Legacy of leader seen in strength of today's union



It was my great pleasure at November State Council Conference to successfully seek support for the conferral of life membership on Anne Gisborne. This is part of what I said:

I feel it is accurate to say that each president of the SSTUWA will endure a variety of unforeseen uncertainties throughout their time in the role.

These may come in the form of school systemic changes, government funding fluctuations – normally in reverse, changes to community attitudes, of course industrial unrest, changes across the federal landscape, internal challenges and changes, the impact of cost of living pressures on members all whilst trying their very best to provide protection for the membership and for the good of our public school profession.

And throughout Anne Gisborne's time as senior vice president [from] 2006-07 and then as president [from] 2008 to 2013, that was most certainly Anne's experience.

It seems to me in the time I have been fortunate to know Anne that she has always had something to say and that this voice is always grounded in what is right, particularly what is right for this union, the union movement and the needs of public school educators.

I am speculating now but I would think that it was these many voices that were the reason why Anne joined the SSTUWA on the 10th September 1984, some 41 years ago.

Anne has been a member of the UnionsWA Council for many years, a former president of UnionsWA, Executive member of the Australian Education Union and remains a member of the GESB Board of Directors, recently re-elected unopposed. Anne is still providing support to new and graduate teachers amongst many other pursuits still aligned to the profession and this union.

In 2004-2007 we saw attacks from the federal government – we had Brendan Nelson and Julie Bishop as Education Ministers at the time; Nelson gave us flagpoles and Bishop tried to give us merit pay.

For us this was not new – the SSTUWA had weathered similar attacks in the 90s in the Court-Kierath era and had built on

the Advanced Skill Teacher (AST) category to develop the first iteration of the Level 3 Classroom Teacher.

Ultimately WA became the first state in the country to introduce an expert teacher salary grade that we still know as the Level 3 Classroom Teacher. This and the AST were both strategies designed to prevent the imposition of a merit pay regime.

As senior vice president Anne worked tirelessly with president Mike Keely to again stop that push and in the process build on what we already had. That struggle saw the establishment of the Senior Teacher category, as well as retaining the Level 3 Classroom Teacher position, an outcome for members that we still benefit from today.

Anne is known for her stamina; past colleagues have often commented to me they are not sure if Anne ever really sleeps. Anne was elected in 2007, began as president on 1 January 2008 and on the 27th February a stop work action was called – 6,000 members assembled at Langley Park and approximately 2,000 in rural areas around WA.

In her very first *Western Teacher* article Anne declared we were going to be at least 600 teachers short, leaving around 19,200 WA students without a teacher at the start of the year and that class sizes were unacceptable. Anne had clearly hit the ground running.

The government responded by immediately placing adverts in local papers, prompting members to write back and in many cases directly to government.

Anne and the Executive placed their own ads, often pointing out to the WA community how misleading the government advertising was! In capital letters Anne wrote to members in the April edition of the *Western Teacher* stating there is much that can and must be done by each and every member.

Strong, clear lines had been drawn. Alan Carpenter was Premier of WA at the time and remained so until Labor lost government to Colin Barnett in September that year. Now I have heard some Laborites blame the teachers for the 2008 election loss, and that may have been the case.

By June 2008 the Department of Education had advised that WAIRC arbitration was the next step, leaving Anne and the leadership to work tirelessly in preparation. Strike action was called for 27 November but was called off by Anne and the leadership as an offer of six per cent, five per cent and four per cent was received, including new salary grades and the previously mentioned Senior Teacher and Level 3 Teacher salary offers.

The year 2009 seems to have started with some optimism, until very quickly the Twomey report landed, highlighting country housing issues and the first iteration of the Rudd Government revealed that public schools were underfunded by approximately $2.9 billion across the country.

The Rudd/Gillard federal government undertook the first Gonski review, which revolutionised the schools' funding model initiated by John Howard, only to fall at the hurdle of implementation, a failing from which we are just beginning to recover.

A report from the Australian Education Union indicated that funding per public school student had decreased by 10.6 per cent between 2009 and 2014, while funding to private schools had increased by much more – sound familiar? The public education campaign – *For Our Future* by Federal Executive was launched and it was against that background that Anne faced the two biggest battles of her presidency.

The SSTUWA vs IPS battle began in 2009, with the Barnett Government aiming to "create an alternative system within a system with an intention to drive an ideological shift." Anne, I suspect, called it many things during this time, one of the more polite ones was "the privatisation of the government schooling system."

This was facilitated by significant early changes to the transfer system, which ultimately led to its almost complete abolition. The half cohort shift also was underway and labelled by Anne as abysmal and short-sighted in the face of the teacher shortages.

This was followed by the delayed budget announcement in August 2013 in which the Barnett Government dropped a completely new funding model on schools – one straight out of the neo-liberal playbook – massive cutbacks accompanied by the devolution of central functions to schools. In the name of "equity" and "student need" we saw:

- Some large secondary schools lose more than $1 million from their budgets.
- Approximately 1,000 EA positions were lost.
- AIEOs all but disappeared.
- A huge loss of teaching positions – some schools lost 10 or more teachers; specialist programs were lost.
- Professional learning became how to manage a budget (for principals only).
- Basically, whatever "fat" was in the system was stripped.

Budgets were slashed by millions, teacher numbers ravaged and Aboriginal Education Officer and EA positions disappeared.

We maintained class sizes and DOTT. The government tried to stop further L3CT positions from being filled but withdrew from that under threat from the WAIRC. They took the 0.1 time though and have consistently refused to restore it in any meaningful way.

We had a statewide stop work meeting in October 2013 as local communities rallied.

In this fight, we established unprecedented close relationships with both the CSA and United Voice. Toni Walkington, Carolyn Smith and Anne collaborated on information and strategies to an extent not previously seen and I am not exaggerating when I say this was the foundation of what we now know as the UnionsWA Public Sector Alliance – the grouping which led to the end of McGowan's salary cap, which had been in place since 2017.

Anne Gisborne's leadership was fierce, intelligent, principled and deeply grounded in her love of the profession and her respect for the members she represented.

Her legacy is visible not only in our pay scales and structures, but in the very strength and identity of this union today.

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