

## ***Edith Cowan and May Holman***

### ***Western Australia's Political Ground Breakers***

I wish also to acknowledge personally that we meet tonight on the country (boodjar) country of the Nyungar people. We pay our respects to their enduring and dynamic culture and the leadership of Nyungar elders both past and present.

I begin with a personal anecdote .... In 1992, I was attending a Conference in Canberra. As I had not been to Canberra since I was 7 years old I spent some time being a tourist. One of the 'sights' I did was of course the new Parliament House, and I spent several hours with a cassette guide slung over my shoulder making my way around that astonishing building. During my tour I was standing in King's Hall looking at the portrait of Joan Child, who was the first women Speaker of the House of Representatives, when I overheard the comment of a small boy who was perhaps 7 or 8 years old and who had noticed, quite perceptively, that Joan Child was a woman! He turned to his grandmother and asked her in utter amazement "Can Ladies work here too Nanna?" It was not an unreasonable question. Indeed it was a most perceptive comment. What he had seen in that building had not provided him with the evidence that ladies - women - **could** work there.

I was saddened by his comment - but as an academic I thought "What a great title for a lecture!" - and so it has been .... and "What a great title for a paper! ...and so it has been.

It was and is depressing that seventy or so years after Edith Cowan was elected to the Western Australian Parliament and fifty or so years after both Dame Enid Lyons and Dorothy

Tangney (another pioneering Western Australian) were elected to the House of Representatives and Senate of the Commonwealth Parliament respectively, that this small boy could see little evidence that women were, could be and should be equal participants in our political processes.

Some things have changed for the better in the almost twenty-five years since that young boy asked his Grandmother that question.

In both the Commonwealth and Western Australian Parliaments – approximately 30 % of members are women;

We have had, and have women Premiers;

We have had a woman Prime Minister ... and a woman Governor General;

Our Foreign Minister is a woman - the Hon Julie Bishop being our first;

The Shadow Foreign Minister is also a woman – Ms Tanya Plibersek;

Senator Marise Payne is our first female Defence Minister; whilst

Women are the Deputy Leaders of the Liberal, Labor and National parties at the federal level.

And in no small measure the current situation – and the relative equality and respect that our current women parliamentarians experience – owes much to ***Western Australia's***

***Political Ground Breakers: Edith Cowan and May Holman***

They were political ground breakers – not only for Western Australia but also for Australia and also internationally. Indeed Western Australia has a proud history of political firsts for women – Edith Cowan was the first woman elected to any Australian Parliament and only the second in the then British Empire; whilst May Holman was Australia’s first elected woman Labor parliamentarian and one of the first few elected Labour politicians in the world; she was also the first woman to serve a decade in any Australian parliament; Dame Florence Cardell-Oliver was the first cabinet Minister; and Dorothy Tangney was the first woman elected to the Senate.

These women remain an inspiration to women – and to all who believe that all citizens are equal and that the political sphere needs women ... not simply to deal with “women’s issues” but to contribute to policy and decision making in all domains.

Neither Edith Cowan nor May Holman would have called themselves feminists – but the issues and causes which they both championed were very similar to those women for which women who do call themselves feminists have campaigned. Campaigning for the vote (or Woman Suffrage in the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> century activists) – the so called first wave of feminism - was a priority for Edith Cowan whilst May Holman worked for equal pay for women and men, which was in turn a priority of the second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Both were committed to education for all – specifically including women.

### **Edith Cowan**

I shall from now on, refer to our political ground breakers as Mrs Cowan and Miss Holman – for such were the forms of address used at the time.

Mrs Edith Dircksey Cowan was an activist for women's issues and the rights and welfare of children long before she entered Parliament at the age of 59. A founding member of The Karrakatta Club (in 1894), the Western Australian Women's Franchise League (in 1899) the National Council of Women (in 1911) and its President in 1913, she was a suffragist and a committed believer in the equal rights of women to education, to political participation and more equal roles in society. In her Maiden Speech she challenged the dominant view of the period that *"it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman in to Parliament"* Rather she argued *"the views of both sides [that is both women and men] are more than ever needed in Parliament today"*. She was a member of an almost infinite range of women's and child welfare organisations both prior to her election and after she left the Parliament. These included the Children's Protection Society (which resulted in the establishment of the WA Children's Court in 1906) and the Board of the King Edward Memorial Hospital (in 1916). She campaigned for day nurseries for the children of working mothers. She campaigned for women to become Justices of the Peace – she herself became a Justice of the Peace in 1919. She was supportive of compulsory voting – believing that being obliged to vote was politically educative ... and she was also a supporter of proportional representation.

As a parliamentarian Mrs Cowan was not one to toe any party line – this both surprised and irritated many of her male colleagues. Her initial election had surprised many of her male colleagues and in Lekkie Hopkins words they *"did not know quite what to do with this eloquent, intelligent and forceful woman who refused to dance to their tune"*. The press branded her *a disgrace to women and heartlessly neglecting her husband and children*. Her

youngest child was 30 yrs old at the time and her husband had been an enthusiastic campaigner for her election.

She was fiercely independent and I think would have been sympathetic to the Burkeian view of representation. Edmund Burke in a famous and often quoted speech to the Electors of Bristol said in 1774 that:

*... it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. [...] But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you ... [...] . Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; ...*

In other words a conscientious and honourable Member of Parliament treats each matter on the merit of the arguments and casts her vote accordingly. This was Mrs Cowan's understanding and her practice as a Parliamentarian. She expected her colleagues to do likewise and, one suspects, was sorely disappointed in them!

It did not commend her to her colleagues and in 1924 she was unsuccessful when she stood for re-election – this time as a representative of the Women's Electoral League. Her time in the Parliament – and the disdain and ridicule she had experienced both prior to her election and during her time in the Parliament - had convinced of the need for women to represent women and in 1923 she spoke in the Parliament:

*There are many of us who still do not wish to bring that about, but it may ultimately be necessary to have such a party to look after the interest of women*

She was not successful in 1924, nor again in 1927, when she stood for election again as a representative of the Women's Electoral League. This has been the history of the women's political parties and women's candidates in Australia ... the most famous perhaps being Vida Goldstein in Victoria - a suffragist who stood for the Senate as a woman's candidate representing the Women's Federal Political Association in 1903 and 1910, and for the House of Representatives for the Women's Political Association in 1913 and 1914. Unsuccessful on each occasion.

Mrs Cowan continued her work as a social activist for the rights of women and children after her parliamentary term – in one sense her period as a Parliamentarian (barely three years) was but one phase or episode in her activist life. That is not to underestimate her significance as Australia's first woman parliamentarian nor what she did achieve as a member of Parliament nor her understanding of how important it was – and is – that there be women in the parliament and that women's voices should be heard and paid attention to. Her parliamentary achievements included two very important Private Member's Bills – one concerning the right of women to enter and practice the legal profession *“that no person should be disqualified by ‘sex or marriage’ from exercising any public function from practicing law or any other profession* [effectively Western Australia's first anti-discrimination legislation] and another concerning the equal inheritance rights of mothers.

Mrs Cheryl Edwards – the Chair of the Constitutional Centre's Advisory Board and our Chair this evening – was the first female legal practitioner to enter the Western Australian parliament in 1989, 75 years after Mrs Cowan's legislation - and Western Australia's first woman Attorney General.

Mrs Cowan's worked for the Red Cross, was committed to the welfare of returned service men, was active in the Girl Guides (another example of her commitment to widening the experiences and opportunities for women and girls) and was a founding member of the WA Historical Society. In time she was awarded an OBE for her services to the community. In my personal view I think she should have been a recipient of the highest imperial honour of the time – that is to have become Dame Edith Cowan (DBE). She was a great supporter of education, and that Edith Cowan University is named in her honour is a fitting memorial.

**Miss Mary (May) Holman** in contrast was a member of the WA Parliament for fourteen years, eleven of these as the only woman in the Parliament. She was Western Australia's second elected woman parliamentarian, the first Labor woman elected in Australia and the first Australian woman to serve a decade in the any Parliament. If it were not for her death upon re-election in 1939 she may well have been Western Australia's first woman Minister.

Miss Holman represented generational change – she was 32 years old when she entered the Parliament in 1925 as the member for Forrest, which was dominated by the timber industry. It had been her father's seat but her election was no taken for granted family succession as she had to survive a tough pre-selection contest against eleven men.

Miss Holmann saw herself as a part of the *Great Labor Family* – her mother Mrs Katherine Holman had been an active member of Labor women's organisations (whose emphasis was to ensure that women and issues particular to women were included in Labor's vision for the future). Mrs Holman was for example a member of the Perth and Fremantle Eight Hour

Day committee, she was a delegate to the first labor Women's Conference in Perth in 1912 and interestingly, together with Mrs Edith Cowan was a founding board member of the King Edward Memorial Hospital. May's father, Mr John Barkell Holman was a Labor member of the Legislative Assembly initially for a Goldfields seat from 1901-21 and from 1923-25 he was the member for the seat of Forrest. He was secretary of the Western Australian State branch of the Australian Timber Workers' Union almost continuously from 1908 to 1925. Miss Holman grew up she said *'in an atmosphere where men and women are credited with existing on the same intellectual plane'* From 1918 she had worked as a clerk assisting her father at the Timber Workers' Union. She was skilled in arbitration work, spending time in the Victorian Arbitration Court.

Life before Parliament – and throughout her parliamentary career was not all serious work! Miss Holman was a talented musician (with university qualifications in both piano and voice) and she regularly organised and ran concert parties and entertainments – for example for departing troops during the first world war and latterly for innumerable charitable causes. Her semi-professional group – *The Entertainers* – were part of her life.

Her focus throughout her parliamentary career was what we would now call social justice – social policy. Equal pay for women and men, and safe working conditions – particularly in the timber industry. Education, maternal and child health, infant health centres, dental clinics, decent housing and sanitation. Not glamorous – but she was someone who believed in getting things done – especially if they were worth doing. And the things she wanted done needed to be legislated – and so the Parliament was her sphere of activism. And she was an astute, diligent and persistent parliamentary operator – she may have been new to the parliament but in her first speech (the Address-in-Reply to the Governors' speech) she



neatly segued from congratulatory remarks to a detailed depiction of the appalling working conditions of timber workers and advocated decent wages, health and safety regulation, sanitation for timber towns, better roads, education and decent medical services for timber families. She was thorough and knew her stuff – her 2 and a half hour second reading speech for the Timber Industry Regulation Bill was the result of not only her years of experience in the Timber Workers Union but comprehensive research and examples drawing from the experiences of jurisdictions from around the world. Miss Holman may have been ‘only a girl’ from WA but even at this time her horizons were international.

Miss Holman was not on the receiving end of the same level of overt discrimination and invective that Edith Cowan had to endure – she was young, pretty and vivacious whereas Mrs Cowan was a serious older woman of 59. But there is more than a strand of surprise and a sort of patronising avuncular tone in much of the reporting of her work – that such a pretty girl should be so clever and do man’s job so well!!

Whilst committed to and deeply involved in a range of Labor Women’s organisations across Australia, Miss Holman entered into new territory when she was appointed as a delegate to the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva in 1930 – a woman was included in every Australian delegation to the League as either an associate or a substitute delegate. She was intensely interested not only in the range of international women’s organisations attached to the League – as the Joint Standing Committee on Women’s Issues - but also the women activists and politicians whom she met. To someone used to being the only woman in the

Parliament it was no doubt inspiring ... she herself used the term *thrilling*. She was a part of the Fifth Commission of the Assembly – which was concerned with social and humanitarian matters. Whilst consistent with her longstanding concerns for social justice, her perspectives were no doubt expanded by the speeches she gave on behalf of the Australian government regarding Dangerous Drugs and the trafficking of women and children .... She was blunt – pouring scorn on those who did not believe that human beings were being trafficked ... sadly, how similar is the situation today ....

Of course she experienced being told that as a woman she was in the wrong place - she was initially denied entry to the Dominions Gallery in for the opening of the UK Parliament at Westminster as the Gallery was reserved for MPs of the Dominion Parliaments (and of course as a woman she couldn't possibly be an MP!) whilst at the dinner she was advised she had attempted to enter by the wrong door as the door for wives was further along.

In 1935 she achieved a decade of parliamentary service and was duly congratulated by her colleagues – and especially by Labor Women. Miss Holman continued her parliamentary career – upsetting her colleagues (on all sides of the Parliament) by her determination to get done things that needed to be done whilst increasingly supporting the rights of women and girls – for example equal pay.

Her death in 1939 on the eve of her re-election was treated as a great tragedy by her Labor colleagues and indeed by the wider community. In scenes that would be reminiscent in

recent times with the funeral of Princess Diana, hundreds of people lined the streets (reportedly 6 deep) as her funeral cortege wound its way from St Mary's to Karakatta. And Perth was a small city at the time.

So what do we make of the work of these strong and feisty women. Is it merely their own achievements that we should concern ourselves with? Or do their "firsts" matter?

I think they do.

The issue of women in Australia's Parliaments, is that broadly, our representatives (in the sense of those who are elected to make decisions on our behalf) are not representative of the population (representative being used here in the statistical sense). They do not reflect or mirror the character of the population, the proportions of different groups in society. Women, who constitute just over 50% of the population, now constitute barely 30%% of Australian parliamentarians – better of course than in the days of Mrs Cowan and Miss Holman when the proportion was miniscule miniscule.

This raises the question of whether we need "mirror representation" ... which assumes that for the interests of women to be represented women need to be elected ... that women and **only** women can represent the interests of women;

Clearly Miss Holman did not think so as she believed that the Labor party which she represented could advance the Interest of all. And Australian voters do not think so either - as evidenced by the failures of all of the women only parties that have put up candidates for election.

But having women in our parliaments does matter – first there is the *symbolic importance of women representatives* - they are symbolic of the fact that a woman's place is in the Legislative Assembly, the Legislative Council, the House of Representatives or the Senate. So not only Mrs Edith Cowan, Miss May Holman but also Dame Enid Lyons, Senator Dorothy Tangney, ... and thinking internationally possibly Helen Clark as the first woman as Secretary General of the UN.

But is that all?

No, because of women's experience of life as women, women representatives will bring differing perspectives, and a wider range of experiences to the issues .... This is not to argue that women necessarily bring different approaches or styles to decision making ... that they are more consultative, less hierarchical, less confrontational etc. Rather it is to argue that women who experience women as women necessarily have unique perspectives to contribute to decision making on all issues. To some it may seem trivial but to Mrs Cowan the one shilling charge for prams on Western Australia's railways was unconscionable "*The Minister for Railways should be sentenced to tramp the city with a heavy baby on his hip and a bag of purchases in his free hand.*" The average wage in Australia in 1921 was around 9 pounds and 3 shillings - that's 210 shillings. Depending on the way you calculate it one shilling in 1921 was

the equivalent of somewhere between \$20 and \$90 today. But even using the lower outcome, \$20 is a substantial fee for being able to take a pram on a train. A one shilling charge may have seemed like a reasonable fee - but to a family making do ... just getting by it was impossible. This is but one example of how the perspective of a woman is shaped by experience, and the positive difference that experience can contribute to good decision making.

A modern example would be *superannuation*. Our current superannuation system assumes that a person begins work in perhaps their early twenties and continues in employment until they retire - barring any adverse and unexpected events such as unemployment. This is not the normal and expected pattern of women's employment. Women have children and care for them – this is the most common pattern of women's working lives. It is neither strange nor unexpected. And yet it is only in 2016 that a modicum of policy measures are being taken to address the unequal superannuation benefits of women – 24 years after the compulsory superannuation guarantee was introduced in 1992.

So simply being there matters.

I think it goes even further however, I think we need to demand what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls the politics of recognition. Charles Taylor talks about the importance of recognition. For all people their / our sense of identity and worth are constructed very much in terms of how others see us, and how our worth and identity is reflected back to us by the other members of the society in which we live. In other words, our sense of identity, our sense of our fundamental defining characteristics or who we are as human beings is partly shaped by recognition or mis-recognition or absence of recognition.

Not just recognition on an individual level but also recognition on an institutional level.

So the politics of recognition means that when our society concludes recognises that we need women to participate fully and equally in decision making in our Parliaments ... when Australian society recognises that we need women Australians to participate fully and equally in what is arguably the most important institution of political life, it will in fact be a recognition of women's full and equal membership of political society and society more broadly.

Thus there are two fundamental reasons as to why it is important that we have more women in our Parliaments:

- the first is that the range of experience of women could be applied to the significant issues of our society - which should of course lead to better decisions
  
- and the second is institutional /societal recognition of the equal worth of women as full and equal members of society, as full and equal citizens.

But to return to our political ground breakers – Mrs Edith Cowan and Miss May Holman – whose presence in the Western Australian Parliament resulted in better decisions and whose very presence reminded everyone in that place and in Western Australian society as a whole that women matter, and were and are equal citizens.

They had much in common – they were reformists whose objectives were to change for the better the lives of those who had little opportunity, few rights and fewer choices. Both were concerned with the opportunities and difficult lives of women and children – and also the working poor. Both were clever, talented and hard working. Both contributed not only to Western Australian and Australian society but both were latterly internationalist. They made a difference ... and so we honour them.

**Sources:**

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