



Edith Cowan

Many people think ... that it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman into Parliament ... [yet] the views of both sides [men and women] are more than ever needed in Parliament today. (Edith Cowan in her maiden speech, 28 July 1921)



Edith Dircksey Cowan (1861–1932), community activist and politician, was born near Geraldton, Western Australia. Her mother died in childbirth when she was seven and her father was hanged to death on a charge of wilful murder of his second wife when she was fifteen.

At 18, she married James Cowan, registrar and master of the Supreme Court who was later the Perth Police Magistrate. This allowed Edith a broader insight into the society's wider social problems and, along with her childhood tragedies, contributed to her urge to do something to help those in need and she became involved in many voluntary and community organisations.

In 1894, Edith Cowan was one of the founders of the Karrakatta Club, a group where women 'educated themselves for the kind of life they believed they ought to be able to take' and was instrumental in the campaign from women's suffrage. The Karrakatta Club was the oldest women's club in Australia and one of the oldest in the world. It was here that Perth's leading women mastered public speaking and shared reading on health, literature and women's rights and in time she became the club's president.

Western Australian women narrowly won the right to vote with changes to the Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899. It was not until 1920, however, that women became eligible to stand for and win Western Australian parliamentary seats. This right was granted with the passage of the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1920*.

Within one year, in 1921, Edith Cowan had won the seat of West Perth in the Legislative Assembly campaigning on her community service record, the need for law and order, and for women in Parliament to speak out on social issues. At the age of 59 she became the first woman member of an Australian parliament and began a number of historic firsts for the Western Australian Parliament and for women.

Although she only served one term, Edith Cowan had a broad platform and sought many changes to parliamentary practice. She fought tirelessly to improve conditions for women, children, families, the poor, the under-educated and the elderly. She maintained her committee and social work until she passed away at 71 years old. When she died, Edith's husband James Cowan was quoted as saying 'to have lived with her those years was an honour.'

A clock tower was erected at the entrance to Kings Park in 1934 to honour Edith Cowan.

Some of Edith Cowan's Key Political Contributions

- First woman to be elected in an Australian Parliament
- First Woman in Southern Hemisphere to be elected to a Parliament.
- Fought for proportional representation and compulsory voting
- Gave strong representation to children's rights, particularly in the court system and health matters.
- A strong advocate of free education with greater funding for education; and enhancement of professional standards for nurses (Nurses Registration Bill).
- Introduced the Women's Legal Status Bill 1923 which opened professions to women for the first time that were previously regarded as male orientated such as practicing law.
- Introduced the Administration Amendment Bill 1922 as a Private Member's Bill to give equal inheritance rights to mothers when a child dies intestate.
- Lobbied for regional development tax incentives and infrastructure for schools, infant health centres, hospitals and roads.
- Tabled a notice of motion to eliminate the 'men only' reservation rule to access all Parliamentary Galleries (now open to women and men).
- Amended the Guidance of Infants Act (1922), which allowed women to apply to the courts if their husbands left them without adequate maintenance. She also argued that a woman should be legally entitled to a share of her husband's income.
- Sought the right for wives to access the Arbitration Court to determine reasonable hours of domestic work and the possibility of payment for household duties.

References

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This fact sheet was created by the Department of Communities as part of the IWD 2021 toolkit and is available as an ongoing resource.