

# Moving on

With an election looming, Members of the House of Representatives will soon find out if they will keep their seats in the House. Alison Grahame reports on three Members who are not contesting the next election and finds out what they think about the Parliament they are leaving.

They may miss the camaraderie and they will certainly miss the interaction with the people of their electorates. What they most definitely will not miss is the level of debate and the behaviour of their senior colleagues during Question Time.

Kathy Sullivan (Member for Moncrieff, Qld), Allan Morris (Member for Newcastle, NSW) and Tony Lawler (Member for Parkes, NSW), each retiring from Parliament come the election, may find it difficult to reach consensus on any number of policy matters, but when it comes to the way the House represents itself to the Australian public their views are unanimous.

"I'm no fan of the conduct of Parliament," Mrs Sullivan says, and after 27 years in Parliament this can hardly be called a rash judgement. "It's out of touch with the electorate and the blame lies with the Executive on both sides of the House - it's a macho show. It's no wonder the public is disenchanted with the system. Debate is one thing but that football crowd behaviour is quite another. It just doesn't work."

Allan Morris doesn't mince words either. House procedures, he says, are "intellectually offensive". "Question Time is an insult to us and an insult to the public. I also believe that Speakers have become less and less independent over the years. The whole thing is a downgrading of the public's perceptions of parliamentarians."

And although only a Member for one term, Tony Lawler's views are as strongly held. "It might be my naivety but I don't think Question Time needs to be the way it is. The way people treat each other does nothing to enhance the reputation of either the chamber or the people in it," he says.

"Debates are not real debates but prepared speeches. There is no real exchange of ideas on the floor - that happens between

Ministers. By the time an issue reaches the floor, all the decisions have been taken.

"If Members aren't prepared to change their behaviour in Question Time then things are going to get worse. We'll get more Independents and end up with an unstable parliament. It's my great fear."



Kathy Sullivan

So much for the bad news.

The good news is that each of the three is a strong supporter of the parliamentary committee system. Mr Lawler thinks his work on the House of Representatives committee looking at substance abuse (the Family and Community Affairs Committee) might just be one of the few things he'll miss when he leaves.

And despite her initial doubts, Mrs Sullivan became a convert. "Having come originally from the Senate I was used to committees but I must admit I was very cynical about how they would work in the House of

Representatives. I came to them with low expectations but I was pleasantly surprised. I think they do valuable work."

**"You are there to serve your electorate."**

Mr Morris agrees but firmly believes that the system is undervalued by the Parliament. There have been attempts to improve it, he argues, but it still doesn't have the full confidence of the Executive. "I think they see it as a bit of a nuisance rather than something that can help promote good public policy. It should be an important development tool for politicians but it's not. Ministers and their bureaucrats don't put forward ideas for committees unless they want a political solution to a pressing problem, something to take the pressure off. Committee members end up feeling used, particularly if a report is then shelved."

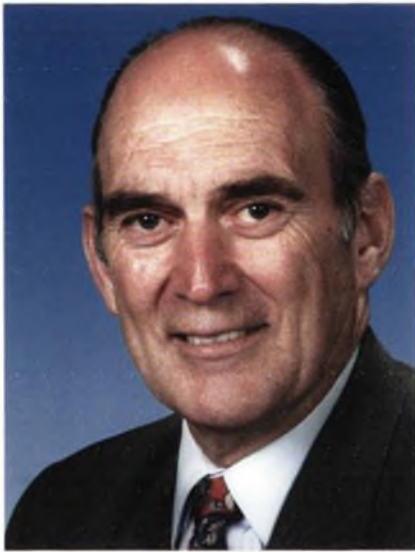
Having said that, Mr Morris is quick to point out that some of his best work as a parliamentarian and some of his most effective learning came as a result of being on committees. "I just think they should be a much better accepted part of public policy making. I also believe that they could be improved if they were to be made autonomous. Committees have had quite a funding cut. If that funding was restored and they could operate without ministerial approval, I think they'd be far more effective."

As for advice to new Members who will soon be making their way to Canberra, once again there is consensus. Always remember you are representing the people of your electorate,



don't get caught up in the pursuit of power, try and establish good working relationships, don't get too frustrated by the pace of change and seek a mentor.

"I was just thrown in at the deep end all those years ago," Mrs Sullivan says. "These days the Queensland Liberal Party does a lot to help new Members and our State Director matches them with more experienced hands who can offer help and advice particularly in those very tough first two months."



Allan Morris

Mr Morris believes that new Members will gradually benefit from new technology like email, which will help keep them in the loop. "It can be an isolating system. When I first arrived in Parliament House we were never told enough to understand how the place really operated, only enough to allow us to function." He thinks that is now changing, although he believes the size of the new Parliament House doesn't help.

Mr Lawler says there is a lot you can do on a one-to-one basis when you are putting your case to a Minister on a particular issue but much relies on personal skills. "To get things done for your electorate you need to develop good working relationships with Ministers and their staff. In fact I've found most of my successful dealings have been because of those good relationships."

As to the pursuit of power, again there is general agreement. Mrs Sullivan says she is familiar with those who see going into

parliament as a way of exercising power. "It's a very male thing. But in my view you should want to serve the people first. That should be your prime motivation."

Every day for 18 years, Mr Morris has asked himself two questions: who am I and what am I here for? It was his way of staying on track. "Politicians are always in danger of being duchessed and flattered. You must constantly remind yourself that you are there to serve your electorate."

**"You have major satisfactions and major frustrations, but that's life."**

And looking back over the years, what do they see as the successes?

There is no doubt in Allan Morris's mind. He feels he played a pivotal role in helping to turn Newcastle from an inward-looking place with a narrow-based economy into an outgoing, energetic and exciting city connected to the world. "It's now a place with a much more balanced economy and the people are getting out there in the marketplace with confidence." He also believes that some of the greatest successes of his career have been in helping solve problems for constituents. "An individual's appreciation is a very powerful thing."

Mr Lawler believes that what achievements there have been are not his but the Government's and the National Party's. "I think that telecommunications, roads and health are areas where we've made outstanding changes and improvements," he says. "But there is certainly more to be done."

Mrs Sullivan believes too that the real buzz of the job comes from helping people in her electorate. "If I'm going to miss anything," she says, "it will be my electorate. I just love that involvement. Of course you never manage to achieve everything you set out to achieve. You have major satisfactions and major frustrations, but that's life. You just move on!" And on the subject of helping, Tony Lawler felt it would be remiss of him if he didn't put in a good word for all the staff



Tony Lawler

of Parliament House who had offered him help during his term of office. "They are the most outstanding group of people I've ever met," he says. "They consistently provide a high level of cheery service and I've never come across it before either in corporate Australia or small business. They just bend over backwards to help MPs and I can't think of one group in the House that would be an exception."

**"Local people seem to think that their bloke is OK."**

So by the time the election is over, Mrs Sullivan says she will be ready to enjoy some much longed for domesticity, Mr Morris will be enjoying more time in Newcastle and Mr Lawler will be back to his old job as a pharmacist. Parliamentarians no longer. But no longer in the firing line and no longer having to put up with the bad image that the word politician seems to conjure up in the public mind. Perhaps Tony Lawler sums it up best. "It's hard to generalise but local people in whatever electorate seem to think that their bloke is OK. It's just the others who are liars, cheats and scoundrels!"

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