

Just call me

Tim



Tim Fischer with wife Judy and sons Harrison (left) and Dominic (right).

After nearly 30 years working as a politician the Hon Tim Fischer MP (Member for Farrer) has decided to call it quits. *About the House* recently spoke to him for an exclusive interview.

"Hello, Mr Fischer?"

"Yes," the former Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the National Party said from his home in Boree Creek, NSW, "but please, just call me Tim."

Tim Fischer's down to earth, friendly affable personality and his hard working, enthusiastic style have earned him a reputation throughout Australia and internationally as being an honest and respected politician. He is the bush pollie who has stood up for issues that he believed in and believed were in the interests of the nation. This included supporting the Government's restrictions on gun ownership, despite this being a different position to many in the bush and National Party voters.

On 27 January at a National Party branch meeting in Boree Creek, Tim Fischer announced that he will not be re-contesting his Federal Seat of Farrer at the next election.

His decision to tell his electorate first that he would be quitting politics was a deliberate one. Likewise, his decision to stand at the despatch boxes in the House of Representatives on 30 June last year and announce that he was retiring as Deputy Prime Minister, Leader of the National Party and Trade Minister was also carefully thought through.

"As a Cabinet Minister I felt it was the proper and correct way to announce my retirement at this level and then tell my electorate that I was leaving as their Member," Tim explained. "It just would not have been the done thing announcing my retirement as Member for Farrer in the House and as Cabinet Minister in Boree Creek.

"Both my electorate and the House should be treated with the respect that they deserve. I have always claimed that it never does any harm having an above average respect for the despatch box and by that I mean not misleading Parliament and this also flows onto the voters.

"I have tried to play a straight bat, be not too slick or too partisan in the extreme and especially not too aggressive in personal punishing attacks. It doesn't mean I couldn't add spin or colour, but it had to be done within other parameters."

In 1984 Tim Fischer moved to Federal Parliament from the NSW State Parliament where he had represented the electorates of Sturt and Murray. While there were a number of changes that he had to adapt to, he explained this was nothing like the differences that have occurred in the ever changing role of a politician.

'It is for others to judge my contribution to state and federal politics.'

The Hon Tim Fischer MP, Member for Farrer

"In the early seventies life for a politician was completely different to what it is now," Tim said. "You went along to a few functions and could almost respond to all invitations. Time was freer. Now the electorate expects you to be a catalyst, motivator, and initiator – and be everywhere at the same time despite electorates being huge and the country being so big.

"We could sit back and reject the demands, but we have all made a commitment because it is our choice that we have been elected to Parliament. Certainly, none of us are perfect and we have all been through some sort of hell especially with pre-selections, but every Member of every party should be able to walk tall. Being a

politician is not just about being a Minister or Deputy Prime Minister. The lot of a backbencher should not be underestimated. The influence here can be substantial."

Tim Fischer claims that some of his most notable achievements came through his involvement in parliamentary committees. These included making recommendations to develop a rail corridor from Sydney to Perth ("even though it was standard gauge") and through the NSW State Committee system introducing Stay Safe, a random breath testing program that is now in place throughout NSW.

"The belief is that you can only make changes if you are a government minister," Tim added. "This is far from the truth. One of the most effective ways to make changes is through Committee work. Committees can't be underestimated, especially those in the House of Reps even though the media doesn't place much focus on them.

"That is why at no stage did I take cheaply to anyone who did not respect a Committee inquiry. My attitude and the respect I had for Committees did not change once my Committee membership ceased. Even as a Minister, I was always involved with them. I tried to instil this respect with other coalition members, especially National Party members." In 1985 Tim Fischer was a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Transport Safety and from 1987 through to 1990 he was a member of the Transport, Communications and Infrastructure Committee.

About the House asked Tim if he had any advice he wanted to share with other parliamentary members or those planning to enter Parliament. He said it was important that new Members participate in seminars on parliamentary processes that are organised through the Department of the House of Representatives, be knowledgeable and up to date with the rules under which the House operates, and take the challenge of raising a point of order as long as it is of "a sensible kind" in the early stages of their parliamentary term.

In addition to this, he would encourage all Members and Senators to select a country that they wanted to focus on and develop networks with. Tim says that such links with another country are invaluable in sharing parliamentary experiences and these connections help with ongoing networks, which in turn benefits the country enormously. He added that embassies based in Canberra and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will always assist a Member with information and advice – "as long as it is a genuine request and they are not seeking a time wasting junket. Believe me, they know the difference!"

"While the work of a politician is demanding and there are enough excuses not to take on any more work, it can do no harm for a Member to select a country and work hard at learning the culture and history of that country," Tim explained.

"I selected Thailand and it really paid off. Early on I could share my experiences with other young backbenchers, but in more recent years it helped a great deal with our international relationship with Thailand. I was Trade Minister and by this stage the politicians I had come to know throughout my years had become Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Prime Minister and even Prime Minister. I never expected the two way benefits and the links to be this great."

Despite all the media exposure about his retirement Tim Fischer will not bring forward his retirement and call a by-election. This he claims would be unnecessary and inconvenience his electorate. His future plans include spending more time with his family, being a director of Ausmore Pty Ltd which manages the Australian International School in Singapore, and acting as a consultant with Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu which is expanding its work in Thailand.



Peter Costello with Tim Fischer following Tim's resignation from the frontbench on 30 June 1999.

'... the things that unite us as parliamentarians are much more significant than the things that divide us... this House is united in saying thank you to you for the service you have rendered to the people of Australia...'

Speaker of the House of Representatives,
the Hon Neil Andrew MP

Tim ended our conversation with a laugh: "I know I am getting a lot of attention at the moment, but it's only because I am leaving. It is something wonderful about our democracy that you can be the boy from Boree Creek and get a fair hearing."

Tim Fischer is known for his boundless energy and enthusiasm, especially for Asia-Pacific issues. He further reminded Australians of this when he recently released his book *7 Days in East Timor – Ballot and Bullets* (published by Allen and Unwin with foreword by Bishop Carlos Belo).