



RESEARCH NOTE

Number 55, June 1997
ISSN 1328-8016

First Women in Australian Parliaments—Historical Note

I have always held that the extension of the franchise to women would not benefit them [but]...I do not think [it] will result in any harm.¹

Although New Zealand was the first country in the world to accord the vote to women in 1893, South Australia led the world in not only enfranchising women in 1894 but also making them eligible to sit in Parliament. By 1909 all Australian States and the Commonwealth had enfranchised most women (see table). Property qualifications applied initially for some upper houses. Federally, Aboriginal women (and men) were not accorded the vote until 1962 and even then enrolment provisions limited their electoral participation.

Although Australia was seen as a pioneer of women's political rights, it had the greatest time lag of all western democratic countries between the eligibility of women to stand for the national legislature and their actual election to it—41 years.

The sequence of women's enfranchisement in Australian legislatures was as follows:

South Australia

The Constitution Amendment Bill 1894 gave women both the right to vote and to sit in Parliament.² Although it was the first Australian State and the first legislature in the world to give women the right to sit in Parliament, it was the last of the Australian States to elect a woman to its lower house, in 1959.

Western Australia

Women won the right to vote in Western Australia, through the *Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899*, but they did not win the right to sit in the State Parliament until 1920,

with the passage of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Bill. Edith Cowan (Nationalist) was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1921, becoming Australia's first woman Parliamentarian. The first time a woman was elected to the Legislative Council was in 1954.

Commonwealth Parliament

With Federation in 1901 women of some States had the right to vote and others did not. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* gave women both the right to vote in Federal elections and the right to sit in Federal Parliament. In 1943 the first women entered the Commonwealth Parliament: Dame Enid Lyons was elected to the House of Representatives and Dorothy Tangney was elected to the Senate.

New South Wales

Women in New South Wales gained the right to vote through the *Women's Franchise Act 1902* but did not gain the right to sit in the lower house until 1918, when the Women's Legal Status Bill was passed. The first woman was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1925. Women gained the right to sit in the Legislative Council through the *Constitution (Amendment) Act 1926* and were first represented in the upper house in 1931, when MLCs were appointed by the Governor, for life. The *Constitution and Parliamentary Electorates and Elections (Amendment) Act 1978* provided for a popularly elected upper house and women were elected to the Legislative Council at its first election in 1978.

Tasmania

Women gained the right to vote in 1903 with the passage of the Constitution Act Amendment Bill, but did not gain the right to sit in the State Parliament until 1921 under the *Constitution Act*. The first women were not elected to the House of Assembly until 1955, over a decade after Dame Enid Lyons was elected to the Federal Parliament. The first woman was elected to the Legislative Council in 1948.

Queensland

The *Elections Acts Amendment Act 1905* gave women the right to vote in State elections. Women received the right to sit in Parliament through the *Elections Act 1915*. The first woman was elected to the Queensland Parliament in 1929. The Legislative Council was abolished in 1922 and had been an appointed, rather than directly elected, chamber; no women ever sat in the Council.

Victoria

Although Victoria was the first State in which a strong women's suffrage movement was organised, it was the last of the States to grant women's suffrage. Women gained the right to vote finally with the passage of the Adult Suffrage Bill 1908 but did not gain the right to sit in the State Parliament until 1923 through the *Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act*, again the last State to do so. The first woman was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1933, at a by-election, and no women were elected to the Legislative Council until 1979.

ACT and NT

Women were always able to vote and be represented in the Territories' elected bodies.

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1. Senator Fraser, speaking on the Commonwealth Franchise Bill, 10 April 1902, *Hansard*, p 11556.

2. Women's right to nominate for the Legislative Council was clarified by the *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1959*, deemed to have come into operation on 1.1.1959.

Australian Women: Eligibility to Vote, to Sit and First Women Elected to Australian Parliaments

Parliament	Date eligible to vote (assent or commencement date)	Date of first election eligible to vote	Date eligible to sit (assent or commencement date)	Date of first election eligible to stand	Date first woman elected	Name	Party	Electorate (single-member unless otherwise specified)
SA House of Assembly	21.3.1895	25.4.1896	21.3.1895	25.4.1896	7.3.1959	Joyce Steele	LCL	Burnside
SA Legislative Council‡	21.3.1895	22.5.1897	1.1.1959 ¹	7.3.1959	7.3.1959	Jessie Cooper	LCL	Central No. 2 ²
WA Legislative Assembly	18.5.1900	24.4.1901	3.11.1920	12.3.1921	12.3.1921	Edith Cowan	Nationalist	West Perth
WA Legislative Council‡	18.5.1900	29.8.1900	3.11.1920	13.5.1922	8.5.1954	Ruby Hutchinson	ALP	Suburban
House of Representatives	12.6.1902	16.12.1903	12.6.1902	16.12.1903	21.8.1943	Dame Enid Lyons	UAP	Darwin (Tas)
Senate	12.6.1902	16.12.1903	12.6.1902	16.12.1903	21.8.1943	Dorothy Tangney	ALP	WA ³
NSW Legislative Assembly	27.8.1902	6.8.1904	21.12.1918	25.3.1922	30.5.1925	Millicent Preston-Stanley	Nationalist	Eastern Suburbs ⁴
NSW Legislative Council - appointed	N/A	N/A	27.1.1926	N/A	23.11.1931 ⁵ 23.11.1931	Ellen Webster Catherine Green	ALP ALP	N/A N/A
NSW Legislative Council - popularly elected	10.8.1978	7.10.1978	10.8.1978	7.10.1978	7.10.1978 7.10.1978 7.10.1978 7.10.1978	Virginia Chadwick Marie Fisher Deirdre Grusovin Dorothy Isaksen	Liberal ALP ALP ALP	N/A N/A N/A N/A
Tas House of Assembly	29.2.1904	29.03.1906	14.2.1922	25.3.1922	19.2.1955 19.2.1955	Milly Best Mabel Miller	Liberal Liberal	Wilmot ⁶ Franklin ⁷
Tas Legislative Council†	29.10.1920 ⁸	3.5.1921	14.2.1922	2.5.1922	8.5.1948	Margaret McIntyre	Independent	Cornwall
Qld Legislative Assembly	1.1.1907	18.5.1907	23.11.1915	16.3.1918	11.5.1929	Irene Longman	Progressive Nationalist	Bulimba
Vic Legislative Assembly	31.3.1909	16.11.1911	12.5.1924	26.6.1924	11.11.1933 ⁹	Lady Millie Peacock	UAP	Allandale
Vic Legislative Council‡	31.3.1909	12.5.1924	12.5.1924	4.6.1925	5.5.1979 5.5.1979	Gracia Baylor Joan Coxsedge	Liberal ALP	Boronia Melbourne West

1. A legal challenge to the nomination of women resulted in legislation, with backdated provisions, to enable women to stand for election.

2. First elected in two-member district.

3. Fourth elected at an election where four were elected (usual three plus a casual vacancy). Elected by preferential voting: PR introduced in 1949.

4. Fifth elected in five-member district. Legislative Assembly had multi-member electorates between 1918 and 1926.

5. Until 1934 members of the Legislative Council were appointed by the Governor; from 1934 to 1978 they were elected by both chambers.

6. Elected fifth in six-member district.

7. Elected first in six-member district.

8. Vote extended only to women who had served as nurses in WWI (*Constitution (War Service Franchise) Act 1920*).

9. By-election to replace her late husband, a former Premier.

‡ Property qualifications applied. Removed in 1973 in South Australia (*Constitution Act Amendment Act 1973*, assent 22.11.73); removed in 1963 in Western Australia (*Constitution Acts Amendment Act (No. 2) 1963*, assent 17.12.63); removed in Victoria in 1950 (*Legislative Council Reform Act 1950*, assent 11.10.50).

† Property and ex-service qualifications applied; removed by *Constitution Act 1968* (assent 20.12.68).