

## REFORMS TO PROTECT PARLIAMENT'S REPUTATION

Ken Coghill<sup>1</sup> & Colleen Lewis

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Coghill was a Member of the Legislative Assembly, Victoria 1979-96 and Speaker 1988-92.

## **REFORMS TO PROTECT PARLIAMENT'S REPUTATION**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Parliament of Victoria and Monash University (Victoria, Australia) have recently completed a three-year research project which gives new insights into why opinion poll data shows declining trends in the reputations of Members of Parliament (MPs). It suggests ways to try to reverse the trend and the threat it poses to the legitimacy of Parliament.

Despite low respect for parliamentarians, the research shows a strong public commitment to the Parliament itself. Similar strong support for the institution was expressed by MPs, senior parliamentary staff and electorate (i.e. constituency) office staff. Significantly, journalists and radio talk-show hosts were among the very few who did not value highly the role and functions of Parliament.

Underlying the findings is evidence of a growing disconnectedness between the Parliament and the community on several levels. Citizens are seeking a stronger relationship with those that represent them and a greater involvement in decisions which affect their lives.

The research also reveal strong support from MPs for improved professional development programs, more professional conduct to be shown by MPs to their parliamentary colleagues, concern at a level of ignorance on the part of the media about the parliamentary process, and the need for the Parliament (as distinct from parliamentarians) to be more proactive in explaining and promoting the institution of Parliament.

### **PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PARLIAMENT**

People understand that Parliament is essential to their freedoms but they have little understanding about what it achieves beyond passing laws. Despite not knowing the details about structures and processes, people have an almost intuitive sense of the institution of Parliament as a good. They see it as fundamental to stable democracy and understand that the political system in Victoria guarantees freedom of speech and freedom from reprisal for expressing political views.

People value Parliament as an institution but they do not value the behaviour of MPs. While the 'battlefield' created by parliamentary proceedings is seen by some as an inevitable part of Parliament's important role as a forum for policy debate and the place where laws are passed, the majority see the battlefield atmosphere as 'just a distraction from the real issues' and parliamentarians behaviour in the Parliament as 'tiresome'.

### **SOURCES OF POLITICAL INFORMATION**

The public's preferred sources of information significantly shape their perceptions. They do not trust the media, but they receive most of their information about politics, politicians and the Parliament from media sources. People understand that the media selects and filters information, giving a vague, biased picture. Some try to overcome this bias by consulting more than one source to counter what they perceive as the media's distorted message.

Radio emerged as a major shaper of people's perceptions. Because it is thought to provide the least opportunity for political 'spin', talk-back radio is seen as an unbiased and unadulterated vehicle for ordinary people to express their views and be heard. However, there was little if any appreciation of the fact that talk-back radio hosts set the agenda for what will be discussed and usually create the context in which the discussion takes place.

## **MPs views**

MPs from both Houses of Parliament had important things to say about the operation of the Victorian Parliament. The vast majority expressed dissatisfaction with sitting times and the volume of work that is sometimes pushed through the Parliament. These combine to make some feel they are working in a 'pressure cooker'.

The volume of legislation that is passed in some sitting periods (50-60 days per year, split into Autumn and Spring sitting periods) is also worrying for MPs. As one commented '60 bills in a single sitting period is not a badge of honour'.

The parliamentary program is largely seen as family **un**friendly, placing pressure on family relationships: 'The hours are off-putting to women and families [even] if you finish at a reasonable time you go home but don't see your children from Monday to Friday morning'.

MPs are looking for reforms which allow for a better balance between parliamentary and electorate roles, improved scrutiny of legislation, and a better work-life balance.

## **Question Time**

Victoria's Question Times are in the Australian model of questions without notice. They are often rowdy. There was a near unanimous dissatisfaction with the conduct of Question Time, regardless of political affiliation. It is seen as a theatre in which MPs play to a public audience through the media. While the capacities of individual ministers and the government are tested, its accountability role is limited although not entirely absent. Nonetheless, it is the conduct of MPs during Question Time which draws most fire. No-one defends it. One MP made the observations that, 'I've seen Question Time in other Parliaments and it's not as disorderly'.

The objectionable features of Question Time were attributed to a distinctive culture kept alive by the Members themselves. As one MP put it, 'this behaviour needs changing, not the system'. The prevailing culture must be changed and a starting point could be changing Standing Orders so that ministers are required to provide the information requested.

## **Respect**

The lack of respect MPs show toward each other is seen to contribute to people's poor perceptions of politicians. While the adversarial party system lends itself to vigorous debate, the personal denigration and constant point scoring by MPs in and outside of the Parliament is not understood or accepted. There is probably no other profession whose members denigrate each other in the way that MPs commonly do. The effect is to undermine the credibility and respect accorded to all MPs.

An important issue for the Victorian Parliament and for individual parliamentarians is highlighted in the following comment, '...[the] problem is that politicians denigrate each other, their behaviour is poor, we want to expose weaknesses in each other, we question each other's honesty, integrity.' The public, it seems, does not appreciate or want this type of behaviour from its elected representatives.

## **Parliamentary Committees**

Despite dismissive community perceptions of parliamentary committees, MPs find that committee work is often very satisfying and provides the opportunity to work cooperatively with members of different political parties. MPs feel they can really get to understand important issues. As one said, '... even the hottest political issues can be sent to parliamentary committees and find points of agreement between the major parties', another felt that '...party affiliations are put to the side so

there is less baggage and things work well with bipartisan support...it's the other way around in Parliament as its very difficult to have consensus on many issues'.

The opportunity to make a direct input and the potential to actually make a difference is important to MPs. Parliament must build on this strength.

### **Professional Development**

Most MPs mentioned the conflicts that arise between their three roles: parliamentarian, party member and local MP. Their concerns about the tension that sometimes exists parallel concerns voiced in focus groups. There was a wide range of comments from MPs about how they experienced particular tensions and tried to deal with them.

The need for professional development related to MPs' parliamentary and electorate roles, as distinct from their partisan political activities. There was very strong support for greatly improved induction and in-service education and training programs for MPs. Additional and on-going education would assist MPs in the performance of their parliamentary, committee and electorate roles, which in turn would enhance their overall level of professionalism. These are appropriate areas for the Parliament to support, as education would enhance MPs' effectiveness in the Parliament and in dealings with their constituents.

### **Parliamentary Officers**

Parliamentary Officers had special insights. They lamented that the general level of understanding about Parliament remains low. While it is felt that this low level of understanding could be partly addressed through improved school curricula, especially at the secondary level, and wider promotion and use of youth parliaments, ('The more we educate the young, the more informed they will be'), it was felt that the Parliament itself could take a more proactive role in promoting the institution.

Media reporting of Parliament is of great concern to Parliamentary Officers. They believe that coverage does not reflect the depth or breadth of what goes on in the Parliament as the media only focuses on Question Time.

While Parliamentary Officers would like to see more coverage of the Victorian Parliament, including reporting of the debates that take place in both Houses, they recognise that such matters may not be considered 'newsworthy enough'.

### **Electorate Staff**

There is a curious dichotomy between the roles of MPs in Parliament and their Electorate Offices (constituency offices), which are provided for by the Parliament. In Parliament, MPs are involved in legislation and policy; their Electorate Offices are largely concerned with addressing matters of government administration.

Electorate staff and Electorate Offices are not well equipped to form part of the interface between the Parliament and the community; they fail to be Parliament's outreach to the community.

In particular, Electorate Offices could play a significant role in the legislative process as local sources of information and avenues for input and with appropriate training Electorate Office staff could work more closely with the Parliament.

### **Media**

The first and most obvious finding from the very limited interviews with media personnel is that they do not report Parliament; they report politics. Their main interest is in political events – party

political actions taken by Government or Opposition and newsworthy events arising from actions of individual MPs.

While media personnel find political events highly stimulating, the majority have no relationship with or appreciation of the Victorian Parliament as an institution. As one person from the media said, 'I deal with Government and Opposition as entities rather than Parliament'. Another admitted that the last parliamentary debate they observed was 10 years ago. Despite this they still hold the view that 'parliamentary debates are largely irrelevant to what is going on'. They see parliamentary debate as too limited and orchestrated, with real debate rare because comments are usually 'controlled and wary'. Some regard Australian State Parliaments (and, by implication, State Government) as redundant.

Media personnel had surprising and poorly articulated understandings of the Parliament's role. One person said it is to 'govern the state'. Other opinions ranged from deciding on grants to fixing administrative matters.

Most media personnel interviewed were reluctant to acknowledge that their role was more than that of mere chronicler of events. However, one of the more experienced and reflective people interviewed did concede that the media are active players in the political process. This was revealed in the statement that,

(w)hen I was an editor going back 25 years I used to argue that the media was not influential regarding public opinion. We didn't create it, we just reflected it. But I think I was wrong. We do, just by the choice of what is on page one, creates public opinion.

Overall, it is clear that the relationship between the media and the Parliament is severely fractured and that there is an urgent need for a pro-active role by the Parliament to address the problem. The absence of a parliamentary-community relations function, incorporating media relations, leaves the Parliament without the professional capacity to address the media's lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the Parliament as an institution.

### **Press Gallery Accreditation**

The Press Gallery is a special media institution which operates to give accredited journalists privileged access to Parliament House and to MPs. The offering of a substantial, mandatory induction program would assist the media to do their work more professionally and also assist the Parliament in establishing the type of relationship that is less vulnerable to misunderstanding caused by lack of knowledge. An induction program would be especially important if other proposal for legislative committees were put into effect.

Similarly, active engagement with talk-back and other commentators on matters affecting Parliament and its Members, as opposed to politics, would improve the knowledge and understanding of the Parliament.

## **PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Parliament to the People**

Our major proposal to increase the connections between Parliament and the community is to bring the legislative process to the people. Legislation should be moved out of second reading debates in near-empty Chambers into the community through legislation committees which call for public comment and hold public hearings at metropolitan and regional locations. These committees would thus become the interface between the community and MPs. A good example is the recent review of the *Audit Reform & Corporate Disclosure Bill* by an Australian Federal Parliamentary Committee.

The Parliament could help to close the gap between the institution of parliament and the people through better information channels. For example, the Australian Senate advertises what is happening in that chamber and invites people to contribute to committee work. Their notices are distinctive and prominently displayed in Australia's national daily newspaper. A similar approach could be adopted by the Parliament of Victoria. This would assist in the dissemination of more information about Parliament and parliamentary processes.

Electorate Office staff should be involved more closely with the Parliament, to play a significant role as the local face of the Parliament in the legislative process, as local sources of information and avenues for input.

### **Professional Development**

It is in the interests of the Parliament that generic professional development is seen as its responsibility. It is about equipping the institution to relate to the public to whom it is accountable, but even more than that to enhance and sustain the communicative relationship that a more sophisticated electorate now expects.

If MPs wish to be seen as professional, they will have to undertake levels of education and training commensurate with other professions. An education and training program should include such topics as media relations, the legislative process, parliamentary committees, and the Parliament's role and relationship with independent offices of the Parliament including the Auditor General, the Ombudsman and Privacy Commissioner. It should also include modules to prepare MPs for roles as parliamentary secretaries and ministers.

### **Media-Parliament Relations**

To facilitate improved relations between the media and the Parliament, a mandatory induction program for members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery is needed. There should also be more active engagement by the Parliament with talk-back radio personalities and other commentators on matters affecting the institution of Parliament.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research project has uncovered a major shift in the relationship that both MPs and the public expect between a Parliament and its constituency. The Parliament no longer enjoys the unchallenged sovereignty on which its current structure and procedures are founded. Indeed the citizens of Victoria now have universal adult franchise, universal education and a widespread belief that they have a right to be involved. It is the Parliament's responsibility to facilitate that involvement.

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