

One Step at a Time: Australian Parliamentarians, Professionalism and the Need for Staff

BY KATE JONES¹

IT is almost never a compliment to call someone a ‘professional politician’. The implication is that the politician so defined is slick, opportunistic, only interested in money and power. Opposed to the idea of professionalism is a suggestion that there was once a golden age of amateurism in which politicians served the country and community from a sense of duty and dedication. However, the concept of professionalism for parliament and parliamentarians has other, very different, connotations from the popular one. Joan Rydon, in her study of Australia’s Commonwealth parliamentarians, identified two complementary aspects of professionalism. First was the idea of the parliamentarian as a professional, one of ‘those who see politics as the central activity of their lives and attempt to keep it as such’.² The second was the professionalisation of the occupation, marked by ‘better pay, generous superannuation, improved working conditions, more secretarial assistance, better library and research facilities, larger travelling allowances’.³ In 1994 Michael Rush discerned similar evidence of an increasing professionalisation of British politicians: improved salaries, better accommodation, staff and research services, their length of service and tendency to retire at about the normal retirement age and their predominant recruitment from a narrow age range.⁴

This article discusses one aspect of that professionalisation of working conditions and entitlements for parliamentarians in the Commonwealth Parliament, the provision of personal staff for members in both their electorate offices and their offices in Parliament House. It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that parliamentarians became entitled to several staff with secretarial, research, media and other administrative responsibilities. This happened not because governments or parliamentary administrations became convinced that parliamentarians needed more assistance, but because parliamentarians themselves began to work differently and realised that they could not fulfil their responsibilities in a modern society without assistance.

The timing of the provision of personal staff was also related to concepts of amateurism and professionalism applied to parliamentarians. This can be seen most clearly in official views about how parliamentarians

should be paid. Although members of the Commonwealth Parliament have been paid since the Parliament was first established, in 1901, and many had been members of the six colonial legislatures and had spent large parts of their lives as parliamentarians, there was ambivalence about their role. They were still seen largely as amateurs serving the nation from a sense of duty and explicitly eschewing the idea of politics as a job or profession. This ambivalence was reflected in the arrangements for their payment made in the Constitution. They were given not a 'salary' but an 'allowance' that would enable them to live while carrying out their parliamentary duties. A similar situation applied to British members of parliament (MPs). They were not paid until 1911, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, explicitly denied that the payment was a salary:

[I]t is not recognition of the magnitude of the service, it is not a remuneration, it is not a recompense, it is not even a salary. It is just an allowance, and I think the minimum allowance, to enable men to come here, men who would render incalculable service to the State, and whom it is an incalculable loss to the State not to have here, but who cannot be here because their means do not allow it.⁵

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901 when the six Australian colonies joined together in a federation.⁶ Its structure and proceedings were modelled largely on Britain's Westminster system, with the one large exception that it did not have a hereditary upper house. The designers of the new parliament also had extensive experience of the workings of the colonial parliaments and used those lessons to good effect. Like many British institutions transmitted to Australia, both colonial and Commonwealth parliaments underwent some changes on the journey that were not immediately apparent to the participants. The nation of Australia came into existence on 1 January 1901, the first election was on 29 and 30 March 1901 and Parliament first met on 9 May 1901 in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. The next day it moved to the Victoria's Parliament House, a few blocks away from the Exhibition Building, where it was to remain for 27 years, evicting the state parliament from its own building. The capital city of Australia was yet to be built, since a wrangle between the two largest colonies, New South Wales and Victoria, had resulted in an agreement that neither would be the capital. As a result, the planned city of Canberra was built in a then-remote inland area of New South Wales, which some contemporary observers felt had been a nice site for a sheep station. In 1927 the Parliament House in Canberra was ready for occupation, as indeed was Canberra itself. The Commonwealth Parliament moved to its new building and then moved again in 1988 to a newer, larger and grander Parliament House constructed on a hill behind what has now become known as Old Parliament House. Some observers, perhaps descendants of those who had regarded the site of Canberra itself with scepticism, looked at the New Parliament House and reflected that it had been a nice hill.

The Commonwealth Parliament consists of an upper and a lower house, the Senate and the House of Representatives, both directly elected. The House of Representatives is the house of government, and in 1901 it had 75 members representing electorates of roughly equal numbers. The Senate consisted of 36 senators, six from each state, thus allowing the smallest state equal representation with the largest. The structure has not changed, but in 2005, there were 76 senators and 150 members of the House of Representatives. The Constitution laid down the structure of the Parliament but had no instructions on its infrastructure.

The MP in 1901 was predominantly a legislator and saw his role as specifically parliamentary. He made speeches, attended political meetings and introduced, amended and debated legislation. In this role he had no need for staff other than those looking after the physical and administrative fabric of parliament. He was also male. Although the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* gave women the right to vote in federal elections and stand for parliament in 1902, the first two women were not elected until 1943. As Australian society developed more complex, specialised and professional bureaucratic and political institutions, especially during and after World War II, a new period of professional and administrative support emerged. This would lead to more elaborate support arrangements and more educated and skilled staff emerging in the 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, by the turn of the century, a new period of globalisation, mass media and fast communications and high expectations of immediate response and action had emerged. In this context parliamentarians, like some other professionals, had support teams which they managed and on which they relied to provide resources and specialist as well as general assistance. Today the work of a parliamentarian encompasses a number of roles: the legislator, the policy-maker, the social worker and the party activist. This is not only an Australian phenomenon. A study of British legislators in 1992 found that they devoted most of their time to constituency matters.⁷ With such diverse responsibilities, parliamentarians rely heavily on staff with professional expertise to support them.

From vocation to profession: 1901–73

It took nearly half a century for backbenchers to acquire access to personal staff and another 30 years for recognition that they now needed more and different staff. When the new Commonwealth Parliament first met in Melbourne in May 1901, its staff consisted of 53 parliamentary officers, a number of whom had transferred from the colonial parliaments. They were very specifically the staff of the parliament, not the staff of the parliamentarians, although some parliamentarians apparently employed staff privately.⁸ Until 1944 backbenchers had no personal staff supplied by government or parliament, although they did have access to the services of typists at Parliament House and at the central parliamentary offices in the state capitals. When Robert

Menzies, later to be the prime minister, was the leader of the Opposition in 1944, he had a staff of two.⁹ In the same year each MP became entitled to employ an electorate secretary, variously described as an 'electorate typist' or a 'secretary-typist'. There was no apparent restriction on where they could be located, but they had no travel privileges. This meant that no travel, including going to Canberra when parliament was sitting, would be funded. It is likely that most were located in the member's electorate office outside Canberra; most such offices were hundreds or thousands of kilometres from the national capital. Parliamentarians were entitled to office accommodation in their electorates or in the state capital, and a staff member in the electorate could look after the needs of the constituents while parliament was sitting. At a time when plane travel was unusual, parliamentarians commonly stayed in Canberra for the length of each session. Someone in the electorate could keep them in touch with what was happening at home. Parliamentarians also had some access to the services of typists in the Parliament House, reducing the need to have their own staff there. It appears that the provision of staff was an executive, rather than a parliamentary, decision as the electorate secretaries were under the control of the Department of the Interior. Parliament could not, in any event, have made such provision unilaterally, as its appropriations were included as part of the Commonwealth budget and it was thus (as it remains today) largely under the control of the executive.

Most parliamentarians apparently regarded the provision of one staff member as adequate. In 1955 the prime minister, Robert Menzies, appointed a committee chaired by H.F. Richardson, a Melbourne businessman and prominent member of his own Liberal Party, to conduct a public inquiry into salaries and allowances of MPs. The Richardson Committee asked MPs to complete a comprehensive questionnaire about the time they spent on their parliamentary duties, their sources of income and their views on the adequacy of their remuneration, allowances and facilities. One question asked whether the secretary-typist was adequate for their needs. Of the 121 who answered the question, 98 (81%) regarded the staffing provision as adequate. The remaining 23 saw a need for relief when the secretary-typist was absent. The Committee concluded that the current arrangements were satisfactory and did not recommend any changes. Yet the parliament itself had changed in actuality if not in theory. Its practices and rules of procedure assumed a parliament of individual members debating, voting and forming alliances based on individual issues, but by the mid-twentieth century, it was clearly a two-party system with few independents in either house. This was not, however, a change that led parliamentarians to want more staff. Politics was still a vocation not a profession, and parliamentarians in the 1950s were predominantly middle-aged men who had been socialised into a particular parliamentary role.¹⁰ However a change of view was imminent.

The Richardson Committee was one of three public inquiries into parliamentarians' salaries and allowance during the 1950s. In 1952 a committee chaired by the retired New South Wales Judge H.S. Nicholas had recognised the expenses involved in being an MP by introducing the electorate allowance. The Nicholas Committee reiterated the view that the parliamentary salary (the 'parliamentary allowance' as it was still known) was intended as a compensation for the inability to earn an income elsewhere, not as a salary. It was not intended to encourage 'the so-called professional politician who may be defined as a man who regards a seat in Parliament as a source of livelihood and not as a means of furthering a cause and thereby serving his country'.¹¹ Richardson also chaired a later inquiry in 1959, which explicitly acknowledged that being an MP was a full-time occupation. The passage of seven years had seen a complete reversal in opinion. The position of parliamentarian had become an occupation instead of a vocation.

Over the next ten years, as a result of both generational and social change, parliamentarians also began to feel the need not only for more staff but also for different staff. This was apparent in submissions made to the Kerr inquiry into salaries and allowances, in 1971.¹² Many parliamentarians wanted a research assistant, who could travel to Canberra rather than being confined to the electorate office. It may have been acceptable in 1944 for the electorate secretary to be confined to the electorate, but parliamentarians were increasingly seeing the need for someone in Canberra as well.

Despite his recognition of the significance accorded to the matter by some parliamentarians, Kerr did not recommend increased or different staff. However, the frequency and persistence of the arguments put to him were an indication of the extent to which parliamentarians themselves were beginning to want different staff to provide a variety of services. Increasingly, they saw the need to delegate part of their responsibilities to others.

The changed views of parliamentarians between 1959 and 1971 reflect the transformation of Australian society in the 16 years between the Richardson report and the Kerr report. The Constitution assigned a few, specific powers to the Commonwealth, leaving the rest to the states, but over time the balance began to change. In the early 1960s, Robert Menzies' Liberal Country Party government began funding secondary education (including private schools), notably by the provision of funding for science laboratories and school libraries. At the same time, the tertiary education sector began to expand substantially, with more students, more universities and the introduction of Commonwealth scholarships, which paid university fees and provided a means-tested living allowance. The Commonwealth public service developed as a career service as merit replaced seniority as the basis for promotion and the ban on married women holding permanent public-service positions was abolished in 1966. In the early 1970s, Gough Whitlam's

Australian Labor Party (ALP) government introduced a series of policy changes that reflected the changes in social attitudes during the 1960s; they included social welfare benefits for sole parents, the abolition of university fees and Aboriginal land rights. ALP MPs such as Jim Cairns, Tom Uren, Arthur Gietzelt and George Georges were at the heart of the anti-conscription and anti-war movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The demographic profile of the Commonwealth parliamentarians reflected these transitions. Amongst those elected in the period 1949–54, 34.2% had university degrees. In the period 1955–68, this had risen to only 35.6%, but in the period 1969–80 the figure was 58.8%. The 1960s generation of politicians also included some who had experienced World War II and post-war reconstruction. Amongst them also were both the originators of the policies that changed Australia from the top-down and participants in social movements that changed it from the bottom-up. They also had different expectations for themselves as well as for Australian society. The pressure for research staff that the Kerr report had discerned was in part a result of the transition to a time when parliamentarians, like others, expected a higher level of support in their professional work. The structure of the labour force had changed. In 1947 it was 25.3% professional and white collar, but by 1972 the figure had increased to 31.7%. The election, in December 1972 of an ALP government, the first for 23 years, headed by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, was also a factor in the extent to which MPs now argued for research staff. It came to office with a reforming agenda, and a substantial number of its backbenchers, as well as the ministers, had a commitment to policy development and change. Those who had already been MPs before the 1972 election had been able, since 1966, to use the Parliamentary Library's Legislative Research Service. They were in a position to appreciate the possible value of research capacity within their offices. The Opposition had other, equally valid, reasons for seeing the need for research staff. For the first time in 23 years the Liberal Country Party was not in government and therefore not able to call on the public service for advice and information. The introduction of research staff for members would supplement the staff which shadow ministers were entitled to and add extra capacity to the Opposition team.

The establishment of the Remuneration Tribunal in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor government created an avenue for parliamentarians to raise the issue of research staff. The Kerr Report had recommended the establishment of an independent body to set parliamentary salaries. It was a recommendation that fitted well with both the new government's agenda of reforming many of the institutions of Australian government and various governments' ongoing concern with keeping politicians' salaries off the front page.¹³ The Tribunal's central function was to make recommendations to parliament on salaries and allowances for

parliamentarians and some senior public servants and statutory office holders, but it could also consider and recommend on related matters. In its first report to Parliament, it recommended that the government consider establishing a number of research assistant positions to be allocated not to individual parliamentarians but to political parties.

None of the recommendations of the initial Remuneration Tribunal report was implemented because the Senate disallowed the report the day after it was tabled in July 1974. The disallowance had nothing to do with the Tribunal's recommendations on staff and probably little to do with its more significant recommendation of a substantial increase in parliamentarians' salaries. This was a time of political turbulence. The government did not have a majority in the Senate and was under severe attack from both the media and the opposition about the level of wage increases and inflation. In rejecting the Tribunal's report, the opposition parties in the Senate identified themselves as responsible politicians refusing a pay rise in the interests of the economy while simultaneously attacking the government's record. However, the Tribunal's recommendations on staff became irrelevant when, early in 1975, the minister for Services and Property, Fred Daly, determined that all MPs could employ assistance in their electoral offices up to a limit of \$7,353 per annum. The new arrangements were to come into effect from 1 March 1975. It was unclear what the government envisaged. If the decision was to employ more secretarial staff, then to some extent the decision contradicted the consensus which had been developing amongst parliamentarians and other interested parties about the type of staff needed and their location.¹⁴ The Remuneration Tribunal in its 1975 review attacked the decision and strongly argued that it was research staff, not secretarial staff, that was needed. However, Daly's intervention is understandable in the context of the political situation both inside and outside the ALP. The caucus had already seen a substantial increase in ministerial staff, many of whom had been brought in from outside the public service, and backbenchers could see the possible advantage to themselves in having extra staff as well. More generally, the government still had no majority in the Senate and it continued to be embroiled in a number of political controversies. It lost office in an unexpected election in November 1975, but even in March, Labor backbenchers may have seen the wisdom of assuring the best possible resources for those in Opposition and in the process ensuring that there would be some form of political employment for potential candidates in future elections.

Although the staffing initiative had come from the Labor government, when it lost office in December 1975 the new Liberal National Party government maintained the commitment. In February 1976 the new minister for Administrative Services (the department had been renamed), Senator Reg Withers, gave approval for electorate assistants to be based in Canberra. The result was that parliamentarians were given

the option of employing a second staff member as either an electorate secretary or a research/electorate assistant. The terminology was apparently being worked out as the negotiations proceeded. MPs became entitled to employ both an electorate secretary in the electorate office and an additional staff member located either in the electorate office or in Canberra. A few members who represented very large electorates were entitled to two electorate offices and could therefore employ an additional electorate secretary. The government also agreed that parliamentarians who used the additional staff member as a research assistant could pool or share them with another member or members and could employ part-time staff within the financial limit set by the amount of salaries payable.¹⁵

Research assistants (or perhaps electorate assistants) had no travel rights, a limitation which was to become a contentious point for a number of parliamentarians. Even when the decision as to what type of staff was appropriate, secretarial or research, was resolved, the issue of where the staff member was to be based often became a problem. A research assistant in the electorate could become familiar with local and state issues. Or possibly the research assistant was a local and already familiar with the issues, in which case he or she might not want to move to Canberra permanently. Those who chose to base the research assistant in Canberra suffered the disadvantage of not having an extra staff member in the electorate for busy periods in addition to the disadvantage of not having someone with an ear to the ground in the electorate. Although the government's introduction of an extra staff member appeared to be the solution to problems which parliamentarians had been raising for some time, it was unclear what the staff member was intended to do and indeed what problem (administrative, secretarial and research) the position was meant to solve.

An additional problem was that there was no office accommodation for research assistants in Parliament House. Parliamentarians were already sharing offices with each other, so the location of a research assistant in Canberra often entailed the research assistant sharing the member's office. The salary offered was also low; in keeping with the origins of the position, it was a secretarial salary. But despite the limitations of the new positions, they allowed all backbenchers the possibility of developing a structure and a specialisation within their offices.

Developing structures: 1973–84

Parliamentarians continued to make submissions about staff to the Remuneration Tribunal throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were concerned not only with the need for more people but also with issues such as travel rights for both research and secretarial staff and salary. Many of the arguments for more staff focussed on the increased workload of MPs and the type of work done in electorate offices. Parliamentarians argued that they saw an increased need to

combine advocacy on behalf of their constituents with participation in policy development within both the party and the parliament, often as part of the developing parliamentary committee system. The demands of the electorate offices in particular were so heavy that often someone hired as a research or electorate assistant (the terms were often used interchangeably) would be obliged by sheer pressure of numbers to assist with constituency matters. The division between the staff member to deal with electorate office matters and the staff member to deal with research, which looked so simple in the Remuneration Tribunal's reports, and indeed in the early submissions made by parliamentarians, was turning out to be rather more complex in practice. Nor did the government necessarily share the parliamentarians' view that more staff were required or the Tribunal's view that its role included recommendations on staffing. The staff themselves were often active participants in this process. They knew the problems, they earned the low salaries and they increasingly had political ambitions themselves. Extra staff and an extended career structure were in both their present and possible future interests.

By 1977 the Remuneration Tribunal had recognised the need for an extra staff member but stopped short of a final recommendation, apparently because of the shortage of accommodation in Parliament House. Malcolm Fraser's Liberal National Country Party coalition government was following a policy of wage restraint, and in its submissions to Remuneration Tribunal inquiries opposed any increases in staff numbers. The ALP, led by Bob Hawke, won the March 1983 election, and in 1984 agreed to the provision of extra staff. Like its predecessor, the Hawke government was committed to a policy of wage restraint, but Hawke was also committed to parliamentary restructuring.¹⁶ He also had an active caucus that understood the possibilities of an expanded and expert staff. From July onwards each MP became entitled to employ a minimum of three people. At least two were to remain in the electorate office, and the third could be based either in the electorate or in Canberra. Although three was the standard number, parliamentarians with two electorate offices (a privilege granted based on the physical size of the electorate) became entitled to four staff. The position of the staff themselves also became more settled. They had previously been employed as temporary staff under the provisions of the *Public Service Act*, but now the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* clarified confusion about who employed staff and on what conditions. It provided for MPs, ministers and office holders to employ their own staff. In practice, most of those staff now had conditions of employment similar to public-service conditions but would lose their job if their employer dies or loses office and can have their employment terminated at any time by their employer.

Parliamentarians lost no time in taking up their new entitlements. By 1986 the 148 members of the House of Representatives and the 76

senators employed 985 people, 573 of them in electorate offices. Of the remaining 412 staff, 328 were employed by Government members and ministers, 68 by Opposition members and shadow ministers, 14 by Australian Democrat members and two by independents.¹⁷

This total represents far more than three staff per parliamentarian, even allowing for the extra person for those with two electorate offices. The extra staff are the ministerial and shadow ministerial staff and the staff of office holders such as party whips or committee chairs. Ministers and shadow ministers have been provided with staff for far longer and under different legislative and administrative arrangements.¹⁸ The provision of additional staff to parliamentary office holders is a more recent development, and the number is small.

When this staff allocation was decided, there were suggestions that the 1988 move to the New Parliament House would result in more staff in the future. This has not so far happened, and the situation in 2005 remains as it was in 1984. There are still, or again, complaints about the level at which staff can be appointed and the amount they can be paid, although such complaints are now sometimes directed towards lack of flexibility.

It was not only in Australia that parliamentarians were discerning a need for staff and pressing for more. In 1969 British parliamentarians were granted an allowance for secretarial costs, and in 1972 the allowance was doubled to allow the employment of a research assistant as well as a secretary.¹⁹ In 1971 30% of members of the House of Commons employed secretarial assistance and 9% employed research assistance. In 1982 the figures had increased to 99% and 58% respectively. As in Australia, there has been a lack of clarity about the role of research staff and there have been moves to make the employment of personal staff more systematic. Under a new system introduced in 2001 staff were placed on standard contracts and pay, and the annual staffing allowance was calculated to pay for between two and three full-time staff.²⁰

Change inside Parliament and out

Although Commonwealth parliamentarians have had extra staff members for more than 30 years, there is almost no information available about who they are and have been, and neither legislation nor government statements specify what their duties are or should be. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when research assistants were first employed in the 1970s, they were seen as young university graduates who would assist the MP in assembling the information he (and they were still predominantly men—in 1975, there were seven women in the Commonwealth Parliament, six in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives) needed in performing his parliamentary duties. Submissions made to the Remuneration Tribunal by parliamentarians support the view that the 1970s ‘research assistant’ was explicitly an assistant, someone to help the parliamentarian but not to be an independent actor

in government or parliament. In 1976 the Labor Senator Arthur Gietzelt outlined the responsibilities of a research officer, as he described the position (terminology was still flexible) as including collecting information both in general and for the use in parliamentary debates and constituents' inquiries, drafting letters and speeches and making representations on behalf of constituents. Ken Aldred, a liberal member of the House of Representatives, similarly nominated research and dealing with constituents as the roles of the research assistant. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many parliamentarians employed seasoned party activists who could be relied on for their political skills as well as, or instead of, for their research capacity.

In 1996, in a rare firsthand account of parliamentary staff, Michael L'Estrange, a former public servant and ministerial adviser to several Liberal opposition leaders (and currently Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), wrote about the role of opposition staff. In particular, he identified four sources of 'policy staff': the public service, university and youth groups affiliated to parties, private-sector employees seconded for a period and a group he described as 'political professionals' which seemed to consist of people who had a long involvement in political work of some type.²¹

L'Estrange defines the 'private sector' to include people coming from careers in 'journalism, corporate affairs, industry, banking, education, academia, interest group activity or other professions'. The only group not regarded as a possible source of staff is blue-collar workers, although perhaps the party-affiliated youth groups could include them. The list covers all the skills that parliamentarians have identified themselves as needing in their staff but offers no set of qualifications or criteria. Like parliamentarians themselves, their staff should possess indefinable qualities to do an indescribable job.

L'Estrange also identifies people recruited from these sources as 'policy staff', a term that differs from the language used in the 1970s and 1980s [and from the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act* 1984 use of the general classification 'Electorate Officer']. His summary of their possible duties is in sharp contrast to the 1970s conceptions of what a research assistant might do:

What is required of Opposition staff covers a wide range of political activity. It includes giving advice, preparing or co-ordinating Shadow Cabinet submissions, probing uncertainties about Government policy and administration, drafting speeches, assuming responsibility for scheduling meetings and itineraries, researching issues, liaising with the media and lobbyists, responding to constituents, picking up hearsay, negotiating with the Government on legislative timetabling and procedures, servicing policy committees, keeping in touch with the views of the Party organisation, and a variety of other tasks.²²

In the 20 years between the two descriptions the research assistant has evolved from an assistant into an associate, acting on the parliamentarian's

behalf with a range of other individuals and organisations. The parliamentarian has become more of a manager, less autonomous, possibly more dependent on having a staff, and an organisation, supporting him or her. There has also been an enormous increase in the extent to which the parliamentarian, assisted by technology, communicates with the voters. The proliferation of newsletters, direct mail, emails, databases and mailing lists requires the support of such an organisation.

The story of parliamentarians' staff reflects changing expectations in Australian society and in the parliamentary environment in the last quarter of the twentieth century. From 1973 onwards the remuneration and support services supplied to parliamentarians were publicly justified and explained with reference to their needs and work efforts, notably in the decisions of the Remuneration Tribunal. In this respect they became more like other public-sector workers. The trajectory of political careers also changed. In the 2000s an MP has often entered some form of 'political' employment at an early stage, perhaps working for an MP, a trade union or an employer organisation. He or she has also developed a range of policy development and social work skills in his or her previous occupations. Making speeches has become relatively unimportant—political campaigning has changed, speeches in parliament are unlikely to have any effect on the legislation being debated and Question Time is seen even (or especially) by the participants as simply theatre. In contrast to the early 1950s, in the 2000s the position of a member of the Commonwealth Parliament is expected to be a full-time occupation. In 1901 MPs were paid an allowance specified in the Constitution. Now their salary packages are linked to senior public-service salaries, and they are entitled to fringe benefits and allowances, as well as generous superannuation. The government, through its parliamentary budget allocation, provides accommodation, staff and other facilities to support them in their role.

The opening in 1988 of the New Parliament House also allowed parliamentarians to use their time, skills and staff in new ways. Not only did it contain far more office space than the old building, but it also provided access to computer networks, information resources and communication technology from those offices. Expectations of parliamentarians began to change. The new ideas were partially those associated with the rise of a new class of knowledge workers and managers. The parliamentarian has become a 'manager' and a professional, joining an increasing part of the working population who have made the same transition. The nature of professional work has changed also, as larger segments of the population define themselves, and are defined as 'professionals' and as managerial work moves closer to the 'professional'.²³ This change in terminology does not merely reflect the aspirations of better-educated workers. Harold Perkin²⁴ has argued that modern society is shaped by professional elites, the possessors of specialised knowledge, a class that includes not only the traditional professions but also

professional bureaucrats and managers in the public and private sectors. By the late twentieth century, knowledge, expertise, research and organisation were essential for parliamentarians and their staff, as they were for other segments of society. Negotiation, analysis and policy development replaced oratory and analysis of legislation as the essential skills for parliamentarians. The ALP increasingly drew its membership from the new middle class. Parliamentarians acquired staff, technology and a level of general administrative support that was unthought of even in the 1960s.

Politics as a career?

The Whitlam government's 1975 decision to provide a second member of staff for each parliamentarian recognised that parliamentarians were no longer individuals operating by themselves in the political system; it was thus a catalyst in this transformation. It also provided a new option for aspirants to a political career; they could work for a parliamentarian as part of their political apprenticeship and ideally as preparation for their own career in parliament. The possibility of such a career path was a relatively new phenomenon. In the earliest years of the twentieth century, the Commonwealth Parliament contained a relatively large number of men who had begun their political careers in the colonial parliaments and then moved at federation into the new Commonwealth Parliament. Men such as Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton, William Morris Hughes and Robert Best constituted a group who had had almost entirely political lives. But this phenomenon was a transitory one, born of the creation of a nation from six colonies. Even Robert Menzies, the man who spent most of his adult life as a politician in either the state or the federal sphere, had become a Queen's Counsel before he entered parliament and had practised law while remaining a member of the Victorian parliament. And he was unusual. Amongst the backbenchers the predominant pattern was a political career coming after another career. Also strong was the idea of service that being in politics in fact should not be a career and that it was therefore something to embark on at a later stage in life.

There was also a simple but important practical reason for the belief that a politics was not a lifetime career. That was that, regardless of political ambitions, the only way to make a living out of politics was as an MP. Other participation in the political sphere was usually voluntary and unpaid. The lack of any structure for a paid political career other than as a parliamentarian reinforced the view that participation in politics was a duty owed to the nation and the community rather than a career or an occupation.

Nor, for most of the twentieth century, did the Australian economy provide many occupations that could allow the future MP to do political work. Most workers, both blue and white collar, were employed in factories, shops and offices where work was about being there at regular

times and working steadily for the required hours. Lawyers and doctors, as professional men, and graziers, had more freedom and could thus spend time on politics if they could afford both the time and the income foregone. Trade-union officials, almost invariably risen from the ranks, could also do political work because of the union movement's affiliation with the Labor Party.

For the majority of the Commonwealth Parliament's existence, there has therefore been a stereotype of the MP related to the view of the parliamentarian as a voluntary political activist. On the Labor side, he was the trade unionist who had finally got his berth in parliament after giving sterling service to the union and the party, and on the conservative side the man who had established himself well enough in his occupation or business to take to the risky business of politics.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the gradual development of a different stereotype. The economic structure of Australia began to change, and new opportunities for employment in political spheres appeared. The middle class expanded to include more (often upwardly mobile) people who often worked in occupations and salaried professional positions that previously had not existed, frequently in an expanded public sector. In 1946 there were 25 Commonwealth government departments and eight public corporations with 10,000 employees; by 1965 there were still 25 departments, but there were 15 public corporations and 350,000 employees.²⁵ Trade unions began to hire university graduates as researchers and organisers, employers' organisations expanded and employed more people whose function was often that of lobbyist in addition to manager, think tanks appeared, often with an explicitly political agenda, community groups acquired government funding and were able to hire workers whose job was to develop policies and argue with government. In all these areas the political component of the job was crucial, and doing that job allowed many people to practise politics for a living in a way that had not been previously possible.

The pattern of a steady lifetime job entered into after school changed, creating the possibility of workers having a variety of jobs in a variety of organisations. Tertiary education became accessible to many more people. A combination of feminism, a booming economy and worldwide trends resulted in married women re-entering the workforce, or never leaving it. Men who would once have been the only support of the family, and would have been unable to deviate from a rigid path of workforce participation, were able to consider the possibility of abandoning the career structure for work in a political environment. In the 1970s increasing numbers of women began to decide that they too could have political careers.

In parliament itself, jobs appeared for people other than the politicians and the parliamentary officers who had traditionally kept the institution going. The result was job opportunities and on-the-job training for people who would previously have been able only to practise

politics as unpaid amateurs unless and until they became MPs. This established new pathways into parliament. In succeeding years parliamentarians would enter parliament with more skills in being a parliamentarian because they had already worked in the parliamentary environment and participated in its processes.

Conclusion

Since World War II the number of personal staff of parliamentarians, both backbenchers and ministers, has expanded, and their roles have changed, in response to pressure from parliamentarians aware of their changing needs. For the ordinary MP, the backbencher, the incremental increase in his or her staff from the one electorate secretary of the 1940s to the electorate and Canberra-based staff has allowed him or her to delegate some tasks to the staff while retaining others, to spend more time out of the electorate office if necessary, to make a bigger contribution to policy development and to do more in the electorate and with interest groups. The other side of these developments is the creation of a structure that facilitates a career in politics as a profession rather than a vocation. In 1971 the Parliamentary Handbook reported that seven MPs had been party officials and 18 union officials before their election, comprising approximately 13% of the total membership.²⁶ In 2005 there were 26 political consultants, advisers and lobbyists, 14 members of state or territory legislatures, 25 party and union administrators, 7 party and union officials and 13 researchers, research assistants, electoral and project officers. In total 38% of parliamentarians could be defined as beginning to a class of professional politicians.²⁷ There is now a career path for Australian politicians, allowing them to be described as 'professionals' in the sense defined by Joan Rydon—'those who see politics as the central activity of their lives and attempt to keep it as such'.²⁸

The increased number of staff and the more elaborate administrative structure that developed in parliamentarians' offices also reflected changes in the way the work of parliamentarians was understood. They were becoming professionals and managers in the parliamentary industry. It is not coincidental that this change has paralleled changes in the nature and extent of the professional class more generally. The era of the new middle class and the knowledge economy is reflected inside parliament as it develops outside, although some would argue that parliament follows rather than leads, experiencing change a little after rather than before or even with the rest of Australian society.

- 1 The author thanks Judith Brett, Stephen Alomes and the journal's anonymous referees for their helpful comments.
- 2 J. Rydon. *A Federal Legislature: the Australian Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1980*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 204.

- 3 Rydon, p. 204.
- 4 M. Rush, 'Career Patterns in British Politics: First Choose your Party...', *Parliamentary Affairs*, October 1994.
- 5 House of Commons Information Office, 'Members' Pay, Pensions and Allowances', *Factsheet M5 Members Series*, November 2004, p. 5.
- 6 P. Weller, 'Parliamentary Democracy in Australia', *Parliamentary Affairs*, July 2004.
- 7 P. Norris, 'The Puzzle of Constituency Service', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Summer 1997.
- 8 A. Browning, 'The Evolution of Staffing Arrangements for Members of the Australian Parliament', *The Table*, 1986.
- 9 R. Menzies, *Afternoon Light*, Penguin, 1969, p. 284.
- 10 Rydon, pp. 46–65; P. Weller and S. Fraser, 'The Younging of Australian Politics or Politics as a First Career', *Politics*, November 1997.
- 11 Committee of Inquiry into Salaries and Allowances of Members of the National Parliament, *Report, January 1952*, Government Printer, 1952, p. 13.
- 12 Inquiry by Mr Justice Kerr, *Salaries and Allowances of Members of the Parliament of the Commonwealth*, Government Printing Office, 1972 (Parliamentary Paper No. 284, 1971).
- 13 K. Jones, 'The Politics of Politicians' Incomes', Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 28–30 September 2005.
- 14 Browning.
- 15 Browning.
- 16 B. Hawke and G. Evans, *Labor and Quality of Government*, Australian Labor Party, 1983; J. Uhr, 'Prime Ministers and Parliament', in P. Weller (ed.), *Menzies to Keating: The Development of the Australian Prime Ministership*, Melbourne University Press, 1992.
- 17 Browning.
- 18 J. Walter, 'The Evolution of Ministerial Staff in Australia', in G. Curnow and B. Page (eds), *Politicization and Career Service*, Canberra College of Advanced Education and NSW Division of the Royal Institute of Public Administration Inc, 1989.
- 19 P. Strickland, 'Members' Office Costs – the New System', House of Commons Library Research Paper, 8.11.01.
- 20 Strickland.
- 21 M. L'Estrange, 'The Role of Opposition Staff', in J. Disney and J. Nethercote (eds), *The House on Capital Hill: Parliament, Politics and Power in the National Capital*, Federation Press in association with the Centre for International and Public Law, Law Faculty, Australian National University, 1996.
- 22 L'Estrange, pp. 179–80.
- 23 K.T. Leicht and M.L. Fennell, *Professional Work: A Sociological Approach*, Blackwell, 2001.
- 24 H. Perkin, *The Third Revolution: Professional Elites in the Modern World*, Routledge, 1996.
- 25 S. Encel, *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Cheshire, 1970, p. 68.
- 26 *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia* (17th edn), Australian Government Publishing Service, 1972.
- 27 *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia* (30th edn), Australian Government Publishing Service, 2005.
- 28 Rydon, p. 204.