984, Ravlich was a teacher at Norseman District High School, Kambalda Senior High School and Northam Senior High School. In 1985 Ravlich was appointed deputy principal of Morawa Agricultural High School and in 1987 deputy principal of Bullsbrook District High School. Her next role was principal education officer at the Joondalup District Education Office in 1989. Ravlich then worked as principal policy officer to Gavan Troy, Minister for Productivity and Labour Relations from 1990 to 1991; to Kay Hallahan, Minister for Education, Employment and Training from 1991 to 1992; and to Eric Ripper, Minister for Family, Community, Youth Justice and Disability Services from 1992 to 1993. In 1993 she was Director of the Joint Venture Consulting Group Pty Ltd until 1996.

In the late 1980s, Ravlich joined the Australian Labor Party. At the 14 December 1996 Western Australian state election she won a seat in the Legislative Council, representing the East Metropolitan Region, for a term that commenced on 22 May 1997. She was immediately appointed Shadow Minister for Public Sector Management. On 21 September 2004 she was appointed Minister for Local Government and Regional Development. She held many portfolios during her parliamentary career including Heritage, the Kimberley, Pilbara and Gascoyne, Goldfields-Esperance; Education and Training; Youth; Government Enterprises; Multicultural Interests and Citizenship; Local Government; Racing and Gaming. The Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich announced her retirement on 26 February 2015 and resigned 10 March 2015. Her parliamentary term ended on 21 May 2015.



"I salute my parents and all other migrants alike for their enormous courage, strength and foresight. I stand in this place in honour of their contribution to this State."

Hon L Ravlich, MLC
Inaugural Speech
Hansard, 27 May 1997

Ljiljanna Ravlich, Member of the Western Australian Parliament
Photograph courtesy of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Sources

Ben Wyatt, Treasurer [photograph], *WA Business News*, 2017.

D Black and G Bolton, eds, *Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of Western Australia: volume one 1870-1930*, Parliamentary History Project, Perth, WA, 2011.

D Black and G Bolton, eds, *Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of Western Australia: volume two 1930-2010*, Western Australian Parliamentary History Project, Perth, WA, 2011.

Carol Martin [photograph] ABC News, 2 May 2011, 11:12am. Accessed 14 March 2019: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-08-03/carol-martin/2520994>

Evan Collis, *The press doorstep Ernie Bridge outside Parliament House* [1990] [photograph], State Library of Western Australia, BA1622/155.

Hon Stephen Dawson MLC [photograph], Collection of Stephen Dawson.

Ljiljana Ravlich, Member of the Western Australian Parliament [photograph], Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website. Accessed 14 March 2019: <https://www.parliament.curriculum.edu.au/photos/wa/ravlichl.jpg>

Parliament of Western Australia website, Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of Western Australia. Accessed 14 March 2019, 9 June 2021, 7 December 2022.

Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, Government Printer, Perth, WA, c. 1953-2021.