

Millicent Preston-Stanley (1883-1955)



Millicent Preston-Stanley was the first female member of the NSW Legislative Assembly, 1925-1927, representing the electorate of the Eastern Suburbs. She was only the second woman to be elected to any Parliament in Australia.

After organising for political, feminist and other groups, she narrowly missed election for the multi-member seat of the Eastern Suburbs in 1922, but succeeded in 1925. She held the seat until 1927. That year she unsuccessfully contested the new seat of Bondi, but changes to the electorates and the voting system resulted in her defeat.

In her inaugural speech, on 26 August 1925, she said:

"I want to make it clear that I am not here merely as the representative of one sex. I believe that women's questions are national questions, and that national questions are women's questions, and it may be shown that woman can take her place amongst the representatives of the people in the Parliament of the country and play her part in the political life of the nation."

During her parliamentary career she campaigned strongly for an improvement in the rate of women's mortality in childbirth, reform in child welfare, institutional care for people with mental illnesses and more equitable custody rights in divorce.

A feminist, she was involved in a number of women's organisations throughout her life and learnt to deal mercilessly with hecklers and interjectors inside and outside Parliament. She campaigned for women's rights in child custody cases, becoming passionately involved in the high-profile 'Polini case', a cause célèbre of the 1920s-1930s.

After leaving the Legislative Assembly she continued an active political life, holding many executive positions on women's organisations, including Presidency of the Feminist Club, a position she held for 18 years. Outside politics she was a journalist, playwright and businesswoman and in 1921 became one of NSW's first female Justices of the Peace.

She wrote a regular column, 'My Daily Message', in the *Daily Telegraph* and these collected columns later appeared in a two-volume publication. In her 'My Daily Message' columns she urged women to believe the best about themselves:

"You are your thought – your thought is you...Our lives follow our thoughts...Failure or success is in the mind."

The National Library of Australia holds her personal papers. A portrait of her by Jerrold Nathan hangs in NSW Parliament and another by Mary Edwards is held in the Dixon Library, State Library of NSW.

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