

The Hon Dr Carmen Lawrence

STUDIED: Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)

YEARS STUDIED: 1965 – 1968, PhD 1983

BEFORE ST CATHERINE'S: Dongara, Regional WA

Remarkable former resident, Dr Carmen Lawrence, first became aware of her desire to advance social equality and the status of women during her years at St Catherine's.

She and Robert French (Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia and newly appointed Chancellor of UWA) had shared top place in the State School leaving examination and her parents, who farmed at Gutha, north of Perth, thought an all-girls' college would be a protective environment for their young daughter. She arrived at College at the age of 16 in 1965. "My parents thought I would be protected from the temptations and pressures of university life at St Catherine's - there were very few women studying at the UWA campus in the '60s, and the College provided me and other young women with additional support, including tutoring."

Neither she nor the nuns at Santa Maria Convent where she had completed her schooling had any idea about what she should study. She considered medicine, but her subject choices at school had not included chemistry, physics and mathematics. So, Carmen chose topics that interested her, English literature, Italian, Economics and Psychology, a field new to her.

"I had the privilege of meeting many wonderful people, including academics, such as Allan Richardson, a psychologist based at UWA. He introduced me and others to European psychology, and for this I am eternally grateful."

Carmen worked hard to maintain the exceptional standards set by her school leaving results but she embraced all that College had to offer. She attended balls and parties, was the Freshers' representative and was involved in the Social Club and the Newman Society. She committed to do an Honours degree in Psychology, left St Catherine's during third year to share a flat but returned to become Senior Student in

1967. There she faced an issue which questioned the basic rights of women. A St Catherine's student was found to have a man in her room. "I'm not sure that there was anything going on but she was expelled, cold, bang, gone. I complained that this was unfair but she stayed expelled."

Carmen completed her Bachelor of Psychology with first class honours in 1968, winning a prize for the most outstanding graduate from a group of Faculties. She travelled to Europe and had a scholarship entry to Cornell University in the United States but decided with 'the perversity of youth' not to accept the offer. During the early 1970s she worked at the University of New South Wales as a research assistant and at Melbourne University tutoring in Psychology. In Melbourne, a 'longish' relationship resulted in the birth of her son, David. "I thought marriage was for the birds. I was a radical."

Managing a baby as a single mother with no childcare facilities and tutoring at University stretched her resources but she maintained a central role in the Women's Electoral Lobby, pressing for affordable childcare, improvement in women's educational opportunities and promotion in the workplace.

Returning to Perth and with family support, she took part-time positions at WA Universities for several years where she refused to prolong her workdays longer than necessary. "I would not have wanted to be as fully engaged as I know some women are today with their little babies. I enjoyed being a Mum." At WAIT (Curtin University) she established a course for nurses in Behavioural Sciences.

Carmen retired from politics in 2007 and currently is a Professor in the School of Psychology, UWA and a Fellow of St Catherine's College.





From left to right: Jo Patman – Tutor, Pat Church – Warden, Carmen Lawrence – Senior Student, Sue Boyd – Social President, Sue Parker – Freshers ' Rep



Paul Keating PM and caucus colleagues, congratulating Carmen Lawrence on her election to the Federal Parliament

Carmen had been a quiet child in a big family. Teaching full-time for four years in the School of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at UWA and her love of language taught her how to project ideas to a wider audience. She completed her PhD in 1983 and she saw two ways to achieve political and social change. One was to pressure politicians to take action. The other was to be a politician. She joined the WA Labor Party and in 1986 won the seat of Subiaco in the WA Legislative Assembly.

An illustrious political career followed. In 1990 she became Australia's first woman Premier and held many additional portfolios before serving in Paul Keating's Federal Ministry 1994-1996. In 2004, she was elected the first woman President of the Australian Labor Party. She considers her earlier experiences, such as establishing the Women's Electoral Lobby with 13 other women and her first portfolio as Minister for Education, amongst her most satisfying.

"Being the first woman to become Premier of an Australian State was a considerable honour. It was a wonderful experience and I was able to use the skills I learned during my Psychology degree to try and find solutions to the social and economic problems we faced at the time. In particular, my university education allowed me to assess the validity of evidence and arguments presented to me, while using critical thinking to analyse and develop policy. In 1990, I became Premier at a challenging time, marked by sustained calls for investigation into the relationship between a former Premier, Brian Burke, and some prominent businessmen. Despite the ongoing controversy, and our decision to establish a Royal Commission into these allegations, our government was still able to chalk up some notable achievements, including

building the Northern Suburb Transit Line, constructing additional public housing and developing community neighbourhood centres to increase rates of early childhood education."

Carmen retired from politics in 2007 and currently is Professor in the School of Psychology, UWA and a Fellow of St Catherine's College. She widely mentors young people and feels you should do what you're good at and love.

"It is about finding something that gets your blood racing and exploring the possibilities that can open up from the interests you already have. I find it preferable not to have an entire set of goals mapped out. Typically, I only plan for the fairly short term, which hopefully means that I am more aware of what's happening around me, seeing what is, rather than focussing on what I hope will be the case.

We don't know what's around the corner, so it helps to embrace every possibility, rather than waiting for the perfect moment. I think persistence is most important in rising to whatever challenges you face or set yourselves - no matter what obstacles are put in your way, keep on trying! "