Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE23091122

Lee, Elizabeth

(1979 -)

Born	19790830, Gwangju South Korea
Occupation	Fitness instructor, Lawyer, Parliamentarian

Summary

Elizabeth Lee became Leader of the Opposition in the ACT Legislative Assembly in October 2020. She was first elected to the Assembly in 2016, representing the Canberra Liberals in the electorate of Kurrajong. Lee retained her seat at the 2020 and 2024 elections but was replaced as leader of the Canberra Liberals by Leanne Castley on 31 October 2024. Lee was the first Asian-Australian to be elected to the Assembly and the first person of Korean heritage to be elected to an Australian parliament. She is the first Asian-Australian to lead a major political party. Before being elected, Lee practised as a lawyer in government and private practice and was a law lecturer at the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. She has also worked as a fitness instructor.

Elizabeth Lee was inscribed on the ACT Women's Honour Roll in 2016.

Details

Elizabeth Lee was born in Gwangju, South Korea on 30 August 1979. She migrated to Australia with her family in 1986, aged seven. Lee has two younger sisters, Rosa and Sara. The family spoke Korean at home. Her father John worked on construction sites, as a cleaner and ran several small businesses; her mother Cecilia worked as a cleaner, in takeaway shops and as a homemaker. The family lived in Merrylands and Blacktown, in Sydney's western suburbs where Elizabeth attended Sherwood Grange, Shelley and our Lady of Lourdes Primary Schools and Girraween Selective High School. Lee has lived in Canberra since 1998 when she began tertiary studies at the Australian National University. She has a Bachelor of Law and Asian Studies (Japanese) degree, a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice and a Master of Laws (Government and Commercial Law) degree.

Prior to entering the Legislative Assembly, Lee worked in the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, the office of the Australian Government Solicitor and as a commercial litigation lawyer at Meyer Vandenberg Lawyers. Lee lectured in law at the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. Lee served as Chair of the ACT and Australian Young Lawyers Committees and Vice President of the ACT Law Society and volunteered for the ACT Legal Advice Bureau. She also worked as a fitness instructor and is a Les Mills qualified instructor for several fitness courses.

Lee ran unsuccessfully for the Legislative Assembly electorate of Molonglo in 2012 and for the Commonwealth House of Representatives seat of Fraser in 2013. She was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 2016, representing Kurrajong. ACT electorates have five members; Lee was the highest-polling Liberal and the only one to be elected in Kurrajong. She was the first Asian-Australian to be elected to the Assembly and the first person of Korean heritage elected to an Australian parliament. Lee delivered her inaugural speech on 13 December 2016, speaking Korean in the closing moments to acknowledge her parents' sacrifice as they sought better opportunities in Australia for their daughters. She also expressed pride in being a member of the first female majority parliament in Australia.

Lee was Assistant Speaker from December 2016 to October 2020 and has held several shadow portfolios, including for Education and Disability. The Canberra Liberals elected her as Opposition Leader in October 2020, when she became the first Asian-Australian leader of a major political party. As leader, she has held the shadow portfolios of Attorney-General (2020–22), Treasury (from 2020), Economic Development and Major Projects (from 2020), Climate Action (from 2020) and Housing Affordability and Choice (from 2022). During Leanne Castley's leadership Lee was on the backbench, but from December 2025, under the leadership of Mark Parton, Lee was once again in the shadow ministry, taking responsibility for Education, Environment and Climate Change, and Tourism and Events.

As Shadow Minister for the Environment, Lee successfully advocated for the Canberra Liberals agreement to achieving net zero emissions by 2045. She has consistently supported policies to improve gender equity and in 2020 introduced Australia's first anti-stealthing laws, leading to the amendment of provisions in the ACT Crimes Act providing for consent to be negated if condom use is misrepresented. Similar laws were later introduced in other Australian jurisdictions. Lee attended the March 4 Justice protest at Parliament House Canberra in 2021, having previously revealed her experience of sexual harassment. She has also spoken personally about pregnancy loss. Lee's daughter Mia was born in 2019 and her second daughter, Ava in 2023. Lee was the first Australian leader of a political party to take formal maternity leave from parliament. Her partner, Nathan Hansford, is a consultant. Lee has often spoken about the importance of being a role model, arising from her political leadership as a first generation Asian-Australian migrant: 'If I can do my small part in inspiring other young Asian-Australians to pursue a role in politics, that's a special thing … I also hope that I'm setting a good example for my girls, that women can do whatever they set their minds to and they can play leadership roles and make a lasting contribution.'

Published resources

Lee-Elizabeth, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/members/tenth-assembly-members/kurrajong/lee-elizabeth

Inaugural Speeches - Lee, Elizabeth - Page 77 - Week 01 - Tuesday, 13 December 2016, https://www.hansard.act.gov.au/hansard/9th-assembly/2016/HTML/week01/77.htm

Elizabeth Lee: a Letter to my Daughter, Elizabeth Lee, 2019, https://hercanberra.com.au/life/elizabeth-lee-a-letter-to-my-daughter/

Humble Lee looks to building a better future, Belinda Strahorn, 2020

Newspaper Article
Elizabeth Lee named ACT Opposition Leader, 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-27/canberra-liberals-leadership-elizabeth-lee-alistair-coe/12816470

Canberra Liberals leader Elizabeth Lee on the importance of speaking out about injustice as a woman in leadership, Harry Frost, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-21/elizabeth-lee-on-women-in-leadership-speaking-up/100019116

Archival resources

'A Secondary Education for All'?: A History of State Secondary Schooling in Victoria

'Albert Park State School Swimming Champions'

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