An honour for Pat



By Matt Jarman
President



From left: Graeme Repper, Trevor Vaughan, Brian Lindberg, Edd Black, Pat Byrne, Ed Harken, Anne Gisborne, Mike Keely, Shirley Savell and David Balfour

Delegates at November 2023 State Council Conference voted unanimously to bestow SSTUWA life membership upon former president and long-time member, Pat Byrne. The following is Matt Jarman's report to delegates.

State Council, I ask for your support in this conferral for life membership to be bestowed on Patricia Byrne, or Pat as we all

know her.

Pat left a presidential legacy that has stabilised and strengthened our union. Pat led the SSTUWA through the extraordinary and unprecedented challenges of a global pandemic whilst reinforcing the status of the SSTUWA as a powerful public sector union in Western Australia among the community and importantly in the eyes of government.

I have witnessed the cross-government support for the SSTUWA and for Pat . Pat's leadership, in my view, is what was needed for the time.

Pat has dedicated herself to the SSTUWA since first joining in 1969.

Through the late 1980s and into the 1990s she held various positions within the SSTUWA following her successful career as one of the few English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in the public system at that time. It is no coincidence that soon after ESL teachers became eligible for permanency for the first time.

Pat was quickly regarded as a potential president during this period by the Executive of the day. This came to fruition with Pat succeeding Brian Lindberg.

Unfortunately for the SSTUWA, the AEU also demanded her leadership, cutting short her initial stint as president of the SSTUWA to become AEU president in 2003. This period of national presidency was critical to the stability and future direction of the AEU given the challenges of school federal funding that were emerging under the increasingly conservative drive to fund private schools at the expense of the public system.

This was a sign of things to come as the initial optimism around the Gonski review diminished as the proposals were watered down, leaving Pat and others in leadership positions with an ever more challenging fight on behalf of public schools and the wider public sector. In her time as national president Pat commissioned advertising and other action, making her unpopular with the conservative media and government of the day, something I am sure she would consider a proud achievement.

Pat returned from Melbourne in 2014 to become SSTUWA president and begin what eventually would become a three-term presidency. Her period as AEU president resulted in life membership to the AEU.

Changes in the community expectations of schools, the rise of a problematic autonomy model, machinery of government budget cuts and more have all been navigated by Pat through the industrial instruments to support members and the needs of public education, as is the remit of the president's role in our organisation.

It is my position that no one else could have not only managed this, but at the same time improved the financial position of the SSTUWA. These feats are in themselves justification for a life membership.

Then there was a global pandemic; an unprecedented health risk to all Western Australians compounded by a belligerent government who refused to shut schools no matter the implication. Pat led from the front and it was her moral compass, ability to see the issue through all the white noise and make strategic decisions that more often than not had implications for other unions, the government and the worried community.

It was a demonstration of the resilience that was at the heart of Pat's achievements. I witnessed how she found the core of the problem, considered all angles, simplified the matters for others and then made an informed, decisive decision. It is one of her leadership traits.

Despite the disappointment of extreme governments being elected at federal level and the anti-TAFE and state school governance of the Barnett years, Pat never resiled from the fight, consistently setting the example to get back up and carry on the struggle. The same qualities saw the union steered through issues that at times deeply concerned and sometimes divided our membership.

In 2023 we acknowledge 125 years of the SSTUWA. Over that time presidents have commonly left the SSTUWA in a better place, arguably few better than that achieved by Patricia Byrne. Comrades, I seek your endorsement for Pat's life membership.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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