

Masters of the House

The House of Representatives has two new men in charge of managing business for the government and opposition. Peter Cotton reports on how Tony Abbott and Wayne Swan view their new and crucial roles.

The Liberal's Tony Abbott and Labor's Wayne Swan are seen as hard men within their parties.

They're politicians who take a vigorous and combative approach when running down an opponent.

However, both reject the idea that their being appointed to key management roles in the House of Representatives means that proceedings in the place will be more confrontational.

Asked about his reputation for aggression, Mr Swan says: "While I may be vigorous in my approach, I believe you should keep talking to people no matter what your differences. You might not agree with them, and in the end you might have to take action against them, but you're always better to keep talking while you can."

Mr Abbott says the public perception of a person is not always the reality. "And what's appropriate in one forum is not always appropriate in another," he says. "I know a lot of blokes who are very tough on the football field, but you wouldn't meet more genial people off the field."

Mr Abbott has taken over as Leader of the House (the manager of government business) from Peter Reith who retired at the last election.

Mr Swan replaces Bob McMullan as Manager of Opposition Business. Mr McMullan was appointed Shadow Treasurer after the election.

Wayne Swan lists the late Mick Young and former Opposition Leader Kim Beazley as his closest associates in politics. Both previously served as Leader of the House.

"I'm approaching the job in the way they did," says Mr Swan. "Looking to promote the long term regeneration of the parliament and its role in our democracy.

"They taught me to take people as you find them. Not as other people tell you they are. The most important thing in politics is for you to assess for yourself how a person is rather than have your opinion of them coloured by someone else's view."

As for his view of the parliament, Wayne Swan says most processes are weighted against the opposition. Given this disadvantage, he says the opposition needs to be focused on outcomes, especially in Question Time. "The most important thing

about Question Time is to be very precise in what you do," he says.

Such precision requires a strategy, and as Manager of Opposition Business in the House, Mr Swan plays a big part in strategy development.

"We put a lot of thought and effort into it," says Mr Swan, "especially for Question Time. And our daily tactics must be consistent with our long term strategy."

As well as helping develop long term strategies, the Manager of Opposition Business must respond quickly to a changing situation. "It's frequently 'seat of pants' stuff," says Mr Swan. "You've always got a plan, but you've got to be flexible. Sometimes the answer to a question takes you down a completely different path than what you'd prepared for.

"It's a fast moving game, and you've got to think on the run. You can't just walk into the chamber and say 'No matter what happens here, this is how we're going to play it'. If the conditions change, the game's got to change."

According to Tony Abbott, government strategy in the House is determined by



Tony Abbott, Leader of the House

the leadership team: Prime Minister John Howard, Treasurer Peter Costello and Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson. "I have some input (into strategy) when parliament is sitting," he says. "And I have a role in putting that strategy into effect in the parliament.

"Plainly, political strategy is critical to the long term success of the government and I'm lucky to have some master politicians, as well as some extremely effective leaders, to learn from.

"Parliament is an important venue to get your message across," says Mr Abbott. "It's difficult to achieve political dominance without also establishing a mastery over the parliament. To be effective in politics, like on a footy field, you've got to be looking to go forward.

"There are lots of ways to do that, but in the end, if you're not going forward, that's to say, if you're not able to articulate a positive message about the government's agenda and at the same time raise doubts about the opposition's agenda, then you're in trouble."

As well as his responsibilities in the House, Mr Abbott is also Minister for Employment

and Workplace Relations. Asked how busy it is holding down both roles, Mr Abbott says he sometimes feels like he's standing on tip toes with one nostril above water.

"It's always hard to juggle a range of responsibilities and do at least some of them well, but learning to juggle is part of political life," he says. "That's true at all levels of politics, whether you're a local member, a minister or a senior minister. It's always hard because you could always spend more time on each of the things you do."

When the House sits, as it does for about 20 weeks of each year, Mr Abbott and Mr Swan discuss issues to do with running the place almost daily.

For example, recently when Labor moved a censure motion in the House, the two got together behind the Speaker's Chair to work out how many Members would speak on the motion. "We came to a conclusion and off we went," says Mr Swan. "That's the daily part of it.

"I may sometimes have a vigorous exchange with Tony Abbott on some issue, but that's no reason I should have a vigorous view about his personality. It's always important to

respect the people you deal with. Otherwise things can break down when they shouldn't."

According to Tony Abbott, while he bears the title Leader of the House, the real leader of the House is Prime Minister John Howard.

"My job is to ensure that the government gets its legislative program through as expeditiously as possible," says Mr Abbott. "I also make sure that the House is a place where the government can make its voice heard, that our political messages get through."

Many voters view the House, especially during Question Time, as a place where their elected representatives play hardball without regard to good manners or general order.

Says Mr Abbott: "The House of Representatives, particularly during Question Time, is always going to be a place of robust and, at times, ragged debate, but that's to be expected given the issues at stake, and given the inevitable contest for power and office.

"The stakes are very high when the parties meet in the House. It's where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition test themselves against each other. It's all part of the necessary process whereby good policy and determined leadership emerges."

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Wayne Swan, Manager of Opposition Business



“It’s difficult to achieve political dominance without also establishing a mastery over the parliament.”

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“This government doesn’t want ‘parliament lite’,” says Tony Abbott.

In reaction to community concerns about unruly behaviour in the House, Wayne Swan and Opposition Leader Simon Crean have developed a set of proposals for reforming House procedures.

And it seems whenever you ask a politician to explain an element of their work, they reach for a sporting analogy. Wayne Swan is no different.

He compares Labor’s proposed reform of House procedures to Kerry Packer’s overhaul of cricket in the 1970s, a revolution which saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of one day cricket.

As Mr Swan puts it: “We want the parliament to be what it ought to be: a debating chamber which doesn’t turn into a rabble of yelling monkeys.”

Both sides of politics support at least some degree of reform to House procedures, and Tony Abbott and Wayne Swan will naturally guide the formation of whatever reforms their parties come up with.

Therefore, the two will probably spend quite a bit of time with each other in coming months.

Swan and Abbott recently discussed Labor’s reform proposals over a beer. “Like all Members of the House,” says Mr Abbott, “I think anything we can reasonably do to improve the mood and temper of the chamber would be good. But we can’t expect miracles.”

When asked to comment on Mr Swan’s comparison between Labor’s House reforms and the popularity of one day cricket, Tony Abbott says: “I’m not sure cricket lovers approve of the sort of streamlining that produced the one day game. Cricket purists regard many aspects of the one days as ‘cricket lite’. This government doesn’t want ‘parliament lite’.”

Released earlier this year, Labor’s nine point plan is called “Cleaning up the House”, and while Mr Abbott says he’s open to Labor’s proposals, he does not seem enthusiastic when taken through the specifics.

Labor’s wish list is headed by a proposal for a more independent Speaker and Deputy Speaker.

Labor says Coalition and Labor members should alternate as Speaker and Deputy Speaker after each election, irrespective of which party is in government.

Under the proposal, the Speaker would not belong to the same party or coalition of parties as the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Abbott says the Speaker during the Howard government has been much more independent than in the past.

“Fair-minded observers would say that the chamber has been conducted in ways that are fair to both sides,” he says. “And I think it’s important for the opposition to acknowledge that the Speakership has been of a quite different quality than what we tended to get in the final years of the former government.”

Labor says members should get a maximum of one minute to ask a question during Question Time and ministers should have four minutes to respond. Labor also wants follow-up, or supplementary questions, as is the practice in the Senate.

Mr Abbott says: “I don’t think Question Time is appropriately turned into a forum where government and opposition get equal time. You can’t expect a questioner to get almost as long to ask his question as the responder has to provide the answer.”

Labor suggests an amendment to standing orders (the rules of the House) that would require ministers to fully answer the questions asked of them in Question Time.

Mr Abbott’s response: “You can ask what questions you like, but you can’t expect the answer you like. If you ask a minister a question, he’s entitled to answer it in any way he sees fit. If his answer is an attack on the opposition, that’s always been accepted as part of the Australian version of the Westminster system.”

Labor would give House committees the power to refer matters to themselves, rather than relying on a reference from a minister or the House before launching an investigation.

Mr Abbott believes the House committee system is working well. “They (the committees) have more than enough to do,” he says. “I’m sceptical as to whether committees would be able to respond to references from ministers if they were able to chase issues on their own motion.”

Labor’s suggestion that a House committee is instructed to report every six-months on action that’s been taken over public petitions draws a positive response from Mr Abbott.

“It’s an interesting suggestion,” he says. “Responding better to the public is a good thing. The parliament needs to be a place that doesn’t just send messages to the citizenry. It’s got to be a conversation between parliamentarians and their constituents, and things that enable that conversation to take place more fluently and fluidly are generally to be considered favourably.”



“We want the parliament to be what it ought to be,” says Wayne Swan.

Despite his constant use of sporting analogies when talking about what he does, Mr Swan says it’s a problem for politics that it’s seen as a game by many people.

“We’ve got to change the rules (that govern the House) so that it looks like what it ought to be: a serious process of accountability,” he says. “Many of the current rules allow the sort of political gamesmanship that devalues the parliament.”

Mr Swan says it’s in the interests of both sides of politics to overhaul the way things are done in the House. “We’ve got to break the cycle,” he says. “I’m hopeful the government is convinced of the need to do that because one day the boot will be on the other foot.” ■

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