

History Notes: Oldest MPs in the Parliament of Western Australia
August 2023



Oldest MPs in WA Parliament

Sir Norbert Keenan: oldest MP at retirement

Sir Norbert Keenan was 86 years old when he retired from politics making him the oldest state parliamentarian. In 1904 Sir Norbert first contested the seat of Kalgoorlie as an Independent without success, however he finally won the seat on 27 October 1905 as a Liberal. During his parliamentary career he was Attorney General from 14 May 1906 until he resigned on 14 May 1909. He did not contest the 1911 election. In April 1930, Keenan returned to the Legislative Assembly as a Nationalist member for the new suburban seat of Nedlands. From 24 April 1930 to 21 September 1931 he was Chief Secretary and Minister for Education in Sir James Mitchell's cabinet. When the whole Nationalist ministry lost their seats in April 1933, Keenan, as the only surviving Nationalist with ministerial experience, became party leader. Keenan resigned as leader in April 1938 but retained his seat until March 1950 when he was defeated for pre-selection.

Norbert Michael Keenan was born on 30 January 1864 in Delville County, Dublin, Ireland, the son of Sir Patrick Joseph, chief of instruction, National Board of Education, and Elizabeth Agnes, nee Quin. He was educated at Downside School, Somerset and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1890 he read law at King's Inn, Dublin and the Middle Temple, London, and became a barrister in England and Ireland. In 1895 he emigrated to Australia. He practised law in Kalgoorlie, acting for many British investors and was appointed a King's Counsel (KC) in 1908. From 1901–1905 he was Mayor of Kalgoorlie and he was also Vice-President of the Chamber of Mines. On 17 February 1900, he married Rose Elizabeth Parker, daughter of Sir Stephen Parker, politician and Amy Leake, at the District Registry Office in Perth. They had two sons. After election to Parliament, Sir Norbert lived and practised law in Perth. He was knighted in 1948. Sir Norbert died in Subiaco, 24 April 1954 and is buried at Karrakatta Cemetery.



'Sir N. Keenan and Hal McKail at the opening of the Sea Scouts Rover Den at Pelican Point, Crawley, 24 April 1937'
Photograph: State Library of WA: 3314B/124



Premier Mr Collier to
Mr Keenan:

'In my opinion that was the reason of hanging on to office until the member was entitled to a gold pass. An honourable man would have resigned twelve months before. It is a strange coincidence that the day on which the honourable member felt he could no longer be associated with his colleagues was the very day that entitled him to a gold pass.'

Western Argus
8 August 1933, page 23

Josie Farrer: Oldest Woman MP

When Josephine (Josie) Farrer (ALP) was elected on 9 March 2013 to the seat of Kimberley, she was 65 years old, which made her the oldest woman MP elected to WA Parliament. She was also only the second Indigenous woman in the WA Parliament, in succession to Carol Martin who had retired. Josie was born on 24 September 1947 in Halls Creek, Western Australia. Prior to Parliament she was Shire Council president and councillor at Halls Creek for 16 years. She was re-elected in 2017. Farrer was a strong advocate for her community of the Kimberley and was instrumental in WA Parliament passing an amendment to the Constitution in 2015 to include recognition of Aboriginal people. Josie was also the first person to speak her native language of Gidja in Parliament, which she spoke during her valedictory speech to Parliament in November 2020. Farrer announced her retirement in 2020 and did not contest the state general election on 13 March 2021.



Josie Farrer

Photograph: Parliament of Western Australia

'I would like to finish my speech with the following words in my language — [Words spoken in Gidja language — Please, Rangka, Rangka perne perrem-pe Jarrak-ngarri ngenan. Wanyakem Kaapuwa purren-kili yurriyangem waranja!] In English it is translated as — Please listen, listen to the words I am saying. We need to stop what's happening to our young people because they are our future.'

Ms J Farrer MLA, Inaugural Speech
Hansard, 17 April 2013

Oldest Labor Man MP

Matthew Hughes was 67 years old when he was elected to the seat of Kalamunda, defeating John Day, in the 2017 state elections in WA. He is the oldest Labor member to be elected. He is a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission.

Oldest Man MP and Liberal MP

James Franklin was the oldest Liberal elected to the Parliament. He was 73 years old when he was elected as the MLC for the Metropolitan Province for a term starting 22 May 1928. He was defeated at the 1934 election by James George, but the latter was unseated on petition and Franklin was declared the winner from May 1934.

Oldest Liberal Woman MP

Glenys Godfrey was the oldest Liberal woman elected to the Parliament. She was 63 years old when she was elected to the seat of Belmont. She was defeated at the 2017 state election by Cassie Rowe (ALP). During her parliamentary career, she was a member of the Public Accounts Committee and the Joint Audit Committee.

Oldest Nationals MP

Philip Gardiner was the oldest National Party/Nationals member to be elected to the WA Parliament. When he began his term as MLC for the Agricultural Region in May 2009, he was 62 years old. He was Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations from 2009 to 2013. He was defeated at the 2013 state election.

Oldest Premier: Hon John Tonkin

In 1971, when the Hon John Tonkin, son of an engine driver, became Premier of Western Australia he was aged 69, the oldest WA Premier. He was also the longest serving member of the Western Australian Parliament. He served continuously in the Legislative Assembly for over 43 years from 1933 to 1977. John Trezise Tonkin was born on 2 February 1902 in Boulder, Western Australia to John Trezise Tonkin, engine driver and his wife, Julia. He was educated at Boulder City Central School and was dux of the school in 1916. He also attended the Eastern Goldfields High School in 1917 and Claremont Teachers' College. His working career began as an office boy at Kalgoorlie Electric Power Company. He taught at various country schools in WA and finally at North Perth Primary School until the start of his parliamentary career. In his early 20s, Tonkin joined the Australian Labor Party and remained a member for 70 years. In 1927 and 1930, he contested the WA seats of Sussex and Murray-Wellington before winning North East Fremantle in 1933. In 1950, the seat was abolished and he then won the seat of Melville. In 1944 he was appointed Minister for Education and Social Services. By 1955 he was the Deputy Premier and from 1971 to 1974 he was Premier of Western Australia. The Tonkin government established Australia's first parliamentary ombudsman and an environmental watchdog; and passed the state's inaugural Aboriginal heritage legislation. Tonkin was defeated in the 1973 election and retired two years later. He died in South Perth on 20 October 1995, aged 93 years. A state funeral service was held at Wesley Church in Perth.



Photograph courtesy of National Archives of Australia NAA: B582, T3/1/1976/P

Oldest Minister

When Dame Annie Florence Cardell-Oliver became Australia's first woman minister on 7 October 1949 at 70 years old, she was the oldest person to have been appointed to cabinet. She was responsible for Health, Supply and Shipping. Cardell-Oliver was elected on 15 February 1936 to the seat of Subiaco in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, as a Nationalist member. She held the seat until 7 April 1956 becoming one of the longest serving women parliamentarians in WA. At first, Cardell-Oliver was a Nationalist, which included the role of vice-president in the 1930s, and then she joined the Liberal and Country League, later renamed the Liberal Party. In September 1934, John Curtin defeated her for the seat of Fremantle in the House of Representatives. Dame Annie was a 'tall woman of imposing appearance' who wore 'long flowing gowns' and feather or flower trimmed hats. She was 'an outspoken and often controversial' member with views frequently different to her party. Her inaugural speech attacked the Government's balancing of the budget and argued for providing milk to 'under-nourished' children from poor families. During a debate on starting-price betting on 10 December 1941, she was the first woman to be suspended from an Australian parliament for refusing to withdraw a comment, ruled as 'unparliamentary'. Due to witnessing malnourished children in London, she introduced a free milk scheme for schoolchildren and compulsory chest examinations to fight tuberculosis. On 1 April 1947, she was appointed an Honorary Minister without portfolio in the McLarty-Watts Government and the following year she became the Honorary Minister for Supply and Shipping. Finally, in 1949 she achieved 'full cabinet rank' as the Minister for Health, Supply and Shipping. She retired from politics in 1956.



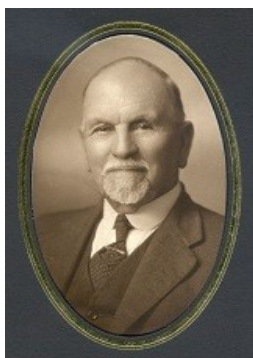
Premier Ross McLarty and his Cabinet (1947)
Photograph courtesy of State Library of WA:
BA1613/94

'We are proud of our democratic heritage which enables us to regard political opponents of whatever party...'

Mrs Cardell-Oliver: Inaugural Speech, Hansard, 25 August 1936

Oldest man MLC

James Franklin was the oldest MLC elected to the Parliament. He was 73 years old when he was elected as the MLC for the Metropolitan Province for a term starting 22 May 1928. He was defeated at the 1934 election by James George, but the latter was unseated on petition and Franklin was declared the winner from May 1934.



James Franklin
Photograph: Parliament of WA

Oldest woman MLC

When Ruby Hutchison was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council on 8 May 1954, representing the Suburban Province, she was 62 years old. She later represented the North-East Metropolitan Province from 1965 to 1971. She was the first woman elected to an Australian Legislative Council.

Oldest Members at Completion of Service, Parliament of Western Australia

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Date Completed
1.	KEENAN, Sir Norbert	86	1	25	Defeated March 1950
2.	STUBBS, Sydney	85	7	24	Retired March 1947
3.	FRANKLIN, James Thomas	85	6	26	Retired May 1940
4.	DREW, John Michael	81	9		Died July 1947
5.	CARDELL-OLIVER, Dame Annie Florence	79	10	27	Retired April 1956
6.	WITTENOOM, Sir Edward Horne	79	5	9	Retired May 1934
7.	HUTCHISON, Ruby Florence	79	3	6	Retired May 1971
8.	HAYWARD, Thomas	79	1	2	Retired Oct 1911
9.	LATHAM, Sir Charles George MLC	78	3	25	Retired May 1960
10.	WILSON, Arthur Alan	77	10	14	Retired Feb 1947
11.	GIBSON, Sir Frank Ernest	77	10	4	Retired May 1956
12.	JOHNSON, William Dartnell	77	3	17	Died January 1948
13.	GEORGE, William James	77	2	17	Retired April 1930
14.	THOMSON, Alexander MLC	77	2	12	Retired May 1950
15.	MILES, George James Gallop Warden MLC	77	-	13	Retired May 1950
16.	SPENCER, William	77	approx		Died July 1901
17.	MACFARLANE, James Mortimer MLC	76	7	9	Died May 1942
18.	KIRWAN, Sir John Waters MLC	76	5	19	Retired May 1946
19.	COLEBATCH, Sir Hal Pateshall MLC	76	1	22	Defeated May 1948
20.	HARTREY, Thomas Augustine	76	-	19	Retired Feb 1977

WA Members of Parliament Over 65 Years Old When First Elected

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Year Elected	Party
1.	FRANKLIN, John Thomas (MLC)	73	6	27	1928	Nationalist
2.	CHURCH, John Herbert	72	9	27	1932	Nationalist
3.	SPENCER, William	72	approx			NA
4.	GRAHAM, Laurie William	71	6	1	2017	
5.	HARTREY, Thomas Augustine	70	0	20	1971	Natl; ALP
6.	HAYWARD, Thomas	68	7	23	1901	Lib
7.	HUGHES, Matthew	67	-	2	2017	ALP
8.	ROWE, Francis James	66	6	4	1927	ALP
9.	ATKINS, William	66	5	29	1902	Forrest
10.	FARRER, Josephine (Josie)	65	5	13	2013	ALP

Oldest Premiers of Western Australia at Date Sworn in

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Years as Premier	Party
1.	TONKIN, John Trezise	69	1	1	1971-1974	ALP
2.	LEFROY, Sir Henry Bruce	63	3	4	1917-1919	Lib & NCP
3.	COURT, Sir Charles Walter Michael	62	6	10	1974-1982	Lib
4.	THROSSELL, George	60	8	23	Feb-May 1901	Forrest

Oldest Ministers of Western Australia at Date Sworn in

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Date/sworn in	Party
1.	CARDELL-OLIVER, Dame (Annie) Florence Gillies	70	10	21	April 1947	Natl, LCL & Lib
2.	DOLAN, John MLC	69	2	6	March 1971	ALP
3.	RANDALL, George	67	6	23	April 1898	Min
4.	STUBBS, Robert Henry Claude	65	11	1	March 1971	ALP
5.	DONEY, Victor	65	3	7	April 1947	CP
6.	BAXTER, Norman Eric MLC	64	9	18	April 1974	CP, NCP, CDL
7.	GEORGE, William James	63	6	1	July 1916	Lib, Natl
8.	SIMPSON, Charles Herbert MLC	62	7	9	April 1950	Lib, CP
9.	PANTON, Alexander Hugh	61	-	4	March 1938	ALP
10.	MARSHALL, William Mortimer	60	1	12	August 1945	ALP

Oldest Former Members of Western Australia at Date of Death

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Date of death	Party
1.	WILLMOTT, Francis Drake MLC	100	5	24	4 August 2004	Lib
2.	HEENAN, Eric Michael MLC	98	1	27	26 June 1998	ALP
3.	OWEN, Raymond Cecil	97	10	15	16 Jan 2003	Ind & CP
4.	COURT, Sir Charles Walter Michael	96	3	11	22 Dec 2007	Lib
5.	GAYFER, Harry Walter	95	11	3	15 July 2021	CP
6.	DIVER, Sir Leslie Charles MLC	95	5	20	4 August 1995	CP
7.	CROMMELIN, Harold William	95	1	11	20 May 1998	Nat, Lib & LCL

Oldest Former Members of Western Australia at 22 August 2023

No	Name	Years	Months	Days	Date of birth	Party
1.	GRAYDEN, William Leonard	101	5	13	5 Aug 1920	Lib
2.	WORDSWORTH, David John	93	2	13	9 June 1930	Lib
3.	CRAIG, Margaret June	92	8	14	8 Dec 1930	Lib

Abbreviations

ALP	Australian Labor Party
CDL	Country and Democratic League
CP	Country Party
Ind	Independent
LCL	Liberal and Country League (by 1968 called Liberal Party)
Lib	Liberal Party
Min	Ministerialist
Natl	Nationalist
NCP	National Country Party
NPA	National Party of Australia

Sources

Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of Western Australia, Parliament of Western Australia, <http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/library/MPHistoricalData>, accessed online 7 August 2017 and 7 December 2022.

D Black, ed, *The Western Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, Parliament of Western Australia, Perth, WA, 2017.

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.

History and procedure of Parliamentary government, The Parliament, Perth, 1980.

Parliamentary debates, Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, Government Printer, Perth WA, 1890-1952.