

Source: Discovering Democracy Lower Secondary Units – Political Life

<http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/ddunits/units/ls4fq2acts.htm#Cowan>

Edith Cowan 1861-1932

Some major achievements

- One of Western Australia's first women magistrates in the Children's Court, 1915-32
- Australia's first woman parliamentarian, 1921-24
- Introduced the Women's Legal Status Bill which removed the ban on women practising law and other professions (Western Australia), 1923



Memorials or monuments

- Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
- Cowan, federal electorate

Edith Cowan, social worker and Member of Parliament

Courtesy Edith Cowan University.

Background and experience

When Edith Brown was seven years old her mother died. Edith was then sent from her home near Geraldton, Western Australia, to a girls' boarding school in Perth. She had to cope with another tragedy when her father was found guilty of the murder of his second wife and executed.

At 18 years of age, Edith married James Cowan, who became a magistrate in Perth. Through her husband's work, she saw how families suffered when their men were sent to gaol. Later she became an active member of organisations that tried to improve conditions for women and children. Edith had five children of her own.

When she became a magistrate of the Perth Children's Court herself, Edith was able to work hard to protect the rights of children. She held the position of magistrate for 18 years.



From Leason's cartoon 'The New "House" Wife', *Bulletin*, 31/3/1921.
Courtesy National Library of Australia.

Political life and times

Western Australian women won the right to vote in 1899 but were not able to stand for parliament until 1920. Edith Cowan campaigned for both these reforms.

In 1921 she stood as a Nationalist candidate for the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia because she thought not enough was being done about the rights of children and women. In the election, Cowan defeated an experienced male politician by 46 votes. She was the first woman elected to an Australian parliament.

In her first speech in parliament, Cowan talked about what could be done to help children, women, wage earners and pensioners. She had some immediate success. When she complained that mothers taking prams on suburban trains had to pay a 'pram fare', the Minister for Railways replied that he would withdraw the charge at once.

Cowan wanted the government to make changes in education, health and immigration policy. But, as a *backbencher* and the only woman in parliament, she did not have the power to make many of the changes she wanted.

Her greatest achievement was to open up the legal profession to women. In 1923, she introduced a Bill to parliament to allow women lawyers to represent people in court, which they had not been allowed to do. Her Bill was passed by the parliament. It also allowed women for the first time to work in other professions. In a way, this legislation paved the way for modern equal opportunity legislation.

Cowan's campaigns for re-election in 1924 and 1927 were unsuccessful.

- A *backbencher* is an ordinary Member of Parliament who does not have responsibility for an area such as Health, Foreign Affairs or Education.

Beliefs and aims

I stand here today in the unique position of being the first woman in an Australian Parliament. I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind Hon [honourable] members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home. I have been sent here more from that standpoint than from any other ... The views of both sides are more than ever needed in Parliament today. If men and women can work for the State side by side and represent all the different sections of the community, and if the male members of the house would be satisfied to allow women to help them and would accept their suggestions when they are offered, I cannot doubt that we should do very much better work in the community than was ever done before.

From Cowan, E, Debut speech in the House of Assembly (WA) 21/7/1921, *Hansard*, pp 15-19.

Challenges and responses

Australia fought on the side of Great Britain in the World War I (1914-18) and over 330,000 Australian men and women went overseas. Most of them were soldiers or nurses and almost two-thirds were wounded or killed.

Cowan did not support the War and did not see it as a solution to international problems. But as the War went on she saw that there were practical things to be done for the ordinary people involved.

Western Australia was the first port of call in Australia for hospital ships coming back from the War and Cowan helped organise a welcoming committee for the people on the ships. She also established a Soldiers' Institute to provide soldiers with meals, rest and recreation.

Cowan worked with the Red Cross and supported the idea that people who had returned from the War should be offered jobs before other people.

After the War, Cowan supported the League of Nations, which was set up in 1919 to promote world peace and cooperation. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in recognition of her work during the War.